

Think Inside the Box

Why the box you keep trying to climb out of is the one thing protecting the person who comes after you

Mike Thomas • Founder & Director | 6 min read • August 2026

A friend asked me a simple question recently: when should I retire my climbing harness?

It sounds like a piece of admin. It isn't. Folded inside that question is one of the most important things we deal with in any professional field — and most of us answer it badly.

The Straight Answer

Let me deal with the harness first, because the honest answer matters.

Manufacturers generally give a working lifespan for soft goods — often somewhere around three to five years of regular use, and up to roughly ten for some items, depending on the maker and on how hard the kit has been worked. Check the guidance for your specific harness; the numbers move.

There's judgment in it. If you've taken a lot of falls on it, used it daily, and generally run it ragged, you retire it earlier. That call is yours to make, and your experience earns you the right to make it.

But what you do not do is go past the stated maximum. That isn't a suggestion. That's the edge of the frame.

Why Not Push Past It?

Here's the uncomfortable part. You might know that harness's whole history. You might have inspected it, tested it, and be genuinely confident it's still good. You may well be right.

But if something happens — and in our work, something eventually does — you have to justify what you did. If you've gone against the manufacturer's guidance, against industry recommendation, against your own company policy, you had better be standing on something very firm.

You need to be rooted enough to justify the decision. "I felt it was fine" is not roots.

That's the real test. Not "was I probably right?" but "could I defend this — to someone who wasn't there, after the worst has happened?"

The Harness Was Never the Point

Because this was never really about a harness.

It's about frameworks — and it doesn't matter what industry you're in. However we dress it up, we all work to one: policies, procedures, protocols, risk assessments, guidelines. A whole plethora of direction handed to new staff, whatever their level.

Sometimes those bits of paper change. That's adaptation. That's evolution. That's completely fine — the frame is allowed to be rebuilt. But there is always a frame.

Because when a new person walks in, they don't start from scratch. They don't just run on their own judgment. They don't just do what they personally think is right — because "what I think is right" is subjective, and subjective, scaled across a team, is another word for chaos.

What we need is something objective. What we need is a frame.

The Climbing Frame

We are forever told to think outside the box. I want to make the opposite case — and to trade the box for a better shape: a climbing frame.

Picture one in a children's playground. You can go up it. You can go down it. You can move side to side, or round in a circle. You have real freedom on it — but you stay on the frame.

That is exactly what a good policy is.

It gives structure and it gives guidance. It points people towards the right outcome. But it leaves enough grey area that someone with experience can apply a little judgment and get there their own way. They stay on the frame — but there's leeway.

That is empowerment. That is what recognising someone's experience actually looks like: we don't tie their hands, we don't forbid them the judgment they've spent years building. The grey area is the room we give good people to be good.

And at the same time, the frame is robust and simple enough that someone *without* that experience — the new hand, the tired hand, the one having an off day — can follow it and still reach a good outcome.

A cage protects no one and teaches nothing. A frame does both.

The Other Way to Fall Off

I've written before, in *Carry On As Planned*, about one way this goes wrong: the person closest to the hazard, who should be trusted to change the plan, and isn't — overruled from a desk that can't see the weather. Their judgment is taken away.

This is its mirror image. This is the person who changes it when they shouldn't — who steps off the frame not because conditions demand it, but because they'd rather. Same frame. Opposite failure. The leeway is there for judgment. It was never there for preference.

What Happens When You Climb Off It

So what happens when people step off the frame?

We've had a few incidents. Not because the framework was wrong, and not, mostly, because anyone lacked the skill. People stepped off because they could — because their own experience felt like enough, because it was more fun that way, because it had always been fine before.

And here is the thing that should stop us cold. It usually *is* fine before. Right up until it isn't.

The King and the Prince

Think about a king.

The king is the leader — for now. One day he steps down, or he dies, and the next in line takes the throne. For the sake of argument, the prince.

Does the prince invent every law from scratch? His own edicts, his own proclamations, a blank sheet? No. He carries on the work. He inherits a legacy and continues it. We call it succession, and we treat it as the most natural thing in the world.

Now bring it home. You are the experienced one. You step off the frame — carefully, with judgment — and you get away with it. Then, in time, you move on. A promotion, another provider, retirement. And the prince steps into your role.

They don't have your judgment. They don't have your experience. But they have inherited something from you all the same: a precedent. A quiet, powerful lesson that says *you can do whatever you want*.

You cannot leave the next person your judgment. You can only leave them your example.

Without your experience to temper it, what decision is the new prince going to make?

So Justify It

Before the big one happens, let's ask the honest question. How do we justify these decisions — to our colleagues, to our successors, to the people we are supposed to be a role model for?

"It's me, it's fine." "It's been fine before." Those are not justifications. That is arrogance wearing the clothes of experience.

Old sayings tend to survive because they hold true more often than not. So here is one worth carrying onto the frame with you: *pride comes before a fall*.

Practical Takeaways

- 1 **Treat the framework as a climbing frame, not a cage.** Move freely within it — up, down, sideways — but stay on it. The freedom is real; the frame is not negotiable.
- 2 **Know the difference between a limit and a judgment call.** Retiring a hard-worked harness early is judgment. Going past the manufacturer's maximum is a limit. Don't confuse the two — the grey area is not everywhere.
- 3 **Run the justification test before you deviate, not after.** Ask: could I defend this to someone who wasn't there, once the worst has happened? If the honest answer is "it's been fine before," stop.
- 4 **Remember what you model, not just what you do.** Your judgment leaves with you. The precedent you set stays behind — and the next person inherits your freedom without your experience.
- 5 **Write the frame for both ends.** Robust and simple enough that the inexperienced succeed; open enough that the experienced aren't hamstrung. Holding that balance is the whole job.

Step off the frame because you can, and the fall you are risking may not be yours to take.

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