

How to rock climb Safely

By Philippa Beale

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Practitioner Training

Abstract

Following 2 fairly serious climbing accidents, I got to wondering why it was that I kept falling off, whereas some of my climbing companions never seemed to have the same difficulty!! One of my climbing partners, Dave never seemed to slip when leading, and I decided to find out what it was about his methods and skills that made it possible for him to climb safely.

I was motivated by a desire not to injure myself seriously, and to stay alive, and discovered that the key learnings were about preparation and awareness; solid competence in rope work techniques ; managing one's anxiety ; and visualising the difficult moves before tackling them.

Methodology

For the project, I returned to Swanage, to the site of one of my climbing accidents, and climbed with Dave. Throughout the day, I seconded the climbs, which gave me ample opportunity to observe carefully his techniques, aiming to second position him to build my intuitive understanding of his experiences.

Following the 'practical part of the modelling project, I interviewed Dave in detail, about what made it possible for him to climb safely. I had constructed the interview prior to my visit to his home, and thus used a range of NLP modelling techniques in a flexible way, incorporating TOTE elicitation questions; strategy elicitation questions; and multi level modelling questions during the interview. It became obvious that there were some overlaps in the information provided in answer to the questions, and thus some flexibility was required, and at times I deviated from the intended structure, to follow up an issue that I was curious about. It was because of this overlapping of information that I have decided to write up the project by looking at the areas of behaviours / beliefs/ feelings / and thoughts before going into looking at a strategy in more detail.

Results

1) Behaviours

My implicit modelling of Dave led me to guess that he placed a high store by being prepared for the climb: he had read the guidebook and planned which routes we were going to climb at Swanage in advance ; knew the route to the rock face well ; and was able to find the routes quickly . His equipment was marked, and he was clear what hardware he had on his lead rack. At the end of the day, Dave packed his lead rack away and checked each piece of equipment.

The multi level modelling questions enabled me to confirm my observations, and Dave added some important other behaviours that he considers to be

crucial in the maintenance and preparation stage: washing ropes after sea climbing; lubricating the hardware with WD 40; and practising identifying specific rock features to enable a route to be identified quickly. In addition, Dave spoke of the need to be aware of other people in the vicinity, to be aware of the potential for possible rock fall.

I had observed that Dave's behaviour whilst climbing was to concentrate carefully whilst on the climb; calmly assess the situation; ask for support from his second when on a tricky move; and to shout clear instructions. Dave's rope work management skills were always confident and unflustered, and his climbing technique appeared to be smooth and confident.

When interviewing Dave, I used the multi level modelling strategy to elicit Dave's specific behaviours and capabilities that enable him to climb safely. I also used the Tote modelling questions to explore what specific steps he uses to be able to climb safely.

In addition to the behaviours that I had observed, which Dave confirmed were important, he added that he aims to set up solid anchors for himself and his climbing partner, attaching himself securely and tautly to the rock face so that in the event of his second falling, he is not pulled off balance. He also spoke of the importance of effective communication, in order to avoid any potentially catastrophic errors. He highlighted the importance of establishing mutually agreed 'calls' and to drawing the second's attention to his call by using their name to avoid confusing the call with anyone else who might be climbing in the area.

2. Beliefs

Using the multi level modelling strategy, I explored with Dave his beliefs and values that made it possible for him to climb safely. He spoke of the challenge of climbing, and the satisfaction of pushing himself. He said that he had been described by someone else as a 'safe, solid, and not bad' climber, and said that this is also how he sees himself. He doesn't believe that he is an excellent climber, and believes that it would take too much commitment and training to become one, but believes that the most important thing about climbing is to enjoy it.

Dave spoke of the importance of believing that his climbing partner is belaying safely and effectively, and that they will be able to hold him in the event of a fall. He made it clear that he would not climb with a partner whom he did not have this belief about, as this would impact on his own state: A lack of trust and confidence would lead to other unhelpful consequences like anxiety over difficult moves and the physiological symptoms associated with that, which are unhelpful when wishing to climb safely.

Dave spoke of how he is now a confident and self-assured climber, and does not need to rely on others. This has helped him to feel that he can climb well, and has added to his enjoyment of the activity. Dave spoke of 'absorbing' lots

of information from fellow climbers over the years, underlining the importance of modelling as a form of learning.

Interestingly, several times Dave spoke of his belief that climbing is an adventure, and said that he believes that he can regain some of the naivety and passion of his childhood during climbing. I had observed for myself Dave's infectious enthusiasm, and was interested to learn how it impacted on his behaviour and feelings: Dave spoke of how he had been to some wonderful places in the UK to climb, and how this joint activity could lead to a great sense of camaraderie with his companions.

Asked to describe his 'mission' when climbing, Dave described it as 'to have an enjoyable day out with like minded people in a great location'. This well formed outcome was stated in the positive, and was clearly motivating to Dave. The evidence that he would use to assess whether he would have achieved his outcome for the day, he described as an overall mental and physical feeling of well-being and achievement, and of being alive. He described this feeling as being 'all over' himself, and spoke of other externally referenced evidence— the pleased look on other people's faces, and listening to them speaking about how much they had enjoyed the day.

