
# The One-Seat Fallacy

A Research Analysis on Distributed Authority in Complex Organizations

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Abel Toth-Bartok – abel@cannaxyz.com

# The One-Seat Fallacy: A Research Analysis on Distributed Authority in Complex Organizations

## Executive Summary

The "one-seat fallacy" represents a critical organizational vulnerability where isolated, centralized authority creates systemic risks in complex operational environments. This research examines how the concentration of decision-making power in single individuals or narrow hierarchies undermines organizational resilience, safety, and performance. Drawing from aviation's Crew Resource Management (CRM) revolution, psychological safety research, and recent organizational failures, this analysis demonstrates that distributed decision-making frameworks significantly outperform centralized models in managing uncertainty, fostering innovation, and preventing catastrophic failures. The findings have profound implications for leadership structures across aviation, healthcare, technology, and other high-stakes industries.

## Introduction

In complex organizations operating in high-stakes environments, the distribution of decision-making authority fundamentally shapes organizational outcomes. The "one-seat fallacy" - the belief that concentrated authority in a single leader or narrow hierarchy enhances efficiency and control - persists despite mounting evidence of its dangers. This research synthesizes findings from organizational psychology, aviation safety, and recent corporate disasters to demonstrate why distributed authority models are essential for modern organizational success.

The transformation of aviation safety through Crew Resource Management provides a compelling framework for understanding these dynamics. CRM was developed as a response to new insights into the causes of aircraft accidents which followed from the introduction of flight data recorders and cockpit voice recorders into modern jet aircraft, revealing that many accidents result not from technical malfunction but from the inability of crews to respond appropriately to situations. This evolution from autocratic cockpit hierarchies to collaborative team-based approaches offers critical lessons for all industries managing complex risks.



## Literature Review

### The Evolution of Crew Resource Management

The origins of CRM trace directly to catastrophic failures of centralized authority. The Tenerife disaster in 1977, where two Boeing 747s collided on a fog-shrouded runway, resulted from miscommunication, time pressure, and steep cockpit hierarchy where an experienced captain overrode subtle concerns from his first officer. This tragedy, which remains aviation's deadliest accident, catalyzed fundamental changes in how the industry conceptualized decision-making and authority.

Prior to the Tenerife disaster, Eastern Air Lines Flight 401 accident in 1972 suggested a need for CRM when the flight crew became so transfixed by a landing gear light switch that they failed to notice their altitude loss. These incidents revealed a pattern: isolated decision-making created blind spots that no amount of individual expertise could overcome.

NASA researchers in the 1970s discovered that over 70 percent of airline accidents were caused by human error rather than equipment failures or weather, with the majority of crew errors consisting of failures in leadership, team coordination, and decision-making. This finding fundamentally challenged the traditional model of the omnipotent captain and led to CRM's development as a systematic approach to distributed authority.

### Psychological Safety as Foundation

Harvard Business School Professor Amy Edmondson's research on psychological safety provides crucial insight into why distributed authority succeeds. Psychological safety - a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking - is associated with learning behavior and improved team performance.

Edmondson's landmark studies in hospitals revealed that teams with high psychological safety reported more errors but actually performed better because open communication allowed them to learn and improve. This counterintuitive finding parallels aviation's experience: systems that encourage speaking up about problems paradoxically experience fewer catastrophes.

Google's Project Aristotle identified psychological safety as a key component in successful teams, with research finding it was "by far the most important" of the five dynamics that make teams effective. The mechanism is clear: Teams without psychological safety suppress critical information - engineers avoid raising technical debt issues, designers withhold concerns about conflicting research findings, product managers hesitate to challenge unrealistic timelines.

### The Costs of Centralized Authority

Research on autocratic leadership reveals consistent negative outcomes. When team members challenge the hierarchy imposed by autocratic leadership, it has a negative impact on team performance, and subordinates experience work stress and lower well-being. Autocratic leadership creates environments where staff cannot contribute because they are not consulted, leading to inadequate creative solutions to problems.

