

Title: **ISLAND HOPPING!**

Goal: To increase awareness about the impact of power dynamics in the workplace.

Description: This exercise illustrates a direct example of power imbalance in the context of group decision-making. Members are split into two groups. One group has the freedom to speak and the power and responsibility to make decisions. The other group must ask permission to speak and does not have a formal say in any decisions. The context of the exercise centers on a pirate ship that has just weathered a typhoon and must choose an island to go to for survival. Each of the islands has pros and cons to be considered.

To create the power imbalance, there are two sets of color-coded instructions for exercise participants. The green instructions are for the ship's "leaders," and the pink instructions are for the "crew." Both the green and pink instructions have a front page with identical information about the ship's situation and the islands under consideration. The back of each instruction sheet contains rules explaining that the leaders can speak freely while the crew must ask permission. All of the leaders must agree on the final decision of which island to go to while the crew has no formal say in that decision. In addition, the pink instructions contain information about what crew members know from their various experiences on other ships. This information is not contained on the green instructions for leaders.

Instructions: Divide participants into groups (optimal group size for this exercise is eight people). Give half of each group green instructions and half pink instructions. Read the common information on the front page about the typhoon, island options, and the common instructions on the backside regarding the rules for speaking and decision-making. Give the groups 20 minutes to reach a decision.

After 20 minutes begin to debrief about the experience:

1. First, ask the crew to speak and the leaders to listen. Ask the crew what it was like to be in the position they were in? Explore what it was like to have to ask permission, how they felt, and how engaged they were in the group process.
2. Ask the leaders what they experienced, observed, and felt.

3. In some groups the leaders may discard the rules, in part or completely, and invite the crew to participate. If this happens:
 - a. Explore how that decision felt to the crew, who will probably still feel the sting of needing permission to be involved. Often the leaders invite the crew to share in information but not decision-making. The crew is usually aware that this is happening.
 - b. Ask how the participants, as leaders in their workplace, can discard unspoken rules and invite their staff to participate fully.
4. Invite open discussion about participant experiences and responses to each other.
5. Ask how this exercise relates to what happens in their workplace and how power imbalances affect participation.
6. Ask what can be done to overcome this imbalance and support full participation.

Discussion:

Power is something that can be taken for granted if you are used to having it. You may not be aware how much people defer to you, and this can lead to “group-think” that may prevent people from voicing their concerns.

The real value of an exercise like this is to be aware of the group-think concept when it occurs and do something to encourage the input of everyone. This can be especially difficult when people say things we find hard to hear. Culture change is needed to create a safe place for all voices to be heard.

Materials needed:

Instruction sheets for ship leaders (green) and ship crew (pink)

Time needed:

45–60 minutes, depending on amount of discussion.

CHOOSE AN ISLAND

Your pirate ship just weathered a typhoon, and your food supplies were soaked with salt water. Your water supplies were contaminated, and you need to find fresh water before you perish. You have pinpointed where you are on a map and realize that there are five islands within sailing distance. You must decide what to do.

Island One—Dutch fort approximately six hours away to the west. There is a possibility that any ships in the harbor are being repaired because of typhoon damage. Two cannons guard the fort on this island that you have visited before. It is renowned for its rum and cooked wild bore.

Island Two—Inhabited island 12 hours southwest with dense jungle terrain. The island is inhabited by primitive, head-hunting natives. It has a rocky coastline and no natural harbors. The island's rain forest has the most wonderful fruits.

Island Three—Inhabited island 28 hours north. Dutch colonists who are armed with muskets and swords sparsely inhabit the island. There are several natural harbors. Three of the crew have lived on the island for a short time and know the island and gifts it offers. The last time you were here you kidnapped the royalty's daughter and held her for ransom.

Island Four—Inhabited island 30 hours east. You have visited this island on numerous occasions. There are no defenses on the island, but you know from experience that diseases of all kinds are rampant. The enticement is that many years ago you left buried treasure on the island. That treasure could be of use to you now.

Island Five—Inhabited island 17 hours south. The island is inhabited by fierce, war-like tribes. There is a great deal of superstition surrounding this island—your crew has refused to land there in the past. There is a natural harbor that is home to the island's sacred rock carving. Native priests always heavily guard this sacred carving. Not far from the rock is every type of food and nourishment that will aid you in journey.

GREEN INSTRUCTIONS

Ship Leaders:

At your table, one-half of you have green sheets and one-half of you have pink sheets.

Everyone with a green sheet is a leader/decision-maker on the ship. Everyone with a pink sheet is a member of the crew.

Crew members must be respectful of leaders and seek permission from leaders before they can speak.

You must decide which island to visit to ensure the safety of the entire ship. As leaders and decision-makers, you take full responsibility.

All leaders at your table must agree on a decision.

It would be nice if the crew members agree because you do not want a mutiny.

Be careful of what the crew members say. Their input may be questionable based on their own agenda and limited information.

You have 20 minutes to reach a decision.

PINK INSTRUCTIONS

Ship Crew:

At your table, one-half of you have green sheets and one-half of you have pink sheets.

Everyone with a green sheet is a leader/decision-maker on the ship. Everyone with a pink sheet is a member of the crew.

You have no vote in the final decision. The leaders will make the decision.

If you would like to speak, you must ask permission from the leaders.

Your ship needs to get to one of the five islands. As a crewmember on the boat, your life is at stake if the wrong decision is made.

You have crewed for other ships and been to these islands before. You know that:

Island One—is now being regularly patrolled by a Spanish fleet trying to catch pirates and retake their bounty. You know how strong they are. The last time you encountered them on another ship you barely escaped with your life.

Island Two—has many caves that you could set out to in smaller boats and use as a base for gathering what you need.

Island Three—has inhabitants that will never forgive you. In the course of being kidnapped by your ship, that royal daughter discovered her adventurous nature. She has been around the world and has never returned to her island.

Island Four—is infected with diseases that were brought by you on previous visits. You have immunity to these diseases. The island has quicksand and deadly snakes everywhere.

Island Five—the priests are not just fierce, they have practiced human sacrifice when they feel people have disrespected their space.