3. Feelings

I was interested to discover how Dave managed his state, as I had observed a calm, confident approach to his climbing, and a complete absence of panicking and flapping. Dave acknowledged that he does experience a degree of fear and anxiety as is common for all climbers. The symptoms as Dave experiences them, are both pictures and images of falling off and the injuries that might be the consequence, and physiological consequences—specifically having a dry mouth and sweating. Dave spoke of making a conscious effort to control his anxiety by taking long, deep breaths to calm his state. He then spoke of the importance of getting himself into a state of 'readiness', by looking carefully at the next move, planning where to put his feet, and using visualisation to mentally rehearse actually doing the move, before committing to it.

Dave also spoke of the importance of building confidence by starting the day with a climb that is well within his capability. He stated that he had seen many climbers 'freak themselves out' by pushing themselves to the limits on their first climb of the day, and then failing to get to the top. Clearly then, a state of confidence can be increased by having successful experiences, and undermined by having unsuccessful ones.

4. Thoughts

I had formed a hypothesis that the thoughts experienced by a safe climber might be different from the ones that I had running through my head.

Dave spoke of his thoughts in a very practical way — he talked of thinking about finding the right foot holds, thinking carefully about setting up safe belays etc, and planning the right moves. He did not seem to have any unhelpful 'inner commentary' going on that he was aware of, but did speak of his experience of hearing an irritating tune going through his head sometimes, and speculated that this might be his brain using this as a distraction from his current reality.

5. Micro strategies

I was interested to know exactly how Dave tackled difficult moves, which he always seemed to be able to do without falling off, so I asked him to access a reference experience of going climbing and having to overcome a difficult move. Dave's eye accessing cues led me to notice that he was looking for a visual representation of his experience, so I aimed to enhance that by asking him to tell me what he could see around him, and what else he was aware of when recalling that situation. His strategy was then described to me as follows

Ve : he becomes aware of the big drop below his feet

Ki : he feels anxious

Vic : he sees a picture in his head of falling off

Ke: he becomes aware that he is sweating, that his mouth is dry, and he is breathing fast

Vic: he has another picture flashing through his mind of falling off

Ai: he tells himself he needs to relax

Ke: he actively slows his breathing right down

Ai: he tells himself that he needs to protect himself

Ve: he looks around for the sequence of moves for his hands and feet

Vi: he visualises where to put his feet and hands

Ai: he thinks that he needs to go about this carefully, rather than just jumping into it

Ai | Vi: he 'blanks out' thoughts and pictures for a moment

Ki: he is aware of having 'time out' and a feeling of space and quiet preparation

Ae: he might have some small talk with his climbing partner to break the tension

Ki: he becomes aware of feeling confident and committed

...And then he makes the move.

Practical application

There are a number of aspects to climbing safely which are important to achieve, if one is to avoid falling off.

Preparation

Firstly, it is important to prepare well for the climb. This involves knowing and maintaining your equipment well, and becoming familiar and confident with the technical aspects of climbing. It is vital to be confident in belaying techniques, effective rope management, and setting up safe anchors; skills that will offer the climber and their partner confidence that the basic safety mechanisms are in place.

Climbers need to be able to understand the rock guides and be able to apply their understanding to the rock face, in order to make quick and accurate decisions about which route is going to be suitable and enjoyable. The best way to learn this is by climbing with more experienced climbers, and learning from them about how they do these skills. Climbers need to be able to assess their environment, and look for potential hazards like rock fall caused by other (perhaps less experienced) climbers.

Communication

It is vital that a climber and their partner develop good communication between them. This can only be achieved if they both have confidence and trust in each other, and have set up an agreed set of calls and signals for the climb. It is useful to call out the person's name before doing a call, to make sure that they are aware that a call is being directed at them, and it is vital to be clear when calling out, to avoid misunderstandings.

Attitude

Climbing should always be fun!! With enjoyment, it will be an engaging activity that will give you a feeling of enormous well-being. To increase your enjoyment of climbing, it is necessary to find like-minded companions; climb in beautiful surroundings; and build up your skills incrementally, particularly remembering to tackle an easy climb first to build confidence early in the day.

Managing challenges

Climbing is an undeniably challenging activity! The challenge is what makes it satisfying and leads to a sense of achievement and well-being. However, the challenge can lead to anxiety and fear, and it is vital that the climber has some effective strategies for managing their anxiety, to ensure that it doesn't lead to unhelpful panic. Climbers are advised to develop deep, slow breathing techniques, to enable them to calm their nerves when facing a difficult move.

Climbers should take their time to assess the move before launching into it, and this preparation should involve looking carefully at where their hands and feet need to go, and visualising exactly what to do. Climbers should try to ensure that they are talking through the sequence of moves in their head, so that their internal voice' is focussed on something positive. Climbers need to practise these techniques to enable them to feel confident when facing challenging climbs.

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