

UCL EXERCISE

QUICK VERSION

for the complete UCL Exercise version, see ...

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1. Cultural Competence 2. Diversity and Inclusion 3. Organization Development 4. Leadership 5. Organizational Behavior 6. Cross-cultural Studies 7. Global Leadership 8. Social Values 9. Business Communication 10. Intercultural Communication 11. Pluralism 12. Management 13. Corporate Culture

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Translated by the author, this book is also available in Spanish, titled:

Tu Enfoque Cultural Individual: Guía para competencia cultural.

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“Know Thyself”

—maxim inscribed in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi (4th Century B.C.)

Cultural competence is the ability to effectively interact, communicate and influence across cultures, whether internationally or domestically in our highly diverse work environments. Developing cultural competence requires practicing *cultural systemic awareness*, *being accountable* and accepting that the *cultural contexts* in which you operate are different from your own—not better or worse, just different.

Becoming a culturally competent professional who, across cultures, affects positive change that engages, motivates, commits and inspires others is what having the capacity to consciously interact effectively is all about. Becoming culturally competent is not about just learning a few ‘tricks’ on how to influence others or how to behave in a certain culture. In fact, just learning ‘tricks’ often backfires by creating a false sense of capacity. It is first about doing the inner work, mindfully exploring our unique cultural lens (UCL), and then, from that solid foundation of self-awareness, with curiosity and humility, proceeding to explore and respect the UCLs of those with whom we interact.

A ***Unique Cultural Lens (UCL)*** is the collection of perception filters, or biases, each person has accumulated over a lifetime. Your UCL reflects the rich ancestral, cultural, educational and experiential heritage from which you emerged and that informs who you are now. Together, these filters or layers define your authentic self, influence how you perceive and interact with the world, and affect the decisions you make.

Layers of Cultural Context

1. **Heritage:** Ancestral, national and ethnic background, including race and complexion
2. **Expression:** Regional and linguistic, including speech patterns and accents
3. **Generation/Age:** Generational acculturation and experiences
4. **Capability:** Including abilities and disabilities
5. **Educational:** Including degrees, certifications and other training
6. **Work identities:** Including fields, hierarchies and positions
7. **Faith:** Religious beliefs and practices
8. **Other values and beliefs:** Including your positions on social issues
9. **Gender and sexuality:** Including identity, expression, assignment, orientation and behavior
10. **Social class:** Including your economic and social class progression

When you do your own exercise, just simply think, write, reflect and then make meaning, without bothering to label what you are doing. Just write!

In the following ten pages you'll find ten sets of questions, one set per layer, designed to help you complete your own UCL Exercise as efficiently as possible. Answer the questions, and you will have completed the self-reflection part of your UCL Exercise.

As you do this exercise, I encourage you to describe specific events, provide context, analyze your interpretations, and strive for meaning, insights and specific lessons. The point is for you to explore your own UCL.

If interested on seeing some examples, you will find them at: <http://UniqueCulturalLens.com/> , which further illustrate what I mean by *deeply exploring, getting to know and becoming really good friends with your own cultural context and your UCL.*

Finally, after the following ten pages describing the ten Layers of Culture, and their related questions to do the exercise, you'll find a one-page description of the distillation process to elicit *The Essence of your UCL.*

Layer 1 — Heritage:
Ancestral, national and ethnic background, including race and complexion

Questions and a Hint to facilitate your exploration of Layer 1 — Heritage:

- Where were you born and where (in which towns, cities, countries, etc.) have you lived?
- What is your cultural background (list more than one, if applicable)?
- What are your parents' and grandparents' cultural backgrounds?
- What is the background of your spouse or partner? How has that influenced you?
- If your children are adopted, what are their cultural backgrounds?
- Which races are you connected or related to? How does that color your outlook on life?
- What lessons do these questions evoke about who you are?

HINT: Go beyond merely naming nationalities and deeply explore your roots.

Take out your journal to reflect and write your responses, or visit <http://UniqueCulturalLens.com> to download the worksheet for this exercise.

