Buddy Up for Confined Space Safety

What’s at Stake?

Some jobs require workers to enter and work in tight areas known as confined spaces, which can be both uncomfortable and dangerous. Usually, a confined space will have limited access, poor ventilation and poor lighting. A confined space may also contain a hazardous atmosphere, moving machinery, and many other potential hazards. So, it’s essential you’re fully trained in confined space procedures before confined space work begins – this includes having at least one trained and authorized person (attendant) standing by in case something goes wrong.

What’s the Danger?

Fatalities and serious injuries are a risk not only to the confined space entrants, but also to “would-be” rescuers. In fact, most workers who die after entering confined spaces are those attempting to help rescue co-workers. They naively believe they can hold their breath while carrying a co-worker out. That may happen in the movies, but in reality, it can lead to a domino death effect, where two or more would-be rescuers die while trying to help an unresponsive co-worker.

Example

Two sanitation workers entered an underground sewage pumping station. As they attempted to unbolt an inspection plate from a valve, the plate blew off and the underground room filled with raw sewage. Neither worker was wearing a respirator or other protective gear.

One worker was overcome by sewer gas, but the other was able to make it out to call the police for help. He returned with a police officer and the sanitation supervisor. They entered the confined space to attempt rescue. No one was wearing respiratory protection and all three were overcome by toxic gas.

Finally, two firefighters entered the space with self-contained breathing equipment and retrieved the bodies of the original victim and the three would-be rescuers. Had a standby person been monitoring the confined space work, this multiple fatality might not have happened.

How to Protect Yourself

A vital safety link for someone working inside a confined space is the standby person, also known as the authorized attendant. If you're the authorized attendant, it does not mean you should enter a confined space to attempt a rescue.

Instead, the attendant must remain outside the restricted area, monitor the conditions and be ready to call for assistance if it's required.

As the authorized attendant, the lives of the workers inside the space are depending on you. So, it's important you be fully knowledgeable in the company's confined space entry procedures, including these eight procedures:

1. Ensure the confined space is tested first before entry is attempted.
2. Know how to maintain communication with workers inside confined spaces.
3. Know how to recognize changes in conditions so you can:
    1. Order entrants to evacuate; or
    2. Sound the alarm for rescue.
4. Know how to detect changes in appearance, behavior, motor skills, perception, speech and concentration of confined space entrants. These are indicators of oxygen deficiency or exposure to harmful substances.
5. Understand procedures for locking out hazards, such as electricity, machinery and moving materials.
6. Understand the importance of atmospheric testing and ventilation.
7. Keep unauthorized personnel out of the confined space, including untrained and unequipped rescuers.
8. Know when and how to start a rescue, without entering the space.

Final Word

As an authorized attendant you must know your job so you can perform your duties, keep an eye on conditions, and get help in an emergency. The lives of your co-workers depend on it.