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SAFETY AND HEALTH TOPIC SHEET NO. 22: BELIEF-BASED SAFETY: ATTITUDES AND COMPLACENCY

A safety and health 'topic sheet' aimed at raising awareness of hazards in the rope access industry. The series may be of use as a toolbox talk.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Within IRATA we are taught from day one the importance of health and safety within our industry. We are taught about the safety of the equipment and methods we use and the importance of our own personal safety, as well as the safety of the people we work with and those affected by our works.

1.2 Although we work in an industry which we consider to be very safe, it can be our *attitudes* that negatively affect the way we carry out our work.

1.3 There are many documents and initiatives that detail methods to improve our behaviours and attitudes to safety (see **11**, Further reading). However, this topic sheet will address two issues which may affect safety within rope access:

- attitude; and
- complacency.

1.4 Examples are given in the following case studies:

2 CASE STUDY 1

Shaping attitude to safety
Whilst carrying out a simple visual inspection, a team of rope access technicians had to abseil down the inside face of a louvered façade. The drops were approximately 50 metres and the ropes passed down the inside face, near to the louvres and the internal mesh surrounding the building. The Level 1 technician noticed the proximity of the rope to the polycarbonate louvre edge and asked the Level 3 whether rope protection was needed. The Level 3 responded by saying that rope protection wasn't needed; but that if he wanted some 'it was on the shelf under the floral print dresses'. This comment was meant as a joke, but also inferred that using edge protection was not only unnecessary but also not "macho" ('not the done thing').

3 WHY THINGS CAN GO WRONG …

3.1 The drops had been checked previously and edge protection was not required. The response from the Level 3 technician was intended as a joke, but what are the potential effects of this type of response?

- The Level 1 may not now be confident to question the need for edge protection in the future, with potentially dire consequences.

- The response may encourage technicians to take risks and not give due consideration to potential hazards.
- The response may discourage technicians from questioning their supervisor, not just on safety topics but also any other issues
- The response not only makes the supervisor un-approachable but also un-questionable.

4 WHAT YOU CAN DO AND HOW TO DO IT …

4.1 Many rope access teams are small and close knit. As a result, there is a tendency for key safety issues to go undiscussed after the initial briefing of the method statement and risk assessment (RAMS). This is not only problematic for new and inexperienced team members but, in emergency situations for example, everyone should know what they are doing and what their role is. A rescue plan will be ineffective if all those involved are running around not knowing what needs doing.

4.2 Comments made between team members who have known each other some time, and have a close working relationship, will have a different effect to those made between relative strangers. In the latter case, the rope access safety supervisor should take the time to explain why rope protection is not required. A positive attitude to safety can be reinforced through discussion. It is important also to remember that those with less experience are still able spot things that may have been missed.

4.3 Our attitude to safety and behaviours help to keep us safe but help also in promoting rope access as a professional industry and a safe system of work.

5 CASE STUDY 2

Complacency
An experienced rope access technician had spent the day carrying out glazing works on a 75 metre high tower block. The job was technical, involving complex rigging and heavy loads. At the end of the day the technician descended to the lowest balcony, at approximately five metres above the ground. They didn't have sufficient rope available to step safely inside the barrier at the door, without detaching from the ropes. When 3 metres away from the unguarded edge they detached themselves, walked to the door and entered through the barrier. The technician was seen by the site manager walking unprotected near an edge. This resulted in the individual, and the company, being removed from site.

6 WHY THINGS CAN GO WRONG …

6.1 The technician had been safely carrying out complex work all day, at high level. When it came to the end of the day, the simplest thing was to break the rules. The technician did not consider it unsafe; he was clear of the unguarded edge and the potential for a fall was unlikely.

6.2 Rope access technicians working at height have good working practices when undertaking their work. However, familiarity with working safely at height may lead to complacency at lower levels. Falling 5 metres can have the same outcome as falling 75 metres.

6.3 A high level of understanding regarding the dangers of working at height, does not make a technician invincible or above the site rules.

7 WHAT YOU CAN DO AND HOW TO DO IT …

7.1 Lead by example. Treat all work at height with the same respect, whether 3 metres or 300 metres. Remember the old saying, “It’s not the fall that kills you, it’s the sudden stop at the bottom”.

7.2 Take few moments to check your environment before you start. Checking ropes and equipment before a drop over an edge is largely routine to a rope access technician, so apply this thinking to all activities which present a risk. Accidents can be avoided by carrying out a quick check before you commence working. Think, “What’s different today?”.

7.3 Remember, not all health and safety incidents result in an accident but this does not make them any the more acceptable.

7.4 Supervisors should not adopt an attitude of “Do as I say and not as I do”. This is not acceptable. Supervisors should adopt and encourage safe practices; and not use experience as an excuse to cut corners. The way you conduct yourself as a supervisor will influence those who go on to be supervisor.

7.5 Remember, you are not on site for people to look at and think, “That looks dangerous and exciting”. You are there to undertake a task and to demonstrate that it can be achieved safely using rope access.

7.6 The way you conduct yourself on site effects the way our industry is perceived.

8 ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

8.1 There are many factors that may affect the safety of rope access technicians.

8.2 This topic sheet is to encourage discussion of the ‘soft’ issues (rather than technical); importantly, attitude and complacency.

8.3 Many people view health and safety as a delay to getting the job done, at best a “necessary evil”. In many cases those undertaking rope access work have a better understanding of the associated risks and hazards than those employing them. Take this as an opportunity to share your knowledge and promote the industry.

9 ACTION

9.1 Discuss with your colleagues the ‘safety culture’ in your organisation. What can you do to improve it? What goes wrong?

9.2 For a list of current (and past) ‘safety communications’ by IRATA, see www.irata.org

10 RECORD FORM

10.1 An example Safety and Health Topic Sheet: Record Form is given below. Members may have their own procedure(s) for recording briefings to technicians and others.

11 FURTHER READING

Promoting a positive culture, A guide to health and safety culture[1]

Human factors and ergonomics, HSE[2]
Human factors: Behavioural safety approaches - an introduction (also known as behaviour modification)[3]

Learning from accidents, Kletz, T. (2001), Butterworth-Heinemann Ltd, Oxford, ISBN 0 7506 4883 X

A review of safety culture and safety climate literature for the development of the safety culture inspection toolkit, HSE Research Report 367[4]

Leadership and worker involvement toolkit, HSE[5]

1 https://www.iosh.co.uk/~/media/Documents/Promoting%20a%20positive%20cultureconnect.pdf?la=en
2 https://www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/index.htm
3 https://www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/topics/behaviouralintor.htm
4 www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr367.pdf
5 www.hse.gov.uk/construction/lwit/index.htm

IRATA SAFETY AND HEALTH TOPIC SHEET – RECORD FORM					
Site:					
Date:					
Topic(s) for discussion:		Topic Sheet No. 22: Belief-based safety: attitudes & complacency			
Reason for talk:					
Start time:		**Finish time:**			
Attended by *Please sign to verify understanding of briefing*					
Print name:		**Signature:**			
Continue overleaf (where necessary)					
Matters raised by employees:		**Action taken as a result:**			
Continue overleaf (where necessary)					
Briefing leader *I confirm I have delivered this briefing and have questioned those attending on the topic discussed.*					
Print name:		**Signature:**		**Date:**	
Comments:					