

INTRODUCTION TO LEADING

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INTRODUCTION

Lead climbing is a different world than top-rope climbing. It is significantly more dangerous and greatly increases the risk of death or serious injury. More than “climbing” skills, lead climbing involves “protection” skills. An extremely accomplished climber who is very poor at protection techniques may have to lead at a level well below his/her best top-rope climbing level. A moderate climber who is skilled at protection may be able to test lead-climbing skills at the same level as his/her best top-rope skills.

When you have reached the level where you want to lead, and especially if you want to do multi-pitch climbs, you must carry with you a complete bag of tricks to handle any problem. These situations are often ones in which rescue is not readily available, and each member of the party—including the non-leaders—should have an understanding of how to self-rescue. This ability comes only with the study of the complete game.

To lead safely, you must understand the **belay chain**, which is the leader’s safety line. All parts of the belay chain must be intact to protect the leader **and** the belayer adequately. The belay chain consists of the belayer anchor, the rope, the belayer, the belayer’s harness, all protection placed by the leader, the leader’s tie-in knot, the leader’s harness and the leader. In these chapters, we will discuss the equipment and techniques that are part of the belay chain, what happens when they are stressed by a lead fall and how to minimize the danger of lead climbing.

You do not become a good leader by reading a book and you do not become a good leader by taking a class, although you should read and study as much as possible. It takes time and practice to become a safe leader. Don’t expect to become good by occasional leading trips. Dedicate some time to the craft. Ask for advice and try to get experienced leaders to go out with you and check your handiwork.

LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITY

Leadership, by its very definition, implies responsibility. A leader is responsible for the climbing team. That does not relieve the seconds, or followers, of responsibility for their own self-rescue should they encounter a problem, but the responsibility of a leader begins before the climb, in the planning stages.

Responsibility To Yourself

As a leader, you have a responsibility to yourself. You should have mastered the skills of belaying, rappelling, prusiking, self-rescue, anchor-setting, placing protection, aid climbing, route-finding and lastly, climbing. Let’s look at these more closely.

Belaying is the technique of protecting the climber from injury in a fall. Your belaying skills should include lead belaying, top-rope belaying, knowing when and how to set a belay anchor, and the Muentner hitch belay as a backup technique in case you drop your belay device.

Rappelling is the primary skill used to descend using a rope. Your rappelling skills should include single-rope rappel, double-rope rappel, being able to lock off while on rappel at any time, being able to use safety backups, and the Muentner hitch rappel as a backup technique in case you drop your rappel device.

Prusiking is the skill of going up or down a rope at will. Your prusiking skills should include being able to prusik up or down, prusik up or down past any obstacle, convert from prusik to rappel, convert from rappel to prusik, and prusik up and down using a one-prusik backup technique in case one is all you have.

Self-rescue skills are those you use to get yourself or your climbing team out of a bad situation. Your self-rescue skills should include being able to tie off and escape a belay, set an anchor one-handed, set up and use a lowering or raising (haul) system, rescue a climber from the wall and rescue a leader who has taken a lead fall.

Anchor-setting is the skill you use to set bomber anchors that will not fail both at the start and end of your lead, and to make the most of an environmental situation where you do not have bomber anchor material. Your anchor-setting skills should include being able to set top-rope anchors, belay anchors, bail-off anchors, and hanging belays, using removable pro and/or fixed pro.

Placing protection is the main actual leading skill that you use to protect yourself as a leader from being injured if you fall, and to protect your belayer from being injured should you fall on him/her. Your protection skills should include familiarity and practice with all the pro you use, including how to stack pro, how to remove pro, how to evaluate the rock for safe placements, how to determine what pro you will need by looking at a climb, how to carry or “rack” your pro, how to evaluate fixed pro placements such as bolts and pitons and how often to place pro during the lead.

Aid climbing is the skill of using gear to advance on a climb. Your aid-climbing skills should include being able to make etriers and use them, and how to set up the aid climbing configuration. While you may not want to “aid” a route, you may get off-route and find yourself in over your head, or you may run into an injury situation that prevents you from free climbing.

Route-finding is the skill of staying on route, or determining the best route if you are putting up a first ascent. Your route-finding skills should include being able to read climbing guidebook topos and descriptions, being able to “read the rock” to stay on route, and an awareness of weather conditions and how they will affect your climb.

Climbing skills are self-explanatory, but you should always evaluate realistically your climbing skill level. Your lead climbing level is not necessarily your top-rope level, and probably not your gym-climbing level. If you overestimate your ability to handle the difficulty of the route, you can jeopardize your safety and the team’s safety.

Responsibility To Your Second And The Other Climbers On The Team

As a leader, you also have a **responsibility to your second and the other climbers on the team**. Even if the other team members’ abilities are equal to yours, you should still communicate so that they know what’s going on—it’s boring and lonely on the belay stance. You should also be honest about your abilities and skill level—their lives depend on you as well as yours on them.

In addition, if your second, or other team members, are less experienced than you, make sure they have the right gear and the minimum level of knowledge to handle the complexity of the climb. Make sure they know how to remove the pro you are placing. Be conservative if they don’t lead; if you get hurt, they may be in deep trouble.

Responsibility To The Climbing World, The Non-Climbing World And The Environment

You also have a **responsibility to the climbing world, the non-climbing world and the environment**. There may be local customs and established traditions in climbing areas that have been arrived at through long negotiations, often involving landowners and public officials; educate yourself about these local customs to prevent access problems. Never remove bolts or pitons from a climb; others may be counting on that piece being there and they may be relying on that information from a guidebook.

