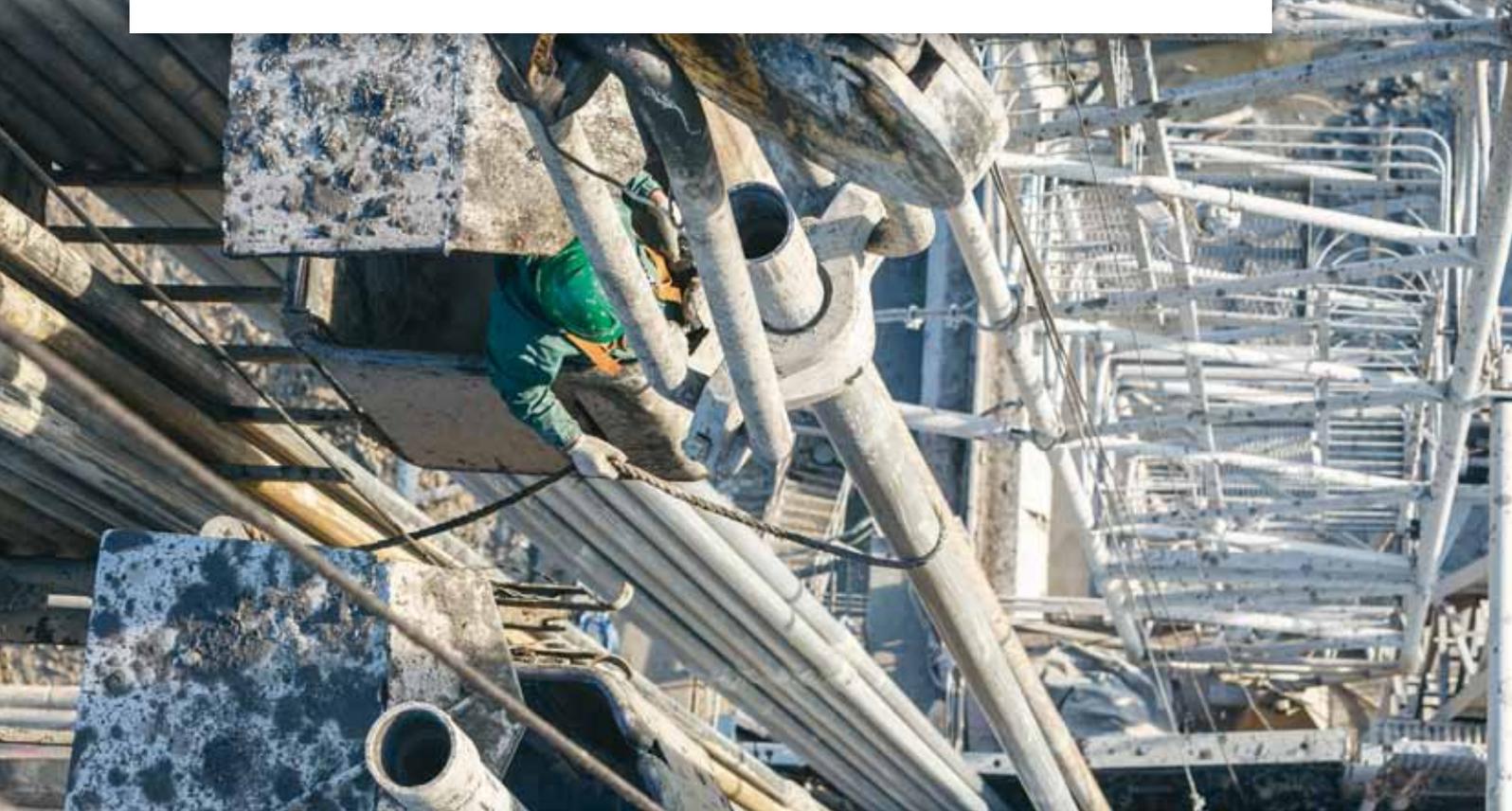


Repetition Normalises Risk

Engage your workforce to keep them safe at height



Working at height is a routine part of the daily job in many operations. Not only when erecting buildings or process plants, but also on oil platforms, in mines, when cleaning building facades, carrying out repair or maintenance works on electricity pylons; there are many places where people have to do their job at heights and have to protect themselves against falls.

Not always it is possible to have technical fall protection like handrails or barriers – even though this would guarantee high-level protection. For many of these tasks the use of personal fall arrest

equipment is the only solution and therefore unavoidable.

Importance of fall arrest equipment

Almost without exception falls lead to severe injuries – or even fatalities. A fall from an apparently low height without fall arrest protection can result in hospitalisation and very often leads to long lasting consequences. Worse still, more than one third of all fatal work accidents in Germany in 2014 were due to falls from height. That means that almost every working

day somebody died from a fall from height. This sadly is also the case in other countries.

The role of the employer

Our human senses help us to perceive height as a risk. Fear of heights or a feeling of dizziness are natural indicators for a high risk of falling. One could be mistaken for thinking that this would be sufficient to let us instinctively behave in a safe way and to do everything necessary to come back to the ground without any injury. Unfortunately, however, the reality is much more complex and complicated. Safe behaviour at ▶



heights demands expert knowledge which needs to be studied.

