

*HIT SAFETY SOLUTIONS*

Field Safety Insight Series

## **Fall Protection: Why Experience Still Matters**

By Edward C. Hartshorn II

Most falls don't happen because equipment is missing. They happen because something was overlooked—or someone thought it wouldn't happen to them.

### **A strong fall protection program is more than equipment and rules.**

It is built on awareness, experience, and understanding.

Fall protection is one of the most serious hazards on any construction site. The risks are often obvious—but over time, familiarity can lead to complacency. Workers become comfortable. Shortcuts start to feel routine. And that's when incidents happen.

The goal is not just to have systems in place.

The goal is to make sure people believe in them.

### **A Jobsite That Could Have Turned Deadly**

On my first day on a large multi-story industrial project, I stepped onto a jobsite that had hundreds of workers and multiple subcontractors actively working at height.

What I saw immediately was a serious problem.

Workers were walking across exposed steel beams several stories in the air. Below them were open floor penetrations—areas where guardrails were missing and a single misstep could have resulted in a fatal fall.

This was not a minor issue.

This was a jobsite where one mistake could cost someone their life.

## **Taking Action Without Losing Control**

I knew I had to act immediately—but how I acted mattered.

I didn't yell.

I didn't start writing people up.

Instead, I signaled for the workers to come down safely and spoke directly with the foreman.

I requested a small team and took them through the site myself, showing them exactly what needed to be corrected.

We moved fast.

Caution tape went up immediately to control exposure areas.

Then we began installing cable systems so workers had proper tie-off points for their lanyards.

Before any work resumed at height, those protections had to be in place.

## **The Real Problem Wasn't the equipment**

Within a short time, the physical hazards were under control.

But there was still a problem.

Even after cables were installed, I found myself constantly having to point at workers and remind them to tie off. They would clip in right away—but the behavior kept repeating.

The issue wasn't a lack of equipment.

It wasn't even a lack of rules.

The problem was that they didn't truly believe the risk applied to them.

## **Moving Beyond Enforcement**

At a certain point, safety has to go beyond enforcement.

You can't stand there all day pointing and correcting every individual.

Workers have to understand the risk for themselves.

They have to believe it.

Because if they don't believe it, they will only follow the rules when someone is watching.

But when they do believe it, they will do the right thing—even when no one is there.

## **The Moment That Changed Everything**

We gathered the entire crew in a controlled, safe area.

A worker was raised high into the air in a manlift with an 80-pound sandbag.

From the ground, I told the crew:

“Imagine this is a worker who isn't tied off.”

Then, on signal, the sandbag was dropped.

It fell fast—and when it hit the ground, it exploded on impact. The force was violent. You could feel it.

In that moment, the jobsite went silent.

Everyone understood.

## **The Culture Shift**

From that point forward, everything changed.

Workers didn't just follow the rules—they believed in them.

They watched out for each other.

They made sure everyone was tied off.

It wasn't just enforcement anymore.

It was ownership.

## **What Makes Fall Protection Actually Work**

An effective fall protection program is not just about systems—it's about people.

From experience, a few things make the difference:

### **1. Experience Drives Awareness**

Experience helps identify risks that aren't always obvious on paper. It allows you to recognize hazards before they turn into incidents.

### **2. Equipment Is Only Part of the Solution**

Harnesses, lanyards, and anchor points are critical—but they only work if they are used consistently and correctly.

### **3. Behavior Matters More Than Policy**

Rules alone do not prevent falls. The way people think and act on the jobsite is what ultimately determines outcomes.

### **4. Leadership Builds Trust**

When workers know you genuinely care about their safety—and not just compliance—they respond differently.

## **5. Belief Changes Everything**

The moment workers truly understand the risk is the moment safety becomes personal. That's when real change happens.

## **Why This Matters**

Falls continue to be one of the leading causes of serious injury and death in construction.

Most of the time, the equipment is there.

The policies are in place.

But something gets overlooked.

Or someone takes a shortcut.

That's why experience matters.

Because it helps recognize the moments where things can go wrong—and take action before they do.

## **Final Thought**

Fall protection is not just about compliance.

It is about awareness.

It is about responsibility.

And most importantly, it is about making sure people go home at the end of the day.

At its best, a safety program creates a culture where workers look out for themselves and for each other—not because they are told to, but because they understand why it matters.

That is what real safety looks like.

## **Field Discussion Questions**

- **What fall hazards on our job today could change as work progresses?**
  
- **Are we consistently tying off, or only when someone is watching?**
  
- **Do we fully understand the risks of the work we are performing at height?**
  
- **What is one thing we can improve right now to make our jobsite safer?**

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Article 4: EM 385-1-1 vs. OSHA: What Contractors Need to Know

Article 5: Why Daily Pre-Task Planning and AHAs Prevent Injuries

### **About the Author:**

Edward C. Hartshorn II is a veteran safety professional, SSHO, and owner of HIT Safety Solutions, with experience supporting industrial, federal, and military construction projects in the U.S., Europe, and Africa.

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