

TOOLBOX TALK #18

LADDER QUESTIONS – PART 1

Ladders are a low cost and efficient tool – how much are they used on today’s jobsites and should they be the first choice to gain temporary access to work at height?

Many experts believe that ladders should be the last choice for gaining access to work at heights. A proper risk assessment is required and should identify hazards, evaluate risk and develop control measures. This includes selection, provision and use of suitable equipment to perform the task. While often not suitable, ladders are used commonly for the simple reason they are a low cost option, readily accessible, versatile, practical and effective ... in the correct work environment. They are perceived as a “tool of the trade” requiring little to no training so everyone thinks they know how to use them.



What are the primary hazards associated with using ladders and how can they be mitigated?

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 20% of fatal falls were from ladders in 2009. One study identified that 50% of all ladder-related accidents were due to individuals carrying items as they climbed. Ladder violations always appear in OSHA’s Top Ten Cited Violations. According to OSHA, training of personnel can prevent 100% of the accidents. Falls are the leading hazard followed by electrocutions. Falls are mainly caused by the use of faulty ladders, the improper set-up of the ladder, the incorrect use of a ladder and selecting the wrong type of ladder for the task.

Have incidents with ladders increased? If so, why?

A US Consumer Product Safety Commission report states that over the last ten years the amount of ladder-related injuries has increased 50%. Ladders seem to be an easy, fast and economical solution to gain access to work at height. The concept of completing work fast to make money permeates our culture. We think, “Should I reach a little further or add time to climb down and move the ladder?” or “It’s a little short of what I need, but I’ll make it work.” We’re creating a culture focused on doing more with less, and it has consequences. Are proper risk assessments being completed prior to all tasks being performed? Are the correct tools being selected/provided for the task? Do workers follow the work methods defined in the risk assessment or do operational failures interfere with safe-use planning? Can a worker be expected to work standing on a ladder all day, and maintain balance while climbing up and down?

(To continue this discussion, see Toolbox Talk # 19, “Ladder Questions – Part 2”)