The most important aspects of this knowledge are:

- *Criteria for selection of the best fall arrest equipment*
- *The correct usage*
- *Protection while at height*
- *An effective first aid organisation in case of an accident*
- *Organisation of competent safety attendants*
- *An effective rescue system in case of an accident*
- *Maintenance, inspection and repair of the fall arrest equipment*
- *Replacement of worn out parts*

This list alone shows that organisation and cooperation of many experts is needed in order to provide sustainable protection for colleagues working at height.

Safety engineers have this expertise, but repeatedly face the challenge of how to provide it to the employees at the right time.

Knowledge transfer

The next question we must ask is how to get the necessary knowledge to those who have to apply it for their own safety.

As outlined in detail in the following sections, this can be achieved through:

- *Effective safety instructions*
- *First hand experience*
- *Leader involvement*
- *Being inspiring*

Effective safety instructions

In daily practice we often experience boring and unemotional instruction sessions. Often these are teaching monologues, even though we know that with this kind of training method very little information is captured by even the most motivated listener.

If we had to sell our products we would never make use of such an unengaging format to share information; or if we did we would surely disappear from the market ▶



quite quickly. Anyhow, this method is employed frequently, especially when talking about the health and safety of our colleagues or employees. Why would we do that – even against better knowledge?

Using such an uninspired format, we will surely become lost in a viciously cyclical rhythm of under motivated employees and lack lustre trainers?

First hand experience

Knowledge is important, but human actions are largely driven by experience rather than knowledge.

Overexposure normalises virtually any trait: whether you're considering graphic violence, endless vain consumerism or dangerous work at height. Routine makes us lose our perception of the risks of a fall. The more we get used to working at height the less we can rely on our natural instincts, since we feel more and more safe and relaxed when working even in high altitudes. It is at this point that the risk of falling increases exponentially. Upon attaining an inner feeling of safety, workers have been known to shun protective measures. After all, they've worn it until now and never fallen, so why bother with the hassle of putting it on in the first place? Once you've carried out one risky behaviour without immediate consequence, it's a slippery slope to a highly misplaced feeling of invincibility.

The result of our subjective risk perception differs more and more from the objective risk assessment result. Finally, we even get the feeling that our protective equipment is hindering us from working effectively.

This is when the challenge for leaders and experts starts. How do we make those at risk of injury at height understand and accept the importance of the protective measures?

Training and safety instruction on a regular basis are necessary to let expertise and knowledge be the drivers of employees' actions, rather than being led by personal

experience that no accidents have happened for years.

Being inspiring

So how then do we make safety training efficient? It's simple: be inspiring, not boring!

Most individuals are intelligent enough to understand that safety equipment is necessary. So let's take the people seriously and ask for their opinion, their improvement suggestions and their ideas on how to realise them.

We like being involved and taken seriously. This should also be practised in safety instruction and training, instead of just reading out loud and repeating what most of the employees – according to their seniority at work – will have heard many times before. So let's turn the tables and ask them: how can you do your task in a safe way? And what do you need for that? In this way we take them seriously for what they are: experts in their workplace and experts in their own protection.

In this respect motivation towards convinced safe action is the goal of safety instruction, rather than the pure transfer of information. Let us challenge the employees and invite them to think outside the box.

In order to achieve this, we should lead our safety instructions with questions. By engaging with a group and opening up debates, those in training will reflect and enter into a dialogue about safety.

Any training or instruction should end with an unambiguous commitment towards the safe behaviour of all involved colleagues. Try it and see if your safety instruction evolves into interesting and inspiring discussions about safety.

Importantly, remember that safety doesn't end in the classroom. After your training session walk the talk, checking to see whether the discussed measures are really being applied on the shop floor. Then whatever the ▶

How to Structure an Efficient Safety Instruction

The following is an example of actively involving employees in the instruction:

- Hold the instruction next to a workplace where people have to work at height
- Start by asking why following the correct safety procedure for working at height is important
- Ask if all steps of the standard operation procedures are known and applicable
- Ask open questions about the work at height and how people assess the risk – make workers reflect on their personal fall protection
- Find out if there are any issues that could deter people from correctly using the harness and try to not only understand causes for resistance but also find suitable solutions
- Include a practical exercise such as letting an operator explain the usage of a harness to new colleagues, then check with help of the operating instructions and your guidance if it is correct

Clear commitment

End the instruction with a clear commitment with everybody to apply the discussed rules and measures.

Clarify that the safety induction is a binding instruction for everybody concerned, rather than an information or a recommendation.

A Toolbox Talk about Fall Arrest Equipment

After three serious falls from height in one year the safety manager of a big metal processing company was about to prepare a presentation for a re-instruction for the operators that would explain how to use fall arrest equipment in the correct way.

The three accidents were all due to the fact that the equipment was not used or not correctly worn. Two of the three injured operators were so seriously injured that they were unable to return to work. The situation was serious.

