Workplace Learning System

Weekly Safety Briefings

Week 34 – Monday, August 17 – Friday, August 21, 2026

Falls

Introduction - Fatal Four Part Two: Falls

Introduction for Leaders:

Falls are number one on OSHA's Fatal Four, the single leading cause of death and one of the top causes of serious injury across virtually every industry that involves working at height, on equipment, on stairs, or on ladders. Last week we covered struck-by hazards. This week we move to falls, and the conversation is going to be just as direct.

What makes falls such a persistent hazard is the same thing that makes them so difficult to take seriously: most of the time, nothing happens. People climb ladders incorrectly for years without incident. They skip fall protection on quick tasks for months without a problem. And then one time the conditions are slightly different, the footing is slightly off, the reach is slightly too far, and the outcome is catastrophic. The fall that kills someone usually looks identical to the hundred before it that did not. This week we are going to talk about why that pattern exists and what breaks it.

How to Frame This Week:

- Wednesday is dedicated entirely to ladder safety, with specific focus on a hazard that rarely gets named directly: using a ladder in a way that puts you above the fall protection that is in place around you.
- Monday carries the weekly challenge. Revisit it mid-week and bring it back on Friday.
- Keep it grounded in what your team does. If ladders are used daily, Tuesday and Wednesday will land hard. If elevated platforms and stairs are more common, Monday and Thursday are your anchors.

Monday- Why Falls Keep Happening to Good Workers

Discussion:

Falls are the number one cause of workplace fatalities, and they have been for as long as OSHA has tracked the data. That fact alone should tell us something important: awareness of the hazard is not the problem. Everyone knows falls are dangerous. The problem is the gap between knowing that falls are dangerous in general and recognizing that this specific task, done this specific way, on this specific surface, carries real fall risk right now.

That gap is driven almost entirely by familiarity and the absence of previous consequences. A team member who has gone up and down the same ladder a thousand times has trained their brain to treat that ladder as safe. A team member who has reached slightly past the edge of an elevated platform dozens of times without incident has trained their brain that the reach is acceptable. Neither brain is processing the current risk accurately. Both are processing the historical average, and the historical average does not predict the next moment.

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The conditions that most commonly precede a fall:

Haste. The fastest path to a fall is doing something at height quickly. Rushing up a ladder, grabbing a quick look over a parapet, leaning out to finish a task without repositioning. Speed and height are a combination that eliminates margin.

Overconfidence born from experience. The team member who has never fallen is statistically more likely to take a risk than the team member who has had a close call. Experience without incident does not build skill. It builds confidence that is often not earned.

Improvised solutions. Using whatever is available rather than the right tool. A bucket instead of a step stool. A step stool instead of a ladder. A ladder instead of a scaffold. Each substitution adds risk that was not in the original plan.

Distraction at the transition point. Most falls happen during transitions: stepping onto a ladder, stepping off an elevated platform, changing direction on stairs. The moment of transition requires full attention and is exactly when people tend to split it.

Weekly Challenge:

This week, every time you use a ladder, climb stairs, or access an elevated surface, pause for five seconds before you start and ask: is this the right tool, am I in the right position, and do I have full fall protection for this height? Do not start until you have answered all three. On Friday we will talk about what people noticed when they stopped and asked.

Tuesday – Three Points of Contact: The Rule That Actually Works

Discussion:

Three points of contact is one of those rules that almost everyone has heard and almost nobody applies consistently. It gets mentioned in training, it gets nodded at, and then it gets quietly set aside the moment someone is carrying something, moving quickly, or doing a task they have done a hundred times without incident. Today we are going to talk about what three points of contact means, why it works, and the specific moments when people abandon it without realizing the risk they are taking on. The rule is straightforward: when climbing or descending any ladder, staircase, or elevated structure, maintain contact with the surface always using three of your four limbs. Two hands and one foot, or two feet and one hand. You move one point at a time. You do not move the next point until the previous one is stable. What makes three points of contact effective is not the rule itself but what the rule forces: it slows you down enough to be deliberate, and deliberate movement on a ladder or stairs is almost always safe movement. Most falls do not happen because the surface was too slippery or the ladder was too steep. They happen in the half second when someone moves faster than their balance could track.

