Crew Follows Boss Into Confined Space

When a construction foreman was found dead in water at the bottom of a manhole, his workers followed him into the confined space and risked death themselves.

The fatality occurred when his crew was installing a sewer line. He had told his workers he was going to take some measurements to plan the next stage of work, but it is not known why he entered the manhole when he could have made the same calculations outside.

Four of his workers risked their lives by entering the confined space to try to rescue him without preparing for hazards such as an atmosphere lacking oxygen or containing toxic gases. Any time there is a “person down” incident in a confined space, atmospheric hazards must be suspected. As it turned out, the four workers did escape without injury, although the first rescuer into the manhole reported nausea and breathlessness, which should have alerted the other three to the possibility of a problem with the air inside.

When atmospheric testing was done after the incident, the air was found to be normal at that time. Investigators surmised that the foreman slipped and fell when he entered the manhole. A coroner confirmed he died by drowning.

It is vital for everyone on a crew to be aware of the hazards of confined space entry. Many rescue attempts turn into multiple fatalities. No one should enter a confined space without the proper training, equipment, authorization and outside backup help.