Layer 2 — Expression: Regional and linguistic, including speech patterns and accents

Questions and a Hint to facilitate your exploration of Layer 2 — Expression:

- What do you know about the regions in which you have lived and key events shaping them?
- In what ways are their histories influencing you?
- What languages do you speak or understand a bit of? How did you learn them?
- What's your particular speaking style (including accents, phrases you use, etc.)?
- What kind of information does your first greeting convey?
- When you hear them, how do certain speaking styles make you feel? How do you react?
- What lessons are these regional/historical reflections evoking about who you are?

HINT: While this layer may seem to resemble Layer 1, its focus is on the spoken word, the way you communicate, how you perceive communication from others, and how others perceive you when they communicate with you. Also, please notice how the examples start with a focus on the spoken word in particular regions and then expand into reflections on views about historical context, diversity, race, culture, religion and more. I invite you to relax when exploring all your layers and let your exploration lead you to where it may. The creation of somewhat arbitrary distinctions amongst layers is just a construct to facilitate reflection. The layers overlap and tend to be, in reality, intertwined.

Take out your journal to reflect and write your responses, or visit <http://UniqueCulturalLens.com> to download the worksheet for this exercise.

Layer 3 — Generation/Age: Generational acculturation and experiences

Most people alive today are members of one of the following generations, generally referred to, at least in the United States as: G.I. Generation (birth year 1900—1924), Silent Generation (1925—1945), Baby Boomers (1946—1964), Generation X (1965—1979), Millennials (1980—1997) or Generation Z (1998 and beyond). While these are sometimes useful, though artificial, conventions in many parts of the world, it's important to also keep in mind many other countries have created their own generational conventions based on local events. For example, the generations shown above make no sense to people in South Africa. They find it far more useful to refer to those who were school age during the struggle against Apartheid as the “Lost Generation,” while those born since 1994 (when Apartheid came down) are often called the “Born Free Generation.”

Questions and a Hint to facilitate your exploration of Layer 3 — Generation/Age:

- Into which generation (using your local interpretation of *generation*) were you born?
- What are the stereotypical descriptions and attitudes of your generation?
- In which ways do those attributes fit you? And, in which ways they do not?
- In which ways has your experience been different than the standard for your generation?
- What lessons do you take from reflections on your generation and age?
- Which preconceived notions do you tend to assign to people from other generations?

HINT: Either use standard generational conventions or deviate from them in whatever way helps you, within your own cultural context, to understand your own personal story.

Take out your journal to reflect and write your responses, or visit <http://UniqueCulturalLens.com> to download the worksheet for this exercise.

Layer 4 — Capability: Including abilities and disabilities

Questions and a Hint to facilitate your exploration of Layer 4 — Capability:

- Which of your physical and mental attributes are your most noticeable, in your own mind?
- What have you been told by others are your most noticeable?
- Which ones are your particular strengths in this area?
- Which ones make you feel uncomfortable and why?
- Of which ones are you most proud?
- What lessons do these reflections on your abilities/disabilities evoke about who you are?
- In which ways you can use your gifts to the benefit of others and, of course, yourself?

HINT: Include physical (height, weight, strength, handicaps, attractiveness, etc.); mental (such as rational, emotional, spatial and other intelligences, psychological preferences, etc.); other characteristics (such as being even, funny or dramatic, etc.); spiritual (purpose, callings, perceptions, etc.), and any other abilities, disabilities or even trauma that matter to you.

Take out your journal to reflect and write your responses, or visit <http://UniqueCulturalLens.com> to download the worksheet for this exercise.

**Layer 5 — Educational:
Including degrees, certifications and other training**

**Questions and a Hint to facilitate your exploration of
Layer 5 — Educational:**

- What degrees, certifications and workshops have you taken and either earned or not?
- What insights have you derived from your training experiences and efforts?
- What doors do you think these qualifications open for you?
- What doors do you think they may potentially close for you?
- How do you think others perceive you just by knowing your qualifications or lack thereof?
- What lessons do these educational reflections evoke about who you are?
- How do you plan to use them to the benefit of others?

