

## Climbing and Levels of Risk

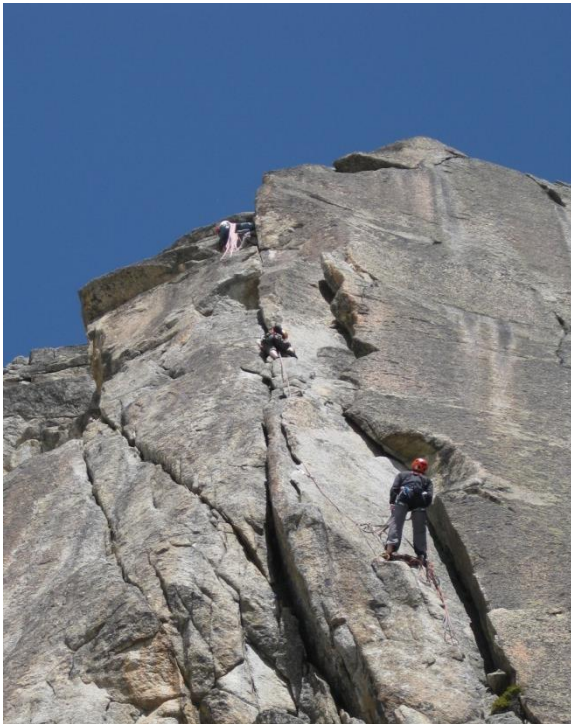
I have talked about climbing and safe behaviours previously and would like to expand on one particular aspect of this subject based on a recent experience whilst climbing in the Alps this summer.

At the end of June this year I was in Chamonix in the French Alps for a week of rock climbing. Part of that time was spent on the large granite cliffs below Mont Blanc where the level of risk is potentially a couple of notches higher due to additional hazards and greater commitment once the route is started. In response to this there is a need for a corresponding increase in personal awareness as well as greater teamwork. On one of these days we chose a hard-ish route of 8 pitches or rope-lengths amounting to approximately 300 metres of ascent. The climbing was absorbing with difficult moves, sometimes with a significant fall potential. Even having successfully reached the top, which we did without incident, the return to the glacier by abseil was also quite involved as it meant repeatedly pulling the ropes down and reattaching them for the next section. On regaining the glacier at the foot of the route (not quite *terra firma*) it was a pleasure to remove my tight rock shoes and cool my hot, swollen feet in the snow prior to putting on my heavier, more solid mountain boots and crampons for the return across the glacier to the refuge. It was at this moment that I carelessly stepped down and caught my exposed ankle on one of the super-sharp points on my crampons causing a not insignificant cut. After applying copious amounts of snow to reduce the bleeding (the place looked pretty grim afterwards!) and rendering immediate first aid I was able to walk back no problem – and more importantly it did not curtail the climbing activities on subsequent days although the potential for a more significant outcome was all too obvious.

The main lesson – so often it is not the big items that hurt you, but the minor, supplementary things after the main job is over. Isn't this the case in the workplace? We are so careful with assessing the risks, taking precautions and looking out for each other during significant tasks, but as soon as the perceived danger is gone we drop our guard. This is one manifestation of the Theory of Risk Homeostasis which suggests that we compensate for lower risks in one aspect of a task by taking greater risks in another (when a job is perceived as less dangerous, we take less care), or conversely when the risk is higher we compensate by taking more precautions. So, when planning an activity, be sure to take into consideration the supplementary activities that on the face of it present less risk and once the main job is over take a few moments to reconsider what could still go wrong. This also acts as a good reminder that it is not only when we are at work that we need to be focussed on our personal safety and well being.



High above the glacier on Chamonix granite



A climbing team part way up their chosen route