

Advocacy groups work to make sure people have all the information they need to make informed, educated decisions – but being able to do that often relies on overcoming communication barriers.

Harriet L. Russell has spent the past 30 years working across cultures, breaking down language and communication barriers, to facilitate successful interactions. Here, she shares her top tips to successful conversations with people from different cultures.

### **Speaking with non-native English speakers**

Advocacy groups interact within many different cultures across the country. And many of the conversations they hold, whether they are face-to-face, online or via educational materials, are in English.

It's used all over the world, but not all English is the same. There is so much nuance in many conversations, but when someone is not fluent, they are only looking at the words and there can be a lot of misunderstanding.

When speaking with a non-native English speaker, try organizing your thoughts ahead of time, allowing for pauses, and watching for signs that the person understands what is being said. Is the person nodding or making affirmative noises? Be observant – look at how people respond to what you are saying and how you are saying it.

Other top tips include:

- Louder doesn't mean clearer
- Avoid double negatives
- Avoid slang, jargon or turns of phrase (e.g. cover all bases, keep your eye on the ball etc.)
- Avoid jokes and sarcasm
- Let your energy and feelings come through in your body language

### **Adapt your style to the person's culture**

The culture someone is from will impact how they interact with health services and how they talk about their health. Understanding the basic conventions of a culture makes communication more effective.

Cultures can be described as informal and egalitarian, like the USA, or formal and hierarchal, like many Asian countries.

In the US, the mindset is that familiarity creates connection. But in formal and hierarchal cultures, familiarity is about respect. So, in countries such as China, Japan and Korea, a healthcare professional–patient relationship would be more “doctor knows best” than “patient centric.”

For example, whereas Americans might be on a first-name basis with their healthcare team, people from these cultures would prefer to use Mr., Mrs. and Doctor. That way, they feel they are being respected and they are giving respect.

### **Remember silence speaks volumes**

Advocates want to empower people to ask questions about their health and disease management. But this may also be subject to something of a cultural barrier.

When a patient is questioned in a medical setting, they may not answer because they feel they have nothing to say. That's why it's important to use encouraging questioning that will provoke a response.

Remember that silence doesn't mean nothing is wrong. For some, silence is a pause: a tool to show that there is discomfort, that they are thinking, or that they don't feel ready to speak up yet.

It's also worth noting that it's norm in some cultures for women to bring a male relative to medical appointments. This chaperone sometimes acts as a translator but can also be a mouthpiece. Speaking to the male relative ahead of any appointment to explain the importance of hearing directly from the patient could help overcome this.

### **Do your homework**

If you know you are going to be working in a particular cultural community, make sure you do some research before you start. Find and visit a cultural center and strike up a conversation. Everyone wants to talk about their culture.

Developing programs and materials with input from the community they are aimed at also helps to ensure the results are culturally appropriate.

Most importantly, when doing business or before starting your advocacy in the community sure to hire a trained and experienced cross-cultural expert, not just a local person of that culture.



## Author Information

**Name:** Harriet L. Russell

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**Biography:** Harriet L. Russell has been working across cultures for 30 years. From managing public relations at Sony in New York City, to translating for Peter Jennings and ABC News at the Tokyo Economic Summit, to working for the US State Department in Minsk, Harriet works to facilitate intercultural competency in the USA and abroad.

Her latest book, *Business Ease Overseas: Building Cross-Cultural Relationships that Last*, has been published by Encyclopedia Britannica Japan and Indie Books International. It explains how the principles of self-awareness, nonjudgment and acceptance of others, and seeing the whole picture can nurture successful, cross-cultural business relations.

Harriet, a Member of National Speakers Association and the Global Speakers Federation, appeared on NBC, ABC, CBS, Crain's Business and Asahi Shimbun Daily. She is also a chapter board member of the International Coach Federation.