

Following others or taking the lead?

It is back to the mountains again and an opportunity to recount a recent experience that hopefully has some wider learning.

I was in Chamonix in the French Alps recently having a week's skiing holiday. As part of the trip I was keen to take the cable car up to the top of the Aiguile du Midi and make the long off-piste ski down what is known as the Vallee Blanche with two other friends. This is a hazardous activity as most of the skiing is on a glacier with its inevitable crevasses, seracs and potential avalanche danger. We had considered all of these hazards, taken appropriate precautions by ensuring we had the correct equipment; we were well acquainted with the route options; and we had checked the avalanche report and the weather forecast. We were confident that we had assessed the risk to be acceptable for our party on that day.

This is a popular route attracting many people every year and on a good day, as this day was forecast to be, it would be fairly busy. The majority of people descending the route would be similarly equipped with avalanche protection and crevasse rescue equipment. Many people chose to use a mountain guide for such a trip as they know the area very well, not only ensuring the safest route but also the best skiing.

One item of equipment my team all had in our packs was a set of crampons. For the uninitiated, these are the spikes you attach to the bottom of your boots to give excellent grip on steep snow and ice. We all carried these, probably because ours was a party of climbers who go skiing rather than purely skiers. I suspect many of those up on the mountain that day were not carrying crampons. The start of the descent involves walking through a short icy tunnel from the cable car station inside the mountain from which you appear into the bright, cold, mountain sunshine on a narrow snow-covered ridge. It is truly an amazing position with a steep, frozen slope dropping several thousand feet down to the valley on one side and an equally steep drop down onto the glacier on the other. You are confronted by spectacular mountain scenery with Mont Blanc to one side, the Grandes Jorasses in front and the Chamonix Aiguilles stretching out on the other side. The ridge can be quite intimidating and is probably the most difficult part of the day for many people despite the guide ropes that are installed to act as hand-rails.

Back to the tunnel where everyone gears-up. A quick look around showed that, whilst a few were, most people were not wearing crampons. After all, the ridge has a pretty well trodden path and does have the benefit of the hand-rail ropes as protection. Should we take the time to get them out, put them on then spend a similar time removing and packing them away at the bottom of the ridge? Remember also that most people did not bother, including many of the mountain guides. I found myself making the point that it probably wasn't worth the effort and "what could possibly go wrong?" But then hang on: I most definitely know it makes sense to put them on. How long will it actually take? What does it matter, what other people are doing? We went against the majority and spent those few moments fixing this simple piece of kit before heading out onto the ridge. Having put them on, we were able to walk much quicker and with more confidence than those who were slipping and sliding, holding onto the ropes – because their life did depend on it! As a result we more than made up for the time taken to get ourselves ready. To add to this, as I was on one of the steeper sections another skier slipped and was left flat on his back, hanging on to the hand-rail

ropes, legs dangling over the snowy abyss, next stop the valley floor! We dragged him back up and he was unharmed, but considering the potential consequence of that few moments I suspect it spoilt his morning.

It would have been so easy to “go with the flow” and not bother making that extra effort, as in so many situations in the workplace. Even when we know something is right, it is too often, too easy to adopt the inappropriate behaviour of those around us. Particularly if there are not clearly defined standards, we aren’t really sure what is “correct” or if role models (in this case, mountain guides) are setting a particular example. When it comes to making a choice about behaviours we have to make it easy for people to make the appropriate choices. This will be helped by clear standards that are understood by all and demonstrated by all leaders and other role models. Encourage people to take a stand and speak up when something doesn’t seem right.