

## **Changing Attitudes – The Key to Protecting Workers at Height**

**Randall Wingfield  
Gravitec Systems, Inc.  
Poulsbo, Washington**

### **Introduction**

As we discuss fall protection in this paper, it's important to note that the workers' attitude by means of appropriate education and training is a fundamental element for success. The effectiveness of any fall protection system is dependent upon the users and their attitudes. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that efforts are focused on educating users in the proper usage, maintenance and selection of fall protection equipment, in order to promote the attitude and understanding necessary to ensure workplace safety and moreover, reduce fatalities in elevated environments. This paper will assist employers and participants with designing, implementing and managing a successful fall protection training program. Key components of fall protection training will be addressed, including trainer qualifications, pre-planning and development, delivery methods, physical environment requirements, evaluation approaches and tools (i.e., observation of performance), and certification and retraining requirements.

In this paper, the speaker will provide a roadmap for identifying fall protection training needs, and developing course content and evaluation criteria accordingly. Examples of effective instructional materials and other documentation will be shown. The author will also highlight one of several areas where hands-on fall protection training could mean the difference between life and death.

### **The Reality**

The fall protection industry has rapidly evolved, from a waist belt and lanyard to a multi-billion dollar industry of advanced equipment and systems. Why, then, do we continue to see an increase in fall fatalities year after year?

The reality is that fall protection education has not kept pace with the accelerated evolution of equipment and system development. Too often we see the consequences: users donning equipment incorrectly, or worse, fatalities where the victim was using fall protection equipment, but doing so improperly. Employers can provide the best equipment on the market, but if users are not educated appropriately, all of our advancements and our efforts are for naught.

## **The Importance of Education**

Fall protection regulations, equipment, written policies and work procedures do little if employers and employees are not educated about fall protection. If a trainee doesn't understand fall protection or doesn't believe that fall protection is in his or her best interest, no amount of regulatory influence or policy will change that. With knowledge comes understanding. Therefore, we cannot expect attitudes to change until we give users the education necessary for them to understand.

An example is the "Click it or Ticket" program. In Canada, when it became law to wear a seatbelt, a person cited for this infraction was given two options. They could either pay the ticket or they could watch a 20-minute video depicting the dangers of not using a seatbelt. The reasoning behind having people watch the video was that if a person was able to view for themselves the realities of the situation and the potential consequences, they would likely be willing wear the seatbelt.

The fundamental idea at play here is that when we are given the knowledge necessary to understand "why," we are much more likely to comply with whatever is being demanded of us. This is the key to changing attitudes: utilizing effective education to redirect attitudes from using equipment because it's required by an authority, to using equipment because the user understands its importance and necessity.

## **The Qualities of an Effective Education Program**

Let's begin with what doesn't work: the authoritative approach or what can also be referred to as "you shall, you will, you must." You tell the students what they need to do, what the guidelines are, hand them a certificate and expect that they heed your expert advice. However, what is likely the case is they will do the bare minimum to meet the expectations you've laid out for them. They will wear their harness and helmet, and attach themselves to the structure they're working on, but they lack the knowledge to do these things effectively. They go through the motions because they have to, not because they understand the importance of doing so. This apathetic attitude towards safety is the cause of too many accidents and fall fatalities.

Effective fall protection education must address workers' attitudes, ultimately ending with the worker willing and wanting to protect themselves from fall hazards. An effective education program informs and purposefully alters a person's perception of a topic, ultimately resulting in a change in behavior. It is not enough to deliver a program and issue an attendance card.

An effective fall protection training program provides employers and employees with quality information, knowledgeable instruction and opportunities to use and examine the equipment. This hands-on aspect of the learning process is fundamental in order to provide a depth of knowledge and understanding so a change in attitude occurs, ultimately resulting in a change in behavior at the workplace.

## Key Elements

Unfortunately, there isn't a single element or training methodology to accomplish a change in attitude that works for everyone. Trainees come from all walks of life, cultures and past experiences, bringing many unknowns into class with them, including prior knowledge, formal or informal education, physical needs, organization representation, a natural resistance to change, a natural desire to control themselves, habits and personal goals. What changes the attitude of one trainee will not necessarily work for another. It takes a multi-disciplinary approach, involving several key elements to ensure success.

