

Guides Use of the Climbing Calls

As recreational climbers we use calls to communicate with our partner from a distance. In that situation our calls state a fact about an action we have taken and we expect our partner to react accordingly. For instance when we say “off belay” it is because we have anchored ourselves in some way, what we expect is our partner will remove the rope from the belay device. If our partner begins to breakdown the anchor after taking us off we might consider it inappropriate but we do not have to take responsibility for their actions and therefore we are not too concerned.

In a guided situation if our client either through confusion or intentionally begins to breakdown the anchor in the above example it is our responsibility. So a guide needs to reassess how and why we use the climbing calls. In effect when we use a call we are requesting that our client do a specific task. The task set we are asking our clients to embark on has a direct impact on their safety. The change in mindset a guide needs to make about the calls is that we will use them to ask our client to do something not to tell them we did something.

For instance when we say “off belay” it is because we want our client to remove the rope from the belay device not because we have anchored ourselves. This change is subtle but can have a great impact on our ability to manage the risks associated with our client’s transition from belaying to climbing.

Here are some examples of how a guide can use the calls in ways to better manage the risks for their clients. There are two main situations we use calls and at least one special situation. The two main situations are, when we can see our client and when we cannot. We often go to some lengths to see our clients; if that is the case we should make the most of that fact.

If our new belay stance is in sight of the client and when we anchor ourselves we immediately yelled “off belay” with our back to our client we have lost an opportunity to watch our client during a critical phase of this transition. You will often hear stories of guides looking down to see their client unclipping from the anchor. This can happen even with experienced clients, particularly if they have not climbed for some time. What I would suggest is when you arrive at a stance build your anchor, organize yourself and only yell “off belay” when you can focus completely on your client. Once your client disassembles the belay device properly and you are confident your client is not going to go after the anchor you can pull up the rope while giving your client an occasional glance.

In recreational climbing you would pull the rope up until your partner says “that’s me”, you would then turn away from your partner and put them on belay (this would occur if you were belaying off the anchor). With a client that you can see what I would suggest is when there is approximately 10 feet of rope left put the rope through the plaquette or Muentner hitch at the anchor then pull the remaining rope up through the belay till your client says “that’s me”. At this point you can wait to see if the client will go for the

anchor prematurely, if not you can then say “on belay” and your client can then disassemble the anchor. Remember that with an inexperienced client you may want to keep your eye on them to make sure they do not untie from the end of the rope at this point!

If you cannot see your client and you are concerned they will make a mistake and unclip inappropriately try this. Once you have tied in do not give a call instead start pulling up the rope. When your client yells that you do not have much rope left put the rope through your plaquette or munter on the anchor and yell, “off belay”. Now you have your client reasonably protected from a mistake and you can proceed with the calls normally.

If at some point you find yourself out of rope and in need of a few feet more to make the stance you may want your client to take you “off belay” so you can get the 5 or so feet of slack. If that were the case I would recommend using the call, in other words simply say, “off belay”. Too often I hear guides trying to explain why it is ok for the client to remove the rope from the belay device from 60 meters away. This is not only confusing to the client it probably is not a good time to teach anyway, just stick with the calls. Of course if you extend a pitch that far you should feel comfortable with your clients understanding of the calls and the transition procedure they initiate.

If after a few pitches of being in sight of your client they have performed well with the calls you may decide to rely on your clients ability to perform the transition. The key here is that before your client is to do something unsupervised that has such an importance to their safety, you should have instructed them and have tested them for understanding. The above methods when used in the proper context can allow the client to practice supervised or mitigate the risks when they cannot be watched. Once they have satisfactorily passed your test you can then give them the responsibility of performing the transition from belaying to climbing unsupervised.