Scaffold Safety Basics

WHAT'S AT STAKE

When you can't safely reach the work above you from the ground or from a solid structure, you need a temporary work platform: a scaffold. Many jobs commonly involve the use of scaffolding, such as construction, demolition, repair, maintenance and painting.

Unfortunately, though, in a typical year, about 100 workers across North America are killed in incidents involving scaffolding.

WHAT'S THE DANGER

Safety regulations state that a scaffold must be designed and set up under the supervision of a qualified person. Unfortunately, this doesn't always happen and workers can be put in grave danger as a result.

Causes of scaffolding failure include incorrect construction or installation, resulting in its collapse and injury or death to workers on and near the scaffold.

Placing scaffolding too close to overhead electrical lines is another mistake that can claim workers' lives.

EXAMPLE

An inexperienced worker who is not qualified to oversee the erection of a scaffold does so anyway. He neglects to ensure that bracing and vertical frame coupling devices are used, because he wrongly believes that the weight of the scaffold and its load will keep the frame secure. When the scaffold moves slightly, it collapses, seriously injuring two workers.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Scaffolds can easily become overloaded with heavy materials, especially if critical braces and other components are not installed or are not properly installed. Before a worker steps onto the scaffolding, it's vital that a competent person inspect it first to determine that it's safe to use.

Scaffolding must be inspected by a competent person not only when it’s erected and dismantled, but also before every shift.

If these daily inspections are not taking place or you have concerns that a scaffold is unsafe, don’t risk your life by climbing onto it. Talk to your supervisor.

Here are some additional scaffold safety tips:

- Before working on scaffolding, get training, including the proper use of fall protection devices, how to inspect those devices and how to determine when the equipment is unsafe to use.
- Don’t climb on scaffold supports. Access scaffolding only from designated areas of a structure or on appropriate ladders. When using ladders, keep both hands free to climb safely. Carry tools in tool belts or hoist them separately.
- Keep tools away from scaffold edges and floor openings. A falling tool could seriously injure a worker below.
- Don’t work on a scaffold during storms or high winds unless a competent person has determined that it’s safe, and has provided you with the proper fall protection.
- If you have concerns over the condition of ropes or planking, raise them immediately with your supervisor.
- Don’t allow debris to accumulate on the scaffold.
- Never use makeshift devices, such as boxes or barrels on the scaffold platform to increase your working height.

FINAL WORD

Safety violations involving scaffolds are among the most commonly cited by safety inspectors. Scaffold work takes training. You need to know how to use a scaffold properly and be able to recognize the multiple hazards that could leave you hanging or worse, send you tumbling to the ground below.

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