### *Fall Hazard Assessment*

Identifying training needs is the first step. A needs assessment of fall hazard locations and method(s) of control must be conducted before the education program begins. You can't train employees without knowing what their fall hazard exposures are. Course content must be applicable and accurate so the education program is not a waste of time and resources for the trainee and the employer. Each employer must look at the physical area where the fall hazard exists, determine an acceptable method of access, list the fall protection method and equipment used, and identify the type of rescue and develop the course content from this information.

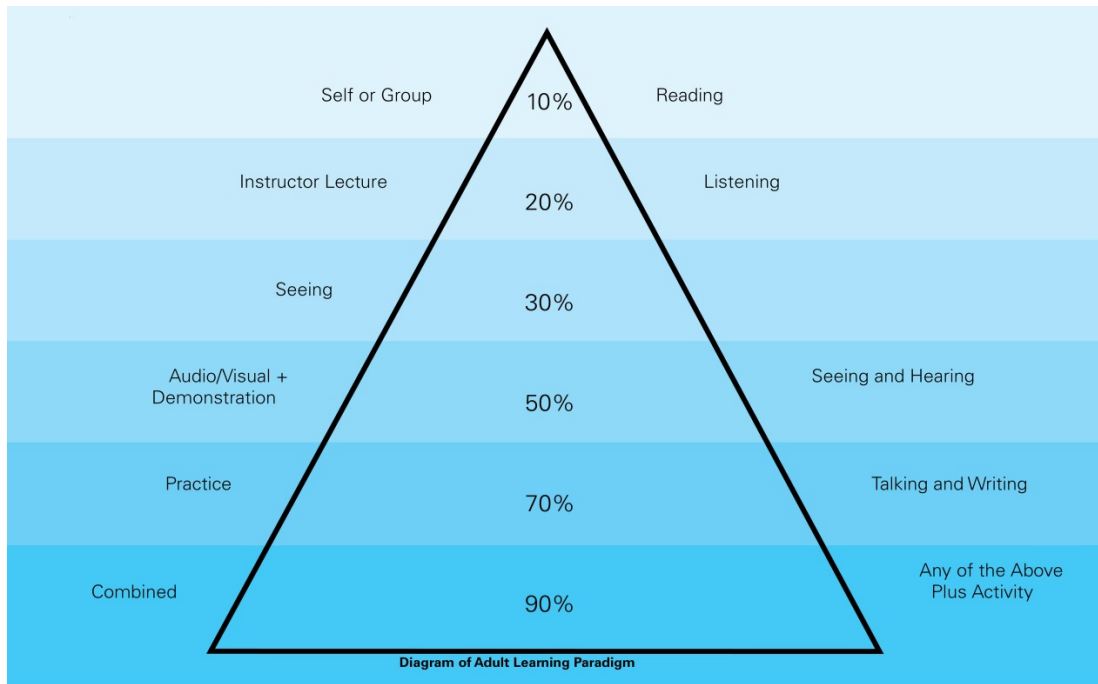
### *Quality Instruction*

Once the course curriculum is developed, the next ingredient is the instructor. The instructor must be knowledgeable about fall protection and associated fall hazards, but also familiar with adult instruction and learning methodologies. You wouldn't assume that licensed automobile drivers are capable of teaching driver's education just because they have a driver's license. When choosing an instructor, it is important that this person can not only deliver the information in a logical and understandable manner, but also be able to identify deficiencies and learning barriers for individual students and how to correct them.

Anyone can play a video, conduct lectures, and provide equipment instruction to students, but a true instructor will look at each student and adapt the teaching method to suit the student's learning style until the student demonstrates an understanding and depth of knowledge. There are many different ways people absorb information. There are visual learners who learn best through demonstrations and pictures, audio learners who learn through lecture and sounds-like analogies, tactile learners who need a hands-on approach, as well as kinetic learners who need to be physically involved to understand. An effective instructor will be able to utilize the supporting materials, hands-on exercises and teaching skills to appeal to each of these learning styles.

Additionally, it is important to note that various teaching methods have various levels of retention, as illustrated below in Exhibit 1. The adult learning paradigm clearly shows that a combination of teaching methods is optimal for knowledge retention. An instructor who is able to touch on all of these teaching methods is more likely to produce a high level of understanding in their students than one who only utilizes a couple of these methods.

Delivering training is a skill, and special consideration must be given to the instructor. All too often an experienced worker is selected to conduct training because they have a wealth of experience, without the necessary skills to communicate their knowledge effectively. Although experienced, if this person cannot explain the curriculum, modify teaching methodologies according to each student, evaluate student performance, and identify learning deficiencies, the desired result of an educated student is not accomplished.