HINT: The invitation here is to go beyond simply listing your degrees; you are not writing your resume. Instead, chronologically explore how different levels of education, and their consequences, have altered the way you *see* the world and interact with others throughout your life. Also reflect on how the way others perceive you evolved with your changing educational levels.

Take out your journal to reflect and write your responses, or visit <http://UniqueCulturalLens.com> to download the worksheet for this exercise.

Layer 6 — Work identities: Including fields, hierarchies and positions

Questions and a Hint to facilitate your exploration of Layer 6 – Work identities:

- List all the organizations you have worked with throughout your life, for pay or not for pay.
- List all the types of jobs you have performed.
- List all the hierarchical levels (titles) you have been assigned.
- What strengths have you been able to develop from these experiences?
- What biases do you think these experiences may have left you with?
- How have your transitions of job positions transpired? What impact did those experiences have on you?
- What has been your attitude toward work throughout your career? How has it changed and evolved (or not)?
- Re-read the lists made in response to the questions above and note lessons your reflection evokes.

HINT: Explore the positional levels and titles you have experienced throughout your life as well as the experiences about transitions between positions and organizations. Remember, you are not writing your resume—this is a different perspective on your career.

Take out your journal to reflect and write your responses, or visit <http://UniqueCulturalLens.com> to download the worksheet for this exercise.

Layer 7 — Faith: Religious beliefs and practices

Questions and a Hint to facilitate your exploration of Layer 7 – Faith:

- What are/were the religions of your parents and grandparents?
- In what religion were you raised? What was the dominant faith in your home culture?
- Describe the evolution of your own religious beliefs as you have grown.
- What's your current faith? How closely do you practice its rituals and believe its dogma?
- In what ways does your own practice deviate from the standard rituals or dogma?
- What are the top three beliefs your faith espouses that make you proud to be a member of it?
- What are beliefs your faith espouses with which you disagree, if any?
- Would you raise your own children in your faith? Why or why not?
- How is your religious or spiritual experience influenced by the religious experiences and cultures of others around you?
- What lessons are these religious reflections evoking about who you are?

HINT: Reflect on the way your religious beliefs and practices have evolved, from the religious practices you were exposed to as a child to your current religious beliefs and practices.

Take out your journal to reflect and write your responses, or visit <http://UniqueCulturalLens.com> to download the worksheet for this exercise.

Layer 8 — Other values and beliefs: Including your positions on social issues

Questions and a Hint to facilitate your exploration of Layer 8 — Other values & beliefs:

- List at least three social issues that are important to you.
- Describe the essence of your own position with regards to each one of them.
- For each one of them, what are your sources of information to inform your position?
- For each one of them, what's your underlying belief or value underpinning your position?
- What cultural backgrounds and experiences may be influencing your positions?
- How have your positions on these issues changed over time?
- What lessons do these reflections on social issues evoke about who you are?

HINT: Articulate, reflect and clarify your position on relevant (to you) social and political issues and how your personal stances on these issues have shifted over your lifetime. Reflect on as many as you may consider relevant, at least on three of them.

Take out your journal to reflect and write your responses, or visit <http://UniqueCulturalLens.com> to download the worksheet for this exercise.

**Layer 9 — Gender and sexuality:
Including identity, expression, assignment,
orientation and behavior**

**Questions and a Hint to facilitate your exploration of
Layer 9 — Gender and sexuality:**

- How do you self-identify relative to your own gender identity and expression as well as your own sexual assignment, orientation and behavior?
- When did you start to notice the self-identity that best fits you?
- What transitions in your own self-identification have you gone through?
- What cultural backgrounds supported this exploration or lack of exploration?
- What cultural backgrounds made your exploration more difficult?
- What are the benefits/strengths of your current self-identification?
- What are its challenges?
- What lessons do these gender/sexual reflections evoke about who you are?
- From your own position of awareness, how can you help others?

HINT: Start with your earliest awareness of your own gender and sexuality, usually around puberty, and reflect on its progression until the present, including naming how you currently self-identify.

Take out your journal to reflect and write your responses, or visit <http://UniqueCulturalLens.com> to download the worksheet for this exercise.

