



*For you, your career, and your life*

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## Culture Clash: Bridging the Understanding Gap

It's an awkward moment: you extend your hand for a friendly handshake but a patient won't respond to your gesture. Have you done something to offend her?

In some cultures, physical contact between opposite genders isn't socially acceptable. You may have encountered this or a number of other cultural differences that test your ability to communicate effectively with patients and their families or even with your own colleagues.

So are there some ways to build rapport, show sensitivity to differences and exchange



"To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others."

*-Anthony Robbins  
Coach, author and motivational speaker*

important information when you are dealing with people from cultures other than your own? Experts weigh in with tips to help you bridge the understanding gap.

### Start with nonverbal cues

Be keenly aware of body language in cross-cultural communication, says corporate etiquette and international protocol expert Shawntell L. Phillips. "First of all, smile. A smile is a universal positive interaction and conversation starter. When you give the impression of being warm and inviting, this will break the ice."

Next, pay attention to your own posture, Phillips says. "Erect posture signifies confidence and authority worldwide."

As founder and CEO of The Perfect Edge, LLC in Houston, Phillips helps executives, diverse work groups and students develop poise and confidence in any business or social situation.

To convey a confident and authoritative look, she recommends:

- Maintain an erect posture

*Whether you're dealing with issues that challenge your ability to cope and communicate effectively with patients and colleagues, or you want to be proactive about gaining personal skills to complement your medical knowledge, RAP is here to help. We are your confidential resource, free for the asking. Our caring professionals are just a phone call away.*

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- when standing and sitting
- Hold your chin up and shoulders back
- Be attentive
- Be alert
- Be respectful

Be aware that certain body language and hand gestures are *not* universal, advises communications expert, author and media trainer Gerard Braud, CEO and president Braud Communications in the Greater New Orleans area.

"Be very cautious with hand gestures," says Braud. "Many gestures Americans find acceptable are offensive to other cultures. Pointing with the index finger, for example, can be very offensive to some cultures. Crossing the legs when seated, exposing the sole of the shoe, and pointing with the index finger can be very offensive to some cultures."

Phillips offers a few specific protocol tips for communicating with individuals from specific cultures:

*Asians: Avoid physical contact except for a handshake*

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## Money Matters

### Are you among the 65 percent?

Only 35% of Americans have a will. Yet without it, you risk unwanted outcomes and potential problems for your heirs.

It may be difficult to think about estate planning issues while trying to manage the many challenges of daily life. However, documenting your preferences now could make a big difference for your heirs and help ensure that your legacy is handled according to your wishes.

### Making Your Own Choices

A will enables you to specify not only which assets you want to give and to whom, but also who you want to administer your estate. It may be the most appropriate way to designate guardians for minor children or for adult children with special needs. Any parent of children who need care should have a will, regardless of financial assets.

If you die without a valid will, the state may decide how your assets will be distributed. Typically, assets would go to the spouse and children, but state laws vary widely, and there are different distribution formulas. When the deceased dies intestate and leaves no spouse or children, the situation becomes more complicated.

Having a will does not avoid probate, the legal process by which assets are distributed. However, a will might make probate more efficient and less expensive.

### Also Consider These

Other documents to consider are beneficiary designations for life insurance policies, IRAs, 401(k) plans and similar accounts. These generally supersede a will, so keep them up-to-date. A living will and a power of attorney should also be considered, as well as a trust, in which you specify how assets are distributed after your death. A trust may help avoid probate and estate taxes. Even if you have a trust, you should have a will.

## Communicating across cultures, *continued*

*British and Western Europeans: Avoid excessive hand gestures, touching and standing*

*Latin Europeans, Latin Americans, and Arabs: Stand close together during conversation*

*U.S.: Avoid standing too close to Americans when conversing*

### Respect boundaries

When looking to bridge a cultural divide, choose courtesy and formality over a casual approach. “Many cultures are far more formal in their conversation than we are in the U.S.,” says Braud. “Use a title with the person’s name, whether that’s Mr. or Mrs. or Dr. This shows that you value the title and the status that goes with the title.”

Courtesy also means using simple words, and slang is never appropriate. “Avoid idiomatic or colloquial words,” says Phillips. “And be wary of jokes, as they almost never translate well and will usually be misunderstood.”

Listening patiently is another thing that’s often difficult for busy professionals to do, yet it’s essential. “There’s a reason we have two ears and only one mouth,” Braud notes. “In conversation, try to listen twice as much as you talk. You may discover that when someone says ‘yes,’ they are simply acknowledging simply that they have heard what you said—not that they agree with you!”

By inviting feedback, then repeating answers to affirm that you’ve heard and understand the response, you can be more successful in achieving clear cross-cultural communication.

### Resources:

- *The Dance of Life-The Other Dimension of Time* by Edward T. Hall, Anchor Books (1983)
- *Body Language 101*, by David Lambert, Skyhorse Publishing (2008)
- “Seven Ways to Better Communicate in Today’s Diverse Workplace,” Harvard Business School article: <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/3266.html>
- Braud Communications [braudcommunications.com](http://braudcommunications.com)

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### *When communicating across cultures:*

#### Do

- Be aware your nonverbal communication
- Speak slowly, audibly and clearly
- Learn others’ cultural preferences and sensitivities in advance if possible

#### Don’t

- Interrupt. It is impolite in most cultures to help others with their speech.
- Don’t condescend to an individual who is less skillful in the language being used, by either showing your know-how or being overly simplistic in use of words
- Don’t verbally compare your way of doing things to another person’s culture

*Source: Shawntell L. Phillips, The Perfect Edge, LLC*

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