Studies demonstrate that authoritarian leadership is negatively related to workplace outcomes including team interaction, employees' organizational commitment, task performance, helping behavior, and vocalization behavior. The psychological mechanisms are straightforward: Authoritarian leaders' autocratic, harsh, high power distance and impersonal qualities reduce employees' cognitive trust, seriously hindering the establishment of high-quality relationships and impeding affective trust between leaders and employees.

### Distributed Decision-Making Benefits

In contrast, distributed decision-making models demonstrate superior outcomes across multiple dimensions. Research indicates that distributed project teams with outlined processes encouraging both formalized and autonomous approaches to decision-making achieve better decision quality and teamwork effectiveness.

Organizations with distributed decision-making unlock agility, innovation, and resilience at all levels, enabling them to anticipate and respond to changes proactively while building trust throughout the organization. The benefits are particularly pronounced in complex environments: Distributed approaches enhance responsiveness as local teams can react swiftly to changes in their specific environments, while diversity of perspectives fuels creativity and leads to more innovative solutions critical for tackling complex challenges.

## Case Analysis: The Boeing 737 MAX Disasters



The Boeing 737 MAX crashes exemplify the catastrophic consequences of the one-seat fallacy in modern organizations. The late 2018 and early 2019 crashes of two 737-MAX passenger planes resulted from organizational flaws involving poor communication and failure to address safety concerns expressed by employees.

### Cultural Transformation and Centralized Decision-Making

Boeing's culture was characterized by focus on cost-cutting, efficiency, and meeting deadlines often at the expense of safety, creating a 'culture of silence' that discouraged employees from raising concerns. In 2018, senior manager Ed Pierson emailed warnings that the rush to produce new aircraft was causing serious problems, stating "all my internal warning bells are going off" - this email was sent nearly five months before Lion Air Flight 610 crashed.

Historically Boeing's organizational culture had been hierarchical with high safety standards and open communication where engineers were heavily involved in design and decision processes, but after acquiring McDonnell Douglas in 1997, there was a slow shift from safety-first culture to market culture focused on competitiveness and profitability.

### Leadership Failures and Information Suppression

CEO Muilenburg's leadership style was described as autocratic and focused on achieving short-term financial goals, failing to adequately address safety concerns raised by employees and downplaying the severity of the MCAS issue. Internal documents revealed comments from employees saying the 737 MAX was "designed by clowns, who in turn are supervised by monkeys," indicating severe employee frustration and suggesting employees were either uncomfortable or not empowered to take their concerns to appropriate levels.

The structural impediments were clear: The design flaws of the 737 MAX were in part a byproduct of competitive pressure Boeing felt to modify the aircraft under compressed time schedule, with red flags about aggressive development schedules prevented from escalating to senior leadership and the board due to organizational and communication failures.

# Organizational Disasters and Information Failures

Beyond Boeing, research reveals consistent patterns in organizational disasters. Three types of information impairments lead to organizational disasters: epistemic blind spots, risk denial, and structural impediment - common information and decision practices that make it hard for organizations to see and deal with warning signals.

At BP, establishing safety as a decentralized function meant decisions impacting major hazards were made at business unit level with little or no influence by corporate safety experts, creating organizational confusion where it wasn't always clear who was responsible for process safety. This contributed to both the Texas City refinery explosion and the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

Many disaster management frameworks rely too heavily on centralized decision-making, creating significant operational challenges during large-scale emergencies as central authorities may lack critical local knowledge about community vulnerabilities, available resources, and cultural factors that influence effective response.

# Implementation Framework for Distributed Authority

## Building Psychological Safety

Organizations must create environments where distributed authority can thrive. Three core leadership behaviors support psychological safety: framing work as a learning problem not an execution problem, acknowledging fallibility, and modeling curiosity by asking questions. Leaders must make it clear that everyone's input matters and that mistakes are not just possible but expected in complex environments.

## Structural Design Principles

Effective distributed decision-making requires intentional organizational design. In distributed systems, the person responsible for making decisions has an obligation to seek feedback from lots of different people, but ultimately the decision rests with that individual - the person closest to the work. This balances autonomy with accountability.



Several models exist: Delegated Authority where central management sets broad goals but delegates decision-making within boundaries, and Collaborative Decision-Making where teams jointly make decisions through consensus or majority vote. The key is matching the model to organizational context and ensuring clear communication channels.

