It’s a supervisor’s legal obligation to take every precaution reasonable under the circumstances to protect workers. That’s an important duty that can sometimes seem overwhelming. But what if we just concentrate on one major hazard: falls. And what if we break it down into steps of five—five things you can do, five things you can say, and five ways you can show how to prevent falls? Just by following these 15 steps, a supervisor can lead workers along the path to safety.

Five things to do today

1) Ask workers one question.
Ask them if they know how many workers died from falls in Ontario construction in 2012. The answer is five. Workers need to know that the problem of falls is serious. Later in the week, give workers the fall protection quiz on page F15.

2) Check for missing guardrails.
Guardrails are often the best form of fall protection because they keep workers away from the edge. Keep an eye out for missing guardrails on scaffolds and floor edges. Ministry of Labour inspectors will be looking for them too.

3) Look out for ladders.
A lot of injuries involve ladders, but we use them so often that we don’t think about the dangers. Look for workers doing things that increase the risk of injury, such as leaning outside the rails, working off a ladder, or carrying something while climbing.

4) Check for floor and roof openings.
Too many workers have died after walking backwards into a floor or roof opening. Fasten a sturdy cover securely over the opening and write something like DANGER! OPENING—DO NOT REMOVE! DO NOT LOAD! on it with bright spray paint. Or install guardrails around the opening and put up a sign.

5) Give a safety talk.
We print a safety talk on the inside front cover of each magazine, and there are more free ones available at ihsa.ca/resources. We also send out a safety talk each morning through Twitter. It’s important to talk to workers about the specific fall hazards and fall protection equipment used on your site. Walk the site with them or meet in an area where you can see several fall hazards. Explain to workers what’s expected of them.

Five things to tell workers

1) “Do it right every time.”
“It will just take a minute” or “I have done this a hundred times before” can be a worker’s last words. Your employees are paid to be professionals. That means doing the job safely each time, every time, and all the time.

2) “Look out for other workers.”
You expect them to fix a problem that endangers other workers—but they need to know that. They should feel comfortable replacing a missing guardrail or a floor opening cover, even if it’s not in their work area.
3) “Use the right equipment.”
Workers need to know that wearing the required equipment is not an option. It’s mandatory.

4) “Tell me about the hazards you see.”
The law requires workers to inform their supervisor of any hazards that can affect them or other workers. They should feel comfortable calling you if they face a confusing situation or can’t control a hazard. It’s in your best interest to find out before an injury happens—so you can prevent it—rather than afterwards.

5) “Know your rights.”
If a worker faces a fall hazard and does not have adequate protection, the worker has the legal right to refuse the work. It’s better for everyone not to get into this situation in the first place.

Five ways to supervise

1) Show that you mean it.
More than anything else, your actions demonstrate your commitment to fall protection. Inspect your site every day. Point out the hazards. Suggest safer ways to do a job (e.g., using an elevating work platform instead of a ladder).

If all you talk about is productivity and deadlines, you encourage workers to cut corners. If your actions show that you care about your workers, you encourage them to protect themselves.

2) Plan your work.
Consider ways to avoid working at heights. For example, assemble roofs on the ground and hoist them into place; order prefabricated wall frames or trusses; use extension handles on tools to do painting or window-washing from the ground. At the very least, think ahead a few days. List the tasks that workers will do at heights.

Go to the jobsite ahead of time and look for fall hazards. Look for places where workers might use ladders, and order elevating work platforms instead. Prepare your equipment and other hazard controls in advance.

3) Train and inform your workers.
Workers must receive training on fall protection basics as well as the specific fall protection situations and equipment on the project. IHSA’s Working at Heights – Fundamentals of Fall Prevention is a good start, but you’ll need to address the specifics of the work they’ll be doing on the site.

The law also requires a supervisor to inform workers about the hazards on site. Knowing what to tell them becomes easy if you already have a system in place. Do a job hazard analysis and then give your workers a safety talk to describe what you found.

Ongoing training and coaching are part of a supervisor’s job. Put up posters, distribute IHSA stickers, and hand out safety talks. These reminders could save a life.

4) Enforce the rules.
Enforce the construction regulations and your company’s policies on fall protection. If workers are ignoring procedures (e.g., not tying off on sloped roofs), insist that they follow the procedures. Explain the consequences of ignoring them. Don’t be afraid to take disciplinary action when necessary. A company can’t afford to tolerate workers who continue to put themselves, other workers, and the business at risk.

5) Reward good behaviour.
Recognize workers who follow the rules. “Catch” workers doing something right and thank them for it. A small token of appreciation can make a person’s day and reinforce good behaviour.