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The moments when three points of contact gets abandoned:

- Both hands on the load. Carrying something up a ladder or down a staircase with both hands occupied means zero points on a handhold. One slip with the feet and there is nothing to arrest the fall. If the load requires both hands, it does not go up the ladder the same trip you do.
- One hand on the phone. A text, a radio call, a quick glance at a screen. One hand off a rung or rail while the other is the only thing keeping you connected to the structure. This one happens constantly and almost never gets flagged.
- Hurrying on familiar stairs. The instinct to trot down a staircase you know well produces a stride that skips the deliberate placement that three points of contact requires. Speed and contact are in direct competition on stairs.

A real-world example:

A maintenance technician was ascending a fixed ladder to reach a rooftop mechanical unit. He had his tool bag looped over one shoulder and was holding the bag steady with his right hand to keep it from swinging. His left hand was on the ladder. Both feet were on the rungs. When his left hand reached for the next rung, the bag swung outward with the movement and pulled his upper body off balance. He had no right hand on the ladder to correct it. He dropped six feet before a lower rung caught his arm. He sustained a dislocated shoulder and torn ligaments. He had made that same climb dozens of times with the bag in the same position. The difference that morning was a slightly faster pace and a slightly wider swing.

Team member engagement:

"Think about how you actually move up and down ladders and stairs on this job. Are you genuinely maintaining three points of contact, or is there a habit you have built that quietly skips it?"

"What do you usually have in your hands when you use the ladder in our work area? Is there a better way to get that material up or down without occupying both hands?"

"Has anyone here had a close call on a ladder or staircase that came down to not having a free hand when they needed one? What happened?"

Wednesday –Ladders and Fall Protection: The Gap Nobody Talks About

Discussion:

Here is the hazard: your facility has fall protection in place. Guardrails on mezzanines. Handrails on elevated walkways. That protection was designed for a person working at floor level in that area. It works exactly as intended if you stay within the height it covers.

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The moment you set a ladder against a wall or structure in that protected area and start climbing, you are adding height that the protection was never designed to account for. A standard guardrail tops out at 42 inches. A six-foot stepladder puts you well above that by the third or fourth rung. At that point, the guardrail that would have caught you is behind you and below your center of gravity. If you lose your footing from there, you are not falling to the protected floor. You are going over or past the rail and down to whatever is below it.

This is not a theoretical risk. It happens because the area looks protected. The guardrail is there. The signs say fall protection is in place. Nobody has specifically said that the protection only applies at floor level, so nobody thinks about what happens when the ladder takes them above it. The hazard is invisible not because it is hidden but because it was never named.

What to do before climbing a ladder in any guarded area:

- Look at where the top rail is and figure out at what rung you will exceed it. If the task requires climbing above that point, the guardrail is no longer your protection for that work.
- Identify what additional protection covers you above the rail. A harness anchored to a rated point above your working position, a different piece of equipment like a scissor lift or elevated platform, or a different approach to the task entirely.
- If you are not sure what protection applies to the height you are climbing to, stop and ask your supervisor before you go up. Not after.

A real-world example:

A maintenance technician was replacing a light fixture on a guarded elevated walkway. He set a six-foot stepladder on the walkway floor and climbed to reach the fixture. The walkway had a 42-inch guardrail on both sides. By the fourth rung he was above the rail with no additional fall protection in place. When he leaned to reach a mounting bracket, the ladder shifted on the grated walkway surface. He fell, cleared the top rail completely, and dropped to the floor below. He survived but did not return to that role. The area had a guardrail. On the ladder, he was above all of it. Nobody had ever specifically told him the guardrail did not cover his ladder work, because nobody had ever specifically thought about it.

Team member engagement:

"Are there places in this facility where people use ladders in areas with guardrails or fixed fall protection? Have we ever specifically talked about the point where that protection stops covering you?"

