CHESS, Inc.
7060 Valley Creek Plaza #115-108
Woodbury, MN 55125
Ph: 651-481-9787
Complete Health Environmental and Safety Services www.chess-safety.com

Getting High

Janet L. Keyes, MS, CIH and Carol A. Keyes, MA, CSP

Some people are short. Some vehicles are tall. The problem: it's impossible to repair some damage while standing on the ground. Or to check an engine while a vehicle is raised on a hoist. The solution: stand on something. That something is likely to be a ladder or a scaffold. (We certainly hope it isn't a chair or a box!) Either one can provide a good working surface, but too often, both are misused.

We often see rolling scaffolds in the shops. These usually provide a better work surface than ladders, because you can move around on the platform. As long as they don't collapse and if the user doesn't fall off, they work well.

Ladders work well if you only need to get to one small spot. People can't safely work more than a foot to either side of the ladder, though. And they need at least one hand to hold onto the ladder. That makes ladders dangerous, because people over-reach, or they do work that puts them off-balance.

In general, stepladders provide a more secure work platform than straight ladders. But you wouldn't want to use a stepladder to climb onto something, as it isn't designed for that (and if you are climbing onto another surface, don't forget the need for fall protection on that surface).

Prevent ladder and scaffold problems with these measures:

- Use only engineered scaffolds and ladders. Unless you know how to determine loads, cobbling together a scaffold with 2x4s or practicing your welding skills to construct a ladder is a dangerous idea.
- Make sure they can take the weight. We've seen some household type ladders in body shops. Those can handle only 200 pounds. Have you weighed your employees lately, to ensure they (plus clothes and tools) weigh less than that?
- Check the area before you set it up. Outside, stay a minimum of ten feet away from power lines. Inside or out, block any doors, so someone doesn't barge through and into you. It may seem obvious, but don't set these up in the way of any cars.
- Put it together correctly. Many mobile scaffolds have locking pins to hold the different sections in place. If the locking pins are missing, it'll be easy to knock a section off. If you leave off the cross-bracing, the scaffold won't be as strong or as solid as intended. The scaffold floor must be fully planked, with engineered planking or with scaffold grade lumber. Check the plank installation, to make sure they can't move.
- Make sure it's in good condition. If parts are rusting or rivets broken, don't risk it. Train your users inspect the equipment before they set it up
- Use guard rails on the scaffold. If there's a potential for a fall from four feet or more, guarding is required.

- Set it up correctly. The floor needs to be firm and level – if it isn't, the scaffold or ladder could tip over. Stepladders need all four feet solidly on the ground.
- Use it correctly. Scaffold wheels need to be locked in place. The person on the scaffold has to keep his feet on the floor. If the scaffold isn't tall enough, you have the wrong equipment for the job. Don't try to add height artificially, by standing on something on the platform. You defeat the guardrail and increase the instability.
- Work within the limits. People fall from ladders (and scaffolds) when they try to get to that last area just beyond their reach. The rails on scaffolds are meant to keep the user on the platform; they aren't an extra step.
- If the location's wrong, move. Users need to get down from the scaffold or ladder to move it. The wheels on the scaffold are for moving it when it's empty, not when someone's riding it.
- Don't miss a step, in particular, the last one. Watch your footing when climbing up, and especially down, a ladder.

Most critical of all, provide the right tool for the job. People do dangerous things on ladders and scaffolds, because, too often, they work with the tools they have. Sometimes, a better tool is available, and they're too lazy/busy/not thinking to go get it. But often, they use the ladder that lacks anti-slip feet, because that's all that's available. Or they stand on the rungs of the scaffold, because they need to work at a height of eight feet, and the scaffold only lets them reach to 7.5 feet. Provide the right tools to allow work at heights, and your workers will be able to work safely at heights.

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