



Warning Calls: Are We Doing Enough?

Written by Tiago Miranda

It was midwinter and early in the morning, with gusts strong enough that not even a flag pole could have stood still. I was an apprentice, dragging branches and happy to do so. Wellington, New Zealand, is a tough town for beginners. Those that worked there know what I am talking about.

Up and down staircases was a clean-up routine of an everyday job.

After months and years working under these conditions, you build up stamina and start not bothering anymore. You look at the job specs and you know the tree is not that big, but the branches would have to go up and down along an arduous stairway, sometimes with no time to take a breath.

You dare not tear up the lawn or break a plant pot. You would suffer unforgiving consequences from the client. It happened to me more than a few times.

This day was not any different unless my tunnel vision was a bit too deep. I remember Richie up in the tree and yelling to us “*stand clear*”.

I walked forward without hesitation, my ears were glugged as if by a cork: nothing comes in and nothing comes out. I felt an increased cold breeze and a slightly wind-blown feeling that in no time, a decent size Pohutukawa branch (*Metrosideros excelsa*) landed on my head, pushing me down to the ground like a flat pancake. It was my fault - *was it really?*



Climbcare in Sydney, AU / Source: T. Miranda 2016



I walked out of there with no injuries, a stiff neck and a smile of impudence, saying to myself that *“it would never happen again”*.

What was wrong and what limited my attention? ***Was*** the job site safe and organised enough to avoid accidents like that? ***Were*** the crew members informed of possible hazards and risks? ***Do*** they sign their life away?

Questions until today I am not sure how to answer. I cannot recall any problems that could infer an accident may happen, though I also cannot tell what I could have done to stop it.

Nowadays, it explains everything.

In tree work, accidents happen all the time, all year along and everywhere around the world. Maybe apart from the more severe ones like chainsaw kickbacks, anchor point failures, machinery injuries and falls from height. Incidents involving falling debris are no exception. And are probably more common than you think.

Tree workers worldwide have a reputation of *‘get into it’* mindset that do not just aggravate risks but add fuel to the fire. When talking about dangerous tasks, such as large removals and large amenity pruning, your attention as a climber and ground person requires full commitment and focus on the job at hand.

When a crew is used to working together, each individual knows what he/she is doing which may end up lessening their attention to hazards. In some cases, it could even increase the risks, depending on the situation.

One of the reasons for near misses and accidents to occur on job sites is the pure neglect of **JSA** (Job Safety Analysis) or most well known as Hazard ID sheet.



Source: T. Miranda 2020



Source: T. Miranda 2016

There is a certain niggles towards filling out a form first thing in the morning, which might put some of the workers off for whatever reason. It is the only occasion that before cranking into it we can analyse and plan how thoroughly and methodically our task may unfold. It can also lift our chances of making it home safely at the end of the day. Something not yet thought out by many employers that insist on flogging their crews to minimise 'free time' from safety checks and tactics to dodge possible mistakes.

It is an attitude on behalf of both parties – employees and employers – to adequately change and reduce accidents that otherwise could halt tree operations for good in case of a fatality.

A simple "stand clear" and "clear" as a response might assure attention. Also, it may enable limb throws and/or rigging practices,



ARB DEBATE

demanding less for everyone to keep their heads-up when worry of falling debris is present.

On behalf of everyone on-site, trained, qualified or otherwise, coordinating a simple communication system like this does not only display a professional competence but also satisfy *Health and Safety* principles.

The awareness created by filling out a JSA form before any work commences and thereby recognising many potential risks can translate to improved attention on the job ahead. It also provides a better example of positively shaping attitudes towards workplace safety for the generations to come.