**Exhibit 1. The adult learning paradigm illustrates levels of knowledge retention.**

### *Supporting Materials*

Providing supporting materials is the next necessary step in providing a proper education program. An effective fall protection training program needs to be supported by manuals, demonstration equipment, teaching aids, equipment instruction manuals, written examinations, and a safe climbing structure. Imagine taking a driver's education course, but the course does not include the use of a car. Unfortunately, this is commonplace in the fall protection training industry. There are many training services that are computer-based or lack supporting materials. Lecture only, computer-based programs, sales demonstrations, etc., are mistakenly being categorized as training. Although the information may be accurate, it falls short. For a trainee to understand fall protection, they must be given supporting materials that they can reference (even at a later date), equipment they can use, instructions that they can employ and a safe structure on which they can climb to demonstrate their proficiency. Not including these supporting materials erodes the quality of the course and, bit by bit, falls short of changing the trainee's attitude. Since what must be included in fall protection training is rarely regulated, the supply of supporting materials is often eliminated.

### *Hands-on Exercises*

Fall protection requires several physical skills. As a result, tactile teaching methods (hands-on or applied learning exercises) are paramount. The student, legal departments, regulators or other agencies can challenge training formats that do not include observations of performance, arguing that they are insufficient. Training formats that do not include observations of performance may provide documentation of attendance, but do little to prove a student's ability or to withstand challenges or the test of litigation. There is a general misconception that, as long as a topic was discussed, demonstrated, and documented with a test or roster, the training was acceptable and

adequate. Inadequate training may instruct students on how to don a harness but use videos or presentations to illustrate how the rest of the fall protection system works. Or an instructor may demonstrate how to use the fall protection system but not have the students physically participate. Observations of performance take an education program to the next level by requiring the students to demonstrate their skills to a qualified instructor—this is key to the learning process. The majority of learning takes place when the student physically participates in hands-on exercises. It is one thing to watch a video of someone using a ladder safety system; it is quite another to don a harness, attach yourself to the system, and climb. The ideal method is to develop real-life scenarios geared towards the students' industry or work environment for them to participate in and observe their performance under these conditions—the more realistic, the more effective the exercise. It is better to put a student in a simulated stressful scenario to discover and work on their weaknesses than have a student to be ill prepared on the job or when an emergency arises.

Unfortunately, a structure where hands-on training can be provided is not always readily available. It also takes time (and money) to provide each student with an opportunity to use each component. Observations of performance are often the first thing eliminated from training when time and money considerations are put before the quality of the program.

### *Retraining*

Retraining is a vital part of any effective education program. OSHA standard 1926.503(c) states that, “When the employer has reason to believe that any affected employee who has already been trained does not have the understanding and skill required...the employer shall retrain each such employee.” Although this particular standard is meant for the construction industry, the message is applicable to all industries that deal with safety.

Depending on the industry or work environment, an employee may not use their training for months or even a year at a time. It is unreasonable to expect employees to maintain their knowledge and their skills without regular retraining.

In addition to length of time between training sessions, there are other reasons an employee should be retrained. OSHA standard 1926.503(c) lists the following:

- Changes in the workplace render previous training obsolete; or
- Changes in the types of fall protection systems or equipment to be used render previous training obsolete; or
- Inadequacies in an affected employee's knowledge or use of fall protection systems or equipment indicate that the employee has not retained the requisite understanding or skill. (1926.503[c][1]-[3])

Any change in the fall protection equipment or systems used, or demonstrated loss of knowledge retention by the employee requires immediate retraining of all applicable persons. If we want to change attitudes, retraining needs to be treated with the same level of importance and urgency given to the initial training.

## **Conclusion**

It should be noted that there is no singular element or method that will change a trainee's attitude toward fall protection. The total sum and experience of an accurate curriculum, delivered by a qualified instructor, supported by effective materials, structured in such a way where students can physically touch and use the equipment, and maintained with regular retraining results in the most effective training program and shift in behavior. It is important that employers and regulators understand that this method of training takes time, and that it is in the industry's best interest to dedicate an appropriate amount of time for fall protection training. It may only take a few minutes to put on a harness, but it takes several hours for a student to understand why.

## **Bibliography**

Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA). 1995. 29 CFR 1926.5039(c), *Training Requirements* (retrieved March 20, 2013) ([http://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show\\_document?p\\_table=STANDARDS&p\\_id=10759](http://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show_document?p_table=STANDARDS&p_id=10759)).