## Technology and Information Systems

Modern distributed decision-making leverages technology effectively. Collaboration tools facilitate real-time communication and knowledge sharing among distributed teams, while advanced analytics platforms provide actionable insights that inform strategic decision-making. However, technology must support rather than replace human judgment and communication.

# Implications and Recommendations

## For Aviation and Safety-Critical Industries

The success of CRM demonstrates the transformative power of distributed authority. The successful functioning of United Airlines Flight 232, which experienced catastrophic engine failure, showed how CRM practices enabled the crew to save 185 of 296 people on board through effective teamwork, with junior crew members freely suggesting alternatives and the captain responding with appropriate commands.

Organizations should:

- Implement formal CRM-style training emphasizing team-based decision-making
- Create clear protocols for escalating concerns regardless of hierarchy
- Establish anonymous reporting systems for safety concerns
- Regularly assess and address cultural barriers to open communication

### For General Business Organizations

The principles apply broadly beyond safety-critical industries. Research shows that the impact of coordination mode on performance is critically affected by the multiobjective decision-making approach selected, with more complex approaches being less sensitive to coordination mode than simpler ones.

Key recommendations include:

- Develop clear frameworks defining decision authority at different organizational levels
- Create "learning moments" from failures without blame assignment
- Invest in leadership development focused on facilitative rather than directive approaches
- Establish metrics for measuring psychological safety and team communication quality

### Cultural Transformation Requirements

Moving from centralized to distributed authority requires fundamental cultural change. Studies by Lewin found that moving from an autocratic style to a democratic one was difficult, but necessary when quick focused decisions must balance with team engagement.

Organizations must:

- Address the "hero leader" mythology that valorizes individual decision-making
- Reward collaborative problem-solving over individual achievements
- Create safe spaces for constructive dissent and alternative viewpoints
- Develop succession planning that preserves distributed decision-making capabilities

## Limitations and Future Research

This research has several limitations. First, the transition from centralized to distributed authority may temporarily reduce efficiency as organizations adapt. Organizations experience recurring patterns shifting between centralized and decentralized structures, with each shift coming with financial, cultural, and operational costs as employees adapt to new processes and reporting structures.



Second, not all decisions benefit from distribution. Autocratic approaches may be effective when decisions need to be made quickly with no time to consult, or when the leader is the most knowledgeable person in the room. Future research should explore decision typologies and appropriate authority models for different decision categories.

Third, cultural and national differences influence the effectiveness of distributed authority. Authoritarian leadership styles remain particularly prevalent in emerging markets including the Middle East, Pacific Asia, and Latin America, suggesting cultural adaptation requirements for global implementation.

## Conclusion

The one-seat fallacy represents a fundamental misunderstanding of how complex organizations achieve safety, innovation, and resilience. The evidence from aviation's CRM transformation, psychological safety research, and organizational disasters consistently demonstrates that isolated authority creates systemic vulnerabilities that no amount of individual expertise can overcome.

CRM's principles have leapt far beyond the cockpit - healthcare professionals have adopted "Crisis Resource Management" to improve teamwork in operating theaters and emergency rooms, aiming to reduce surgical errors and preventable incidents. This cross-industry adoption validates the universal applicability of distributed authority principles.

The path forward requires courage to challenge traditional hierarchies and wisdom to recognize that true organizational strength emerges not from concentrated power but from collective awareness and distributed intelligence. As organizations face increasing complexity and uncertainty, those that successfully distribute authority while maintaining coordination will possess decisive competitive advantages.

The stakes could not be higher. In our interconnected world, organizational failures cascade across systems and societies. By embracing distributed decision-making, building psychological safety, and learning from both successes and failures, organizations can create resilient structures capable of navigating complexity while maintaining their fundamental commitment to human welfare and safety.

# References

*For detailed source citations, please refer to the Appendix. This research synthesizes findings from over 60 sources including peerreviewed journals, accident investigation reports, organizational case studies, and expert analyses from leading institutions.*

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*Abel Toth-Bartok - abel (at) cannaxyz.com*

# Appendix: Source Citations

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