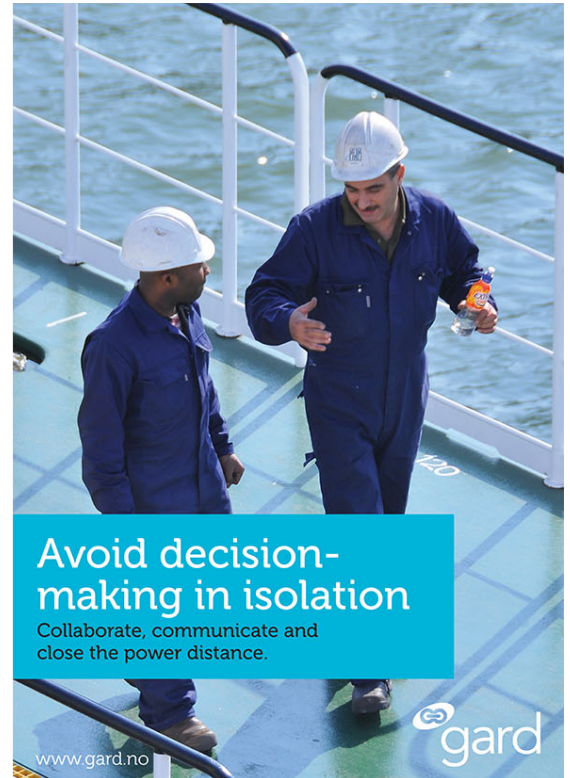


**THERE ARE  
DOWNSIDES TO  
MAKING DECISIONS  
IN ISOLATION**

**COMMUNICATE,  
COLLABORATE AND CLOSE  
THE POWER DISTANCE**



## **There are downsides to making decisions in isolation**

When decisions are made in isolation during critical operations, such as navigation, the consequences of improper execution can be dire.

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In an isolated decision-making style decisions are made without consulting the people who will be affected by the decision. The decision makers expect their subordinates to understand the reasoning behind the decisions and to therefore comply with the decision. This gap between the team leader or, for example, master's expectations and the understanding of any team members is characteristic of a culture of "high power distance". When decisions are made in isolation during critical operations, such as navigation, the consequences of improper execution can be dire.

Several flag-state reports on navigational incidents suggest that a complete breakdown of communication between the master, or the pilot, and his bridge team can lead to an incident. A breakdown in communication may not necessarily mean no communication, it can very well be one-way communication from those making the decision to those executing them without the opportunity to provide feedback.

### **High power distance and a lack of collaboration**

Lack of communication amongst the members of a bridge team is usually due to a culture of high power-distance. In high power-distance cultures less powerful members of an organization accept and expect power to be distributed unequally. A culture of high power-distance isolates the leader from people thereby compromising the overall efficiency and safety of the operations and of the vessel.

While the impact of high power distance is felt mostly in the junior ranks, a change is not achieved by simply educating them to "speak up". Cultures can be understood, measured and changed provided there is commitment from the top management ashore as well as on-board.

### **Closing the gap**

The first step towards reducing the power distance is to consult those who execute the decisions made by the leaders. A system of collaborative decision making where subordinates are consulted prior to critical operations is one way to reduce the power distance on board ships. For example, involving important team members like the chief engineer, officers of the watch, lookout and the helmsman on a briefing of the voyage plan is one way to allow them to communicate their issues and more importantly, encourage them to speak-up during the execution stage of the voyage plan. Once a collaborative decision making is established, the next step could be to allow decision making by individuals that have the information, for instance at the time of crisis the crew should be allowed to respond without excessive interference from the office on shore, or in cases where there may be a conflict between safety and commercial matters, the ship's staff should be empowered to decide that safety comes first.

### **Further reading**

Loss Prevention poster [gard\\_poster48\\_powerdistance\\_lores-01.pdf](#)

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