Layer 10 — Social class: Including your economic and social class progression

Some indicators of social class to consider include:

- Income
- Education
- Housing
- Occupation
- Neighborhood
- Language (accent, vocabulary, grammar)
- Assets or wealth
- Appearance (dress, condition of teeth, posture, make up, accessories, hair style, etc.)
- Possessions (including what you own versus what you would like to own)
- Leisure (daily, weekends, vacations and special leisurely projects)

Questions and a Hint to facilitate your exploration of Layer 10 — Social class:

- Describe your socioeconomic/financial status history from birth to today.
- Reflect specifically on any status shifts you may have experienced. What produced the shifts? What meaning did you make of them?
- What's your current socio-economic status?
- What would be your ideal socio-economic status? How likely are you to achieve it?
- What are the advantages of your current status?
- What are its disadvantages?
- What cultural influences do you think your socioeconomic status has had on you?
- How is your socio-economic status seen in society, and how does that impact you?

- What is the first memory you have of someone you thought was significantly richer than you? Why did you think so, and what did you make of it?
- What is the first memory you have of someone you thought was significantly poorer than you? Why did you think so, and what did you make of it?
- What was your family's source of income when you were growing up? What was your family's attitude about money?
- Describe the home(s) and neighborhood(s) of your youth.
- How does your educational level compare with those of your family members?
- What has been hard, and easy, for you regarding your class and background?
- What have you gained from and what do you appreciate about your class and background?
- What lessons are these socio-economic reflections evoking about who you are?

HINT: Recount and reflect on the different socio-economic statuses you have experienced from birth to the present day. Include the types of lifestyles - and perceptions about money and power - your financial situations have enabled you to afford throughout your life. Pay particular attention to the impact of financial transitions in your life.

Take out your journal to reflect and write your responses, or visit <http://UniqueCulturalLens.com> to download the worksheet for this exercise.

Consider enhancing the ten layers, if necessary.

The next step is to complement the ten UCL layers with any additional cultural layers you may deem necessary for this exercise to help you describe and understand yourself and your own unique cultural context as meaningfully as possible. Some of these may have popped into your mind during Step I, as you worked through the exercise.

For example, in my own case, I noticed that I wanted to explore cross-cultural marriage and added that element as my 11th layer for my UCL Exercise. The extra effort proved to be very rewarding.

Other layers you may wish to consider for inclusion could be:

- Family dynamics
- Cross-religious upbringing and/or marriage
- A particularly demanding profession or any sport you may have practiced competitively
- Lessons from a significant tough life situation (illness, deaths, dramatic failure, tough childhood)
- Lessons from dramatic successes, achievements, awards and the like
- Unusual opportunities life may have offered you
- An extreme pursuit of a goal (for example, Olympic-level athlete, climber, diver, artist)
- The effects on you from parents who may fit one of the above situations
- As mentioned before, whatever may truly resonate with you

And, if at the end of completing your reflection on the ten layers described no other layers come to mind, that probably means you've done a sufficiently thorough exploration.

Take out your journal to reflect and write your responses.

Distill the essence of your UCL as you have discovered it.

Reflect on your own UCL, with a focused intention to distill its essence. Take some time to reflect before you write down that essence.

To be truly “the essence,” what you describe needs to be very short. It usually helps to start with either “I am ...” or “My essence is...” in describing this distillation. That’s why I’m inviting you to write here no more than a short sentence; a metaphor; a character from a play, book or movie; a mythological figure or superhero; or perhaps an animal or imaginary creature. It is, as O. W. Holmes used to say, “simplicity on the other side of complexity.” Three excellent examples I’ve heard of truly powerful UCL essences are:

- *“My essence is lion and lamb!”* – announced by a person who had been showing up sometimes frightened, other times courageous, struggling with the seeming contradiction
- *“I’ve been a wall holding at bay who I truly am!”* – stated by a man who realized he feared showing his true self to the world
- *“I am a Ninja Geisha!”* – pronounced by a woman of Japanese Irish descent with both warrior and dancing experience, who realized this duality is essential to who she really is. And, she added: *“It is from the physical context of others’ lenses, combined with my own experience, that imagination inspired ‘Ninja Geisha.’”*

Take out your journal to reflect and write your responses.

