



AAC Publications

Essentials: Speak Up!

Intervening Effectively for Safer Climbing

HAVE YOU EVER seen a climber doing something unusual, like belaying with an unfamiliar device or technique?

Have you ever seen a situation that may not be immediately dangerous but could be one day, like setting up a rappel device with a non-locking carabiner?

Have you ever seen an impending accident, like a belayer repeatedly dropping the brake strand of the rope to shoot photos of the leader at a crux?

Any of these scenarios might cause an experienced climber to feel concern, and some climbers might be tempted to intervene and try to stop or correct the behavior. But when is it actually appropriate to intervene and how can it be done in the most effective way? Intervention exposes a fellow climber to potential embarrassment, and it exposes the intervener to retaliation.

Consider that most people are not intentionally dangerous. Most people deserve the benefit of the doubt. In addition, many people have experienced interventions negatively, and, for good reason, they may be reflexively defensive.

It's hard to make sound judgments about safety without risking being a hypocrite. Most of us occasionally do things that could be safer. Some of us don't wear helmets at "safe" crags. Some of us don't use backups all the time. Effective safety interventions require the intervener to have some perspective on the severity of hazard, in order to modulate the severity of the response.

The first question to ask yourself before intervening with fellow climbers is this: "Is harm imminent?" If the answer is yes, an urgent intervention is justified. If not, or if you're not sure, a softer approach is often more appropriate.

INQUISITIVE APPROACH

Some things you see at the crag are not necessarily unsafe, just unfamiliar or unusual. For an intermediate or experienced climber, this may provoke a desire to intervene with a "better" method. But it's also possible that an unfamiliar or unusual technique might actually be cutting edge. Or it might be an equally effective technique that's just different from the one you were taught. Do you really understand all the pros and cons of what you're seeing? A soft intervention helps the intervener discern the difference between novelty and naïveté.

Consider the example of a belayer using an unfamiliar device. You're curious and just a little concerned. If the belayer knows exactly what he's doing, you want to learn more about it. If he doesn't know what he's doing, you want to offer to help.

The inquisitive approach would be to ask something like, "Hey, do you mind if I watch you use that belay device? I've never seen that one." Hopefully this will lead to a discussion and some information sharing. If the belayer can confidently demonstrate the unfamiliar device or technique, you'll learn

something. If he or she appears unconfident or inept with the belay, it may be time to ramp up the intervention.

SUGGESTIVE APPROACH

This approach may be appropriate when you see things that aren't exactly best practice, but don't imply imminent harm either. A reasonable and humbly presented suggestion can be persuasive. For example, take the climber about to rappel with a device clipped to her harness using a non-locking carabiner. Nine times out of ten, no harm would result, but it's clearly not the best practice.

"Excuse me," you might say. "Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but I was wondering about your rappel setup."

Climber: "What do you mean?"

"I mean your carabiner. Do you typically use a non-locker? I tend to use a locking carabiner right there."

At this point, some climbers won't be willing to listen, and they may even respond with something dismissive or derogatory. But if they open a door, you can have a useful conversation.

Climber: "I'm not sure. I've only done this a couple times."

"Cool," you say, "I was just asking because it's really more secure to use a locking carabiner to connect the device to your belay loop. Do you need to borrow one?"

URGENT APPROACH

Some situations are genuinely urgent. If harm is about to occur, act decisively to prevent someone from getting hurt. Feelings and egos can be salvaged afterward. To avoid overstepping, quickly ask yourself: Do I really understand what I'm seeing, and is it imminently dangerous? If the answer to both questions is yes, don't be afraid to act.

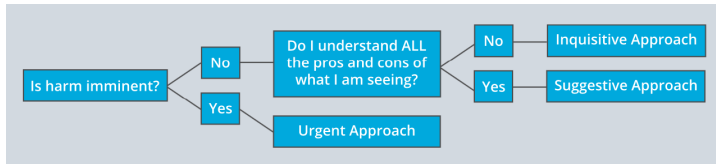
That belayer dropping the brake hand to shoot photos of his shaky leader? This is probably a case where asking questions and making suggestions isn't enough—a ground fall may be imminent. You could grab the rope behind the belayer to back up the belay or tie an overhand on a bight as a temporary backup. You'll likely have a pissed-off belayer on your hands, but you also might have saved someone's life.

WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Tactful and precise interventions take practice, so don't lose heart if your first attempts instigate unsavory interactions. Incrementally, you'll get better at intervening, and we'll all get better at experiencing an intervention. We're all in this together. If we're reflexively giving each other the benefit of the doubt, then we'll be patient when others are impatient, and we'll be delicate when others are indelicate.

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Images



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