

Positional power: seeing it, naming it, and using it well

Supervisors, managers, and people with expertise or tenure hold power that shapes who speaks, who is believed, and whose time counts. Seeing it is the first intercultural skill; using it deliberately is the second.

Why it matters

Dominant-culture defaults feel like neutrality to the people they serve. Naming positional power lets a leader change a room instead of asking others to adapt to it.

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Where power sits. Role, tenure, credential, language fluency, familiarity with the organization, race, disability, and who the process was designed for all shape who is heard.

What it does. People with less power wait to be asked, soften disagreement, and stop offering ideas that were ignored once. People with more power mistake that quiet for agreement.

What to do with it. Speak last. Ask the newest and the quietest first. Credit ideas to the person who had them. Change the format so contribution does not depend on speaking fast in English.

In supervision. Ask what the person needs from you rather than telling them what you need. Make expectations explicit so people do not have to guess the unwritten rules.

Across difference. Cultural humility means assuming you do not know how your habits land and asking. The Intercultural Development Inventory can help a person see their own orientation; it is one tool, used by qualified administrators, and never a label or a rating.

Next steps

- **Prepare for intercultural work without making assumptions** — program page </library/pn-intercultural-method>
- **The IDI and the tool registry** — program page </library/pn-idi-and-tool-registry>