Conclusion. Traditional command and control management developed in an era of few workers' rights, an assumption of an unchanging and—therefore—irrelevant environment, and narrow measures of performance often limited to volume and quality of output. In today's complex world, the bar has been raised enormously for all knowledge workers at all levels of responsibility who are now charged to successfully reach or exceed many different performance measures and manage an increasingly complex, varied and demanding group of stakeholders across cultures, sometimes with little to no authority. The orientations of those who succeed are not toward control; they tend to be toward agility. And, one has to be aware to be agile.

Professionals today need to be more self-aware and authentic, as well as more aware of group dynamics, system and organizational dynamics and cultural differences and contexts than ever before. They need to be able to perceive these dynamics clearly, as they are, rather than as they would like them to be. Ignorance of these forces can lead to unchecked assumptions, conflict, inefficiencies and misdirected organizational initiatives.

In my experience working with leaders and other professionals, self-awareness - getting to know and respect oneself through increased awareness of filters, prejudices, strengths and weaknesses - paves the way to perceive cultural differences, contexts and dynamics in others, groups, organizations and the societies and countries in which we operate.

In addition, professionals today also need to make themselves accountable to the objectives they have signed up for and commit to a conscious process of strategic decision-making, using information gathered by clearly perceiving differences and contexts while keeping a clear focus on meeting committed objectives.

Because the bar has become so high, and keeps getting higher, the only way to achieve increasing results over time is to nurture capability. This requires constant understanding of relationships, systems and human motivation. It also requires enough self-awareness and self-care to allow everyone to consciously use their strengths, mitigate their weaknesses and get out of the way of others. Professionals need to be highly-tuned instruments who act as catalysts for capability. Therefore, the conscious, reflective and strategic kind of leadership I am calling *inspired leading* is not a luxury - it is what is required to achieve the results expected today. And, it starts with the deep self-exploration the UCL Exercise enables. *Inspired leading* is a strategic and agile approach to leading by harnessing the creative energy that lies between being authentic and being accountable.

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YOUR UNIQUE CULTURAL LENS is a guide to help you develop your own cultural competence – your ability to effectively interact, communicate and influence across cultures at home or overseas. It advocates that the most efficient way to do so is by increasing your self-awareness and supports your efforts through the Unique Cultural Lens (UCL) Exercise.

Your UCL is your own set of perception filters (biases) accumulated over a lifetime. It reflects the rich ancestral, cultural, educational and experiential heritage you emerged from and informs who you are now. Together, these filters define your authentic self, influence how you perceive and interact with the world, and affect the decisions you make - whether you are consciously aware or not of them.

By increasing your own self-awareness, **YOUR UNIQUE CULTURAL LENS** argues you will more effectively be able to create the conditions for better, more inclusive and more productive working environments.



ENRIQUE J. ZALDIVAR is founding partner of Inspired-Inc., professor of organization development at American University and author. He is convinced that effective leaders create culturally-appropriate conditions for organizational success that produce results as well as sustainable, effective and rewarding workplaces. His results-based approach to consulting and coaching, called **INSPIRED LEADING**, emphasizes harnessing the creative energy between being authentic and accountable.

Enrique has worked with more than 10,000 leaders in 50 countries and individually coached more than 1,000 executives/managers. He lives in the Washington, D.C. area.

EXPERIENCE FROM USING THE UNIQUE CULTURAL LENS FRAMEWORK:

Hundreds of clients and students have followed the approach described in this book to increase their cultural competence and leadership effectiveness. Printed here, with permission, a reaction from a client who did the exercise and followed through:

“I CONSCIOUSLY BELIEVE all people have equal potential and deserve the same opportunities, and strive to show that through my behaviors. After doing my UCL exercise, I finally understood why, typically during emergencies or under severe stress, my words and decisions did not reflect my conscious beliefs. I had been unaware of my biases and prejudices all my life. Through realizations like this one, my UCL exploration became a solid foundation for the rest of my cultural competence developmental growth and for my organization’s ensuing transformation.”