

A Time to Train

by Mark Chisholm

After working in the industry for decades, I have witnessed many changes in how we work, learn, and even teach. Many of these changes are certainly for the better. One of the laggards in the chain however, is the mentality of what is called the common crew leader. This mentality can hamper the working environment of a company and even sabotage a safety program if left to flourish.

Early on in my career, it was quite common to hear a foreman bellowing certain catch phrases like, "Just get up there," and "You don't need all of that junk." The foreman thought that it was his job to "talk you through a tree" with this gibberish instead of using tactical encouragement. Some even felt that they were helping to preserve the tough-guy image of our industry from these "wimpy" young climbers, as if their own ability and toughness would come down a notch when others saw how the new guy couldn't climb.

Lead by Example

The moment of change for my foreman was when our crew was sent to prune some large trees. We gathered our climbing gear and our STIHL MS 200 T's and headed to our assigned patients. He began to coil his rope into a "monkey's fist" to throw it into the first union, while I yanked out my throw ball made of rubber and polyester rope. He defensively and condescendingly barked, "You don't need that stupid mess to get up there!" He and the ground crew laughed. He was well on his way to setting his line higher from up in the lower crown, when I finally started to footlock. As I passed him by and ascended straight to my 85'-90' high tie-in point, I shouted, "Do you want to borrow my mess for the next one?" The ground crew and I laughed as one this time. This discussion and display of efficiency set a precedent for a changing atmosphere.

Create Balance

In order for learning to occur on the job, there needs to be balance. Balance between making money and growing your worker's knowledge, between getting things done and pausing to teach how you did it. It can be a dedicated scheduled training session, or it can take the shape of a five minute discussion immediately following the work, maybe while you're taking your gear off or getting a drink. Too often we have a "watch me and learn" mentality. This can work with some people, but it should not be the sole vehicle used to exchange ideas. Different people have different learning styles. The best catalyst for a successful progression could be an open mind.

Preserve Safety

One of the most important duties a crew leader takes on is preserving the safety of the crew. To do this one must walk a thin line of pushing a young climber to overcome "natural" and common fears, yet not make them feel as if they are bulletproof. There are times in the field that one should not "just get up there" and, instead, they should walk away from a situation and re-evaluate the approach. If they do not feel empowered to say no, it could turn fatal down the road.

Safety & Strength

I see plenty of young climbers who lack a good work ethic. This is nothing new and is probably the root of how these catch phrases came to be. I embrace the need for several different kinds of "toughness" in order to become a good climber and to remain consistent in the field throughout a long career. I do believe that it is necessary and possible to instill a sense of strength in a worker while teaching them to remain safe and productive. It all depends upon the mentality of those in charge and how they create a time to train.



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Learn more about Mark at treebuzz.com

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