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Being Trained Doesn't Make You A Tower Hand

by Dr. Bridgette Hester

When I established Hubble Foundation, I jumped in headfirst to advocate for climbers and their families. After 18 months of organizational work, I realized I needed to truly understand their profession. I decided to get “Comtrained” and climb a tower myself, believing I couldn’t advocate effectively without experiencing the job firsthand.

My late husband had been a tower climber, and I thought I knew what I was getting into. I was wrong. For someone more suited to office work, putting on a harness and using pelican hooks to climb a broadcast tower was incredibly intimidating. I endured heat, sweat, cumbersome equipment, and my own nerves—conditions that pale in comparison to what professional climbers face daily.

The Comtrain class taught me the basics. I learned how to rescue someone, tie knots, and maintain safety. However, I quickly discovered that knowing information and executing the job are two completely different challenges. While climbing, I was astounded by the sheer amount of critical information I needed to remember simultaneously.

During the climb, I found myself so focused on managing my own anxiety that I wasn’t paying proper attention to crucial details like Y-lanyard placement, pelican hook orientation, and descent line management. These were immediately pointed out and corrected by my instructors.

Trying to simulate a real rescue scenario with my current husband, I realized how complex and dangerous the job truly is. If I had to actually rescue someone, I would not have been effective. I wasn’t fast enough, fluid enough, or comfortable enough—physically or mentally. The experience was daunting.

Employer Responsibility

I firmly believe that anyone claiming to be completely fearless in this profession is either lying or dangerously overconfident. While some people might be naturally gifted climbers with no fear of heights, they should still approach the job with a healthy sense of caution. This job requires a specific personality type, and employers have a critical responsibility to ensure their employees understand the inherent hazards and safety protocols.

Both of my trainers emphasized that basic training is just the beginning. Years of additional training and experience are needed before someone can be considered truly proficient. You can’t simply take an inexperienced person, rush them through a basic training

course, and immediately send them to work on a tower.

I recommend that every telecommunications employee, even those in office roles, should undergo basic climber training. Unless you understand what climbers actually do, you don’t truly understand the business.

In my advocacy role, I’ve heard disturbing accounts of newly trained climbers being sent directly to job sites with minimal preparation. Some are sent out with only other inexperienced workers, or worse, sent out alone. This practice is not just irresponsible—it’s potentially fatal.

Employers seem to believe that passing a basic training course automatically qualifies someone to perform complex tower installation tasks. This is fundamentally wrong. Knowing how to technically climb does not equate to being a professional tower technician. While on-the-job training is crucial, sending someone to work immediately after basic training, especially without experienced supervision, is unconscionable.

Let me be clear: just because you’ve sent your new employees through a basic training course does NOT make them qualified tower hands. Period.

Complexity and Danger

The telecommunications industry must recognize the complexity and danger inherent in tower climbing. It’s not a job that can be learned overnight or treated casually. Each climb in-

volves managing multiple critical variables simultaneously, where a single mistake could mean the difference between life and death.

Employers have a moral and professional obligation to:

- Provide comprehensive, multi-stage training
- Ensure new climbers are always supervised by experienced professionals
- Recognize that basic training is just the first step in a long learning process
- Prioritize safety over expediency

To truly respect and protect tower climbers, the industry must shift its perspective from viewing them as replaceable labor to recognizing them as skilled professionals who require extensive training, continuous learning, and unwavering commitment to safety.

Conclusion

This experience has transformed my understanding of tower climbing from a theoretical concept to a profound appreciation of the skill, courage, and precision required in this critical profession. □

Among her many titles, Dr. Hester serves as a senior adjunct doctoral chair for Grand Canyon University. Prior to this, she served as the president of Hubble Foundation for 10 years. In addition to her work responsibilities Dr. Hester also maintains her own academic research in the telecommunication industry.





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LIGHTS FLICKER AND EVENTUALLY DIM, MOTORS HUM, SPARKS FLY AND OBSERVERS GASP. THE AIR CRACKLES WITH ENERGY...THE DOOR OPENS...



MET BY THE CHEERS OF THE TOWER INDUSTRY AND HIS FANS, THE WINTER CLIMBER RAMPS UP HIS FIGHT FOR TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND THE AMERICAN WAY. WHERE TOE CRACK ONCE REIGNED, PROPER INSPECTIONS PREVAIL. WHERE CLIMBER SAFETY ONCE PLAGUED A WORKFORCE, EDUCATION AND TRAINING



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