Mountain Guide Falls to His Death

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A 21-year-old assistant mountaineering guide fell to his death on Denali (Mount McKinley) while attempting to rescue another climber from falling.

The climbing route guide was part of a team that was descending from a camp along the West Buttress of Denali. During the descent, he noticed that one of the climbers in the team had slipped on the path and was having trouble regaining his footing. The team was on a rope line with the guide at the end. The assistant guide unclipped from the line and walked past the other climbers to the fallen team member. As he moved along the path toward the fallen climber, the assistant mountaineer lost his own footing and slid down the slope toward the more than 500 feet glacier below. His body was recovered at a later time.

Climbing can be fun and exhilarating. As this case proves, it can also be dangerous. There were two recommendations that came out of this event. First was the need for a comprehensive safety program that clearly provides guidelines that assure employee health and safety. This program should outline safety practices and provide guidelines for employees to follow when they need to undertake specific practices, such as assisting in a rescue. The second recommendation was ensuring that guides are properly trained in assist and rescue techniques. Assistant mountaineering guides may not have the same level of experience or the same expertise as the senior guide in evaluating and making a rescue. Training will help bridge this gap, and help prevent falling incidents during rescue efforts.

Source: Alaskan Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) Program, Case Report 98AK016