Remember that you have an impact on any area you visit. It may only be footprints in the dirt or some broken vegetation, but it is there. Minimize your impact on the climbing environment as much as possible. The human population growth is overwhelming the natural resources on our planet, and we are all part of it. Pack out all your trash, period, and pack out other people’s trash—there is simply no room for it. Follow local guidelines for disposal of human waste. Follow established trails whenever possible—many areas have a braided network of “trails of use.” Show courtesy to other climbers and non-climbers. Always follow posted regulations and closures. All these things eventually become a factor in any decision about further use of the land. Proper treatment of the land will go a long way when we need to negotiate that continued use of private or public land.

MENTAL ASPECTS OF LEADING

As stated above, leading is a different world than top-rope climbing. Much of that difference—the risk of death and injury—is mental. How you approach **the mental game** and how you handle it may well determine how successful you are. Some of the mental skills required are concentration, awareness, and the ability to deal with fear. In addition, climbing is considered an extreme sport, or an adrenaline-junkie sport. There is a certain amount of bravado, egotism, or swagger that may go along with it—although it isn’t necessary, and you needn’t be intimidated by it.

Concentration

Leading can be described as a series of bouldering problems. You boulder from the bottom toward the first placement. When you reach it, you place the piece and clip the rope, then relax. At this point, you are equivalent to being on “top-rope,” but not with the bomber anchor that is required of a top-rope. The rope above you acts somewhat like a slingshot, and if you fall, your chance of injury is minimal as long as the placement holds. You need to concentrate on getting from the current placement to the next placement. Your entire focus should be on the travel between the two—not on the scenery, not on needless chatter at the base of the climb and not on conversation about anything other than the lead. Only when you have successfully clipped and protected yourself should you relax—especially when you are first learning to lead. If you have an iffy placement, however, you still need to concentrate on getting to the next secure placement. This ability to concentrate is one of the keys to staying safe.

Awareness

At the same time, you must be aware of what is going on around you. Compare it to driving a car. When you first started driving, you had to learn to operate the steering wheel, the brake, the clutch, the turn signal, and the accelerator. During these actions, you had to stay aware of drivers behind you, traffic lights ahead of you, people turning on both sides of you, speed limit signs, and other traffic warning signs. Similarly, in leading, you need to learn how to lock off, place pro, and clip the rope. And during these actions, you have to stay aware of where the rope is in relation to your legs, where the next placement is, how fast the belayer is feeding you slack, and the other climb-related factors. Just like driving, these actions will become automatic or second nature for you, and you will adjust as the rope changes position, or the climb changes direction. It does, however, take practice. Driving a car every day of your life from your late teens has given you that second sense of what is happening all around you. Climbing as often as possible will help you develop your ability to stay aware of what is happening on the route.

Dealing With Fear

The last mental skill is **dealing with fear**. Some people “freak out” when they feel they are in a dangerous situation. And leading is not for everyone. You must learn how you deal with fear, and you must decide if it is right for you. There is nothing wrong with being afraid and nothing wrong with avoiding the risk. Everyone—from the “No-Guts-No-Glory-5.13-climber” to the non-leader—has to make his/her own decision. And for that person, it is the right decision. If you decide to lead, however, you have to learn and practice how to deal with fear.

Macho Factor

Good climbers are respected partly for their ability to overcome fear or laugh in the face of danger (not always the best course). When climbing, you may find yourself in a situation in which the audience (your friends, strangers climbing next to you, attractive persons of the opposite sex) may be a factor in your decision to lead or not lead. This is the “macho factor.”

It would be wise to think about some things that are ego-related before you get in these situations.

Never be ashamed to back off a lead. The mental preparations that go into it are crucial. Some days are lead days and some are not. People have gotten injured because they could not concentrate on the lead due to personal problems. This can be just as dangerous a situation as daydreaming about these problems when driving. Your reasons for backing off don’t matter; this is an individual decision, which is yours and yours alone.

Never criticize or make fun of anyone who backs off. They have the same right to choose when and where they want to lead that you do.

Double-check each other. Don’t consider questions to be nagging or doubting of your ability. The safety of each member of the climbing team affects the others, and is a legitimate concern by each one. The leader can fall on the belayer or pull the belayer off a stance or into the rock. The belayer can neglect to anchor and allow too much of a fall, or not feed slack fast enough to allow the leader to clip before coming off. This is a team effort.

Double-checking can be a particular problem when climbing with significant others (SO’s). Sometimes SO’s aren’t the best teachers of each other, and parents aren’t the best teachers of the child. If you think about the work that you do, day in and day out, you should realize that you rarely have a perfect day—one in which you write a perfect program the first time around, or make a perfect widget every time, or install all the tile perfectly. We all make mistakes; it’s just that there is a lot on the line in leading, and you do it much less often than your work. Take the extra time to double-check each other.

DEFINITIONS OF LEAD STYLES

These are commonly used definitions of lead “**styles**.” This term is used subjectively, as it implies a judgment of a “good” or “bad” style. Ultimately, who cares? It’s up to you, and you should do your leading for your own purposes. Those who believe that a lead should fit a certain style are just as right as those who use varying lead techniques to improve their own ability. You will often hear of a climber doing the following:

On-sight, on-sight flash, a vue: to lead without falling or hanging and with no prior knowledge of or experience with the route

Redpoint: to lead (without falling or hanging) a climb while placing protection en route with prior knowledge of or experience with the route

Pinkpoint: to lead (without falling or hanging) a climb that has been pre-protected

Hangdog: to finish the lead after hanging on the rope