Thinking about this task, the safety manager had some doubts. It could be very easy, as lots of general explanations, former instruction presentations, rules and other information about fall arrest equipment could all be found in the files on his shelf. On the other hand, however, everybody had already been instructed in this way and the accidents had occurred regardless.

He decided to change his approach to instruction. To do this he consulted the people that were really involved in the topic: the operators themselves.

Taking some general information about fall arrest equipment he went to the department manager of one of the areas where people had to work at height regularly. Together they wanted to organise a new type of training on the shop floor.

In addition to the material they formulated four questions for the discussion:

- *What risks do you perceive when working at height?*
- *How do you protect yourself?*
- *What kind of problems do you sometimes face when working at height?*
- *What are your suggestions for improvement?*

So, feeling prepared they started the toolbox talk. The team of 10 operators sat in the breakfast room waiting for the lecture. They did not seem to be highly motivated.

First the department manager told them shortly that this re-instruction would be one of the measures that was decided necessary after three of their colleagues had experienced serious accidents. They shortly spoke about the incidents, which were known by everybody. After this introduction the manager invited them to all visit a workplace where operators have to work at height

and continue the safety training there. Understandably the team was confused – this was not the typical way to receive safety instruction.

The safety manager then gave a short explanation that this training would be different to the ones they'd had before and invited everybody to contribute knowledge and experience.

So the team preceded to go through the list of questions. The first question didn't reveal any surprises as the risk was obvious. We can fall down and we have to protect ourselves with a harness – that is clear. The answers to the next question, however, opened a long and intense discussion.

The following facts were raised by the operators: they had three different types of harnesses, which they were all using, but none of them had followed a training for all three types. None of the operators had his own personal equipment and instead had to take whichever was currently available, so that all of them were using all three types. Furthermore, one of the harnesses had a big size for tall people and one of the operators said that he would prefer to work without PPE rather than wear a harness that was too big for him, as it would hinder more than it would protect. Another operator, a tall man, said that he could not use protection if someone else had taken the one harness in his size, while a third operator mentioned that one of the harnesses was difficult to adjust to size.

The safety manager and area manager listened intently to this discussion; these were arguments they had never heard before.

At this point they asked the fourth question: What kinds of suggestion for improvements do you have?

The operators had already often discussed between themselves that more harnesses in different sizes and all of the same type would be very helpful. Most important was the point that more than only one per size would be necessary to cover all cooperation possibilities between the team members.

Furthermore they said that a practical training would be helpful as well, as each of the harnesses would be different. This was easy and was done directly.

As a last improvement the operators suggested that a colleague should always check whether your harness was put on correctly before you start to climb at height.

All suggestions were directly approved by the managers and brought to action the same day.

“a colleague should always check whether your harness was put on correctly before you start to climb at height”

outcome, stay engaged with those under your instruction and continue the safety dialogue.

Leader involvement

The involvement of the leader is the pinnacle for every safety instruction.

The real importance of a topic is shown by the active engagement of the leader in it. The easiest way to demonstrate this is to be present in the safety training and to sit in the first row.

Even more impressive and efficient commitment is shown when making safety a leadership concern. Active contribution of the leader in the safety instruction can make safety an important and obvious topic. By giving small yet clearly visible signs, the importance of the right protection measures can be influenced proactively. A leader opening the instruction session with motivating words shows the importance of the topic, and asking for a clear commitment at the end has more power than even the best expert's lecture on its own.

Talking about possible improvement of safety measures should be as natural as the daily checks of product quality, production output and cost reduction.

Conclusion

How you approach safety is your choice. Make it an important issue by making it your own. By engage the workforce in safety training employees are more likely to not only feel valued, but also to internalise the safety messages, resulting in a happier and safer workplace for everyone. ■

Authors



Elke Werner-Keppner graduated with a Master's degree in Educational Science and Psychology from Heidelberg University and founded etalon

in 2016 after more than 20 years as a trainer and consultant – the last seven years of which as general manager at Kirschstein & Partner. She started her career as a freelance trainer and consultant for international companies with a focus on HSEQ - communication, leadership, cooperation in teams and change management in organisations. Elke is specialised in concepts and strategies for change processes in multi-national companies, supporting safety culture in various companies and industries.



Dr Volker Koch holds a PhD in Chemistry from the Leibniz University in Hannover and is the General Manager at etalon international GmbH. In the course

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etalon international GmbH

The German based etalon international GmbH was founded by Elke Werner-Keppner and Dr Volker Koch based on their experience in supporting and leading change culture processes with innovative tools to improve knowledge, attitude and behaviour in multi-national enterprises. With its strong roots in behaviour oriented occupational safety, etalon is able to

offer on one hand a broad scope of expertise ranging to environmental protection and health and on the other hand leadership development and coaching. The etalon team comprises experts with more than 20 years of experience in the fields of psychology, environmental protection and communication.

All team members are working in close cooperation with their clients as qualified specialists in projects as consultants, coaches, trainers, lecturers and seminar leaders and contribute to the successful management of customers' projects.

etalon carefully regards the culture, history and leadership attitude of each client as unique and applies customised solutions in order to maximise the effectiveness of its services and products.

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