

How to start decolonising spaces

Strategies for deconstructing colonialism in your workspace

Yielding Power

- Talk with black and brown colleagues about how changes might be made to the professional environment, and to professional cultural expectations. Can rooms and other physical spaces be given local names? Can national holidays be observed? How could an explicit policy be designed around having children in the office after school? Could HR policies include broader definitions of family (particularly for bereavement leave), time off for cultural/community obligations, flexibility of hours to manage both work and family commitments?
- Consider that black and brown staff, and particularly black and brown women staff, who work in development “inhabit the same spaces that the projects and programmes purport to be seeking to change for the better. As such, they too are entitled to experience improved safety and security, dignified, and enabling conditions, and the workplace flexibility that reflects the many roles they play in their families and societies” (from Spark, 2020, ‘Two different worlds: Papua New Guinea women working in development in Port Moresby, page 12.)

Note: Seek the advice of black and brown staff. Encourage them to be propositional about changes to the work environment and professional practice.

Wielding Power

- Do some personal analysis on your professional environment. Don’t accept the environment and its unspoken rules uncritically. Do you feel that the office is a space where you can safely do your work without feeling oppressively monitored? Do you feel that you can bring your outside life and obligations in and out of the professional environment if you must? If the answer is “no” to any of these, can you work with black and brown colleagues to suggest changes to the way the office environment is established, and which will support decolonisation and locally led processes?
- If your organisation is serious about its commitment to decolonisation and locally led processes, use that commitment to advocate for change that allows you to be more effective. Some substantive change is needed, but there are also cosmetic changes that could send a different message about local ownership and definition of the professional office environment. Be propositional.