

Lessons Learned from a Zipwire Incident

Narrative

An instructor at a zip wire facility was on the take-off platform, checking students and clipping them on prior to them descending the zip wire. Her assistant was at the bottom, and after students had descended, her role was to mount a small platform, then use a ladder to reach and unclip students from the wire.

It was part way through the session and all was going well. Another young boy descended. The assistant climbed the ladder to unclip him, but was having difficulty as the karabiner was jammed. A few moments later she heard a strange humming noise, looked up and saw another boy coming towards her at great speed. Little Johnny slammed into the two of them. Through quick thinking, the assistant held onto the ladder and 'rode' it to the ground. Dazed, she looked up to see the two boys suspended from the cable. They were safe, and fortunately she and the boys suffered only minor injuries. Had the first boy been unclipped at the time of impact, then there could have been a very different outcome.

All challenge courses should have protocols for each of the elements. In this case, although the instructor at the top of the zip wire had been fully trained, she did not perform the checks that she was supposed to; she did not look down the cable to check that it was clear. One quick look would have shown her that the zip wire was not ready for the next participant to descend. As instructors, we want to keep things fun and moving along, this helps keep everyone's interest. In this case the instructor was not fooling around, she simply overlooked a very basic but crucial procedure.

The Lessons Learned Group is a small group of professionals and enthusiasts in adventure activities, brought together by a common aim to incorporate any lessons that can be learned from accidents into ongoing good practice.

Our intention is to present an objective summary of an incident together with possible lessons. We do not aim to allocate blame or responsibility and our report represents the views of the individual members of LLG and not of any official body.

Information not currently available to us may render our comments inaccurate and the lessons identified may or may not have influenced the actual outcome. Any report published has been agreed by at least four individuals within the Group as meeting these aims.

www.lessonslearned.org.uk

Lessons Learned

1. Many accidents and near-misses are caused by staff not following standard procedures, be they written or oral.
2. The repetitiveness of doing the same moves over and over again can be hypnotic, but consistency is the watchword of a safe programme.
3. One way to help address these sorts of problems is to get the participants themselves to do much of the clipping on, checking that the zip wire is clear, etc, prompted as necessary by staff members who ultimately will check either verbally or physically before launch.
4. When multiple instructors are working together to deliver the same activity, it is important to establish a communications protocol/system to give clear indication of when it is safe to proceed; in this case a simple 'thumbs up' from the Assistant to the Lead Instructor (as per a helicopter winch-man) would have sufficed.
5. Managers should remind staff about the potential hazards associated with 'complacency', especially where regular routine activities are concerned.

The Lessons Learned Group are grateful to America's leading organisation for ropes courses and similar challenge courses, the Association of Challenge Course Technology (ACCT), for allowing us to use material from their in-house magazine Parallel Lines in this article. Thanks Sylvia!

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