

How to decolonise your language

Tips for removing implicit white superiority from your language

Yielding Power

- ☐ Consider how the tone and words of your communication – in both written and oral form – can perpetuate the wielding of power and, at times, constitute micro-aggressions against the agency of local personnel. For example, think about the use of power in phrases like “I think we should...” and “I would do things this way...”.
- ☐ Start by asking for your partners’ opinions and ideas before offering your own. Listen deeply to what they are saying (and to what they are not saying!), rather than sharing your own ideas or listening out for your own ideas.
- ☐ Find phrases in the language of the country where you are working and use those phrases to bookend your ideas and suggestions. For example, in Vanuatu, you could use “Be hemi jes wan tingting blo mi nomo” (“This is just an idea, though”) to bookend your suggestions.
- ☐ Be vocal and visible in admitting failure or vulnerability. This is a powerful way of dismantling neo-colonial perceptions of ‘white saviours’ who have all the expertise and answers. By making explicit your own failings or lack of knowledge, white personnel can assist local personnel to see through the ‘white saviour’ façade. Through this new lens of white fallibility, black and brown personnel can reassess the value of their own knowledge and skills and have increased confidence in its validity – a critical step towards power wielding.

Make strong use of the conditional tense. For example, use “If you think this is a good idea, we could look at...” as well as “But, please disregard this idea if you don’t think it will work...”.