"If you needed to do ladder work above an existing guardrail right now, what would your protection plan be?"

"What is one task we do regularly where this gap might exist and nobody has addressed it yet?"

Thursday – Stairs and the Falls Nobody Plans For

Discussion:

Not all fall hazards involve height in the dramatic sense. Stair falls are one of the most common causes of workplace injury, and they happen at heights most people would not instinctively consider dangerous, three steps, six steps, a single landing. The injuries from those falls are real: broken wrists from catching yourself, head injuries from hitting the edge of a step, back and hip injuries from the impact. And they happen to people who have used the same stairs hundreds of times without incident.

Stair safety habits that prevent falls:

- Use the handrail. Every time. Not when carrying something, not when you are in a hurry, every time. The handrail exists because stairs are where people fall, and it is there to catch a misstep before it becomes a fall.
- Do not carry loads that block your view of the steps or prevent handrail contact. If the load is too large or too heavy to navigate safely, get a second person or use a different route.
- Watch your footing at the top and bottom step. The transition from stair to landing is statistically the most common point of stair-related falls because it is where people shift attention from the stairs to wherever they are going.
- Report damaged, wet, or uneven steps immediately. A step that is slightly uneven is easy to miss and easy to trip on. It does not fix itself.

A real-world example:

A shipping associate at a distribution center was carrying a large box down a staircase to the lower level. The box was awkward but manageable, and he had made the same trip with similar loads plenty of times before. Both hands were on the box, neither was on the handrail. Three steps from the bottom his foot caught the edge of a step and he went forward. With nothing to grab he could not catch himself. He hit the landing hard, broke two ribs, and spent the rest of the shift in the emergency room.
The load was not too heavy. The staircase was not defective. He just had both hands full and nothing left to catch him when his footing gave out.

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Team member engagement:

"Are there floor openings, skylights, or hatches in our work environment that are covered or guarded? Who is responsible for making sure those covers stay in place, and does everyone know that?"

"What is your honest habit on our facility stairs? Do you use the handrail every time, or only sometimes?"

"Has the weekly challenge changed anything about how you approach stairs, ladders, or elevated surfaces this week?"

Friday –Week Wrap-Up

Discussion:

This week we covered the number one cause of workplace fatality from the ground up. We talked about why falls keep happening to experienced team members, including the specific role that familiarity and the absence of previous consequences play in eroding caution. We went through the fall protection systems that already exist in most work environments and the critical point that every one of them has a defined envelope of protection that ends somewhere. We dedicated Wednesday entirely to ladder safety and named directly the hazard that almost never gets discussed: using a ladder in a guarded area and climbing above the protection that is in place. And we covered stairs and floor openings, the falls that happen at modest heights and that hurt people badly every single day.

The common thread through this week and last week is the same one that runs through this entire series: hazards that are familiar do not feel like hazards. The ladder you have climbed a hundred times does not feel dangerous. The staircase you use every shift does not feel dangerous. The guard railed mezzanine does not feel dangerous. And they are not, right up until the one moment when conditions shift slightly and the margin you have been unknowingly relying on disappears. The five-second pause from this week's challenge is the habit that keeps you honest about that margin.

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Weekly Challenge Report-Back:

This week you were asked to pause five seconds before every ladder climb, stair use, or elevated surface access and ask three questions: is this the right tool, am I in the right position, and do I have full fall protection for this height? Let's hear what happened when people actually stopped and asked.

"Did the pause change anything about how you approached a specific task this week? Walk us through it."
"Did anyone identify a moment where the answer to one of the three questions was actually no? What did you do?"

"Was there a situation involving a ladder in a guarded area that you looked at differently after Wednesday's conversation? What did you see?"

Closing questions:

"What is one specific change to how we use ladders, protect floor openings, or use our stairs that this team should make based on this week?"

"If someone new joined this crew tomorrow, what would we tell them about fall hazards in this environment that they would not figure out on their own just by looking around?"