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# *The* **6 STAGES of CULTURAL MASTERY**

A Roadmap for Leaders in a  
Culturally Complex World

“Every decade or so a book is written that can truly change the world. This is one of those books.”

— DUANE CUMMINGS, CEO, The Sensational Group

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**RICARDO GONZÁLEZ**

# Reviews of *The Six Stages of Cultural Mastery*

“For us to become truly liberating leaders, we must learn to lead people of diverse cultures in a relevant way. *The Six Stages of Cultural Mastery* will prepare you to lead those unlike yourself with much higher levels of influence and power. You will want to buy several copies to give to others wanting to connect.”

— Jeremie Kubicek, author of *5 Gears*, CEO and co-founder of GIANT Worldwide, named by Inc.com as a top 100 leadership speaker.

“Every leader serious about creating follower-ship and engaging talent of diverse cultures should read *The Six Stages of Cultural Mastery*. In an honest and refreshing way, Ricardo lays out very specific and actionable steps that will transform you, and through you, those you lead.”

— Arnold Dhanesar, Group Chief Talent Officer, Zurich Insurance Company.

“We live in a fast-paced, hard-hitting world. *The Six Stages of Cultural Mastery* will help you to dig deep and do the necessary internal work to succeed with people of diverse backgrounds. Written with wit and wisdom, this book is a home run!”

— Molly Fletcher, author of *Fearless at Work* and *A Winners Guide to Negotiating*, CEO of The Molly Fletcher Company.

“Collaboration requires a deep level of self-awareness and understanding from a number of cultural perspectives. *The Six Stages of Cultural Mastery* provides leaders with a necessary framework for breaking down cultural barriers. It’s a much-needed piece of the collaborative puzzle in a global economy.”

— Alan Schaeffer, founder and CEO, Banding People Together.

“To work through the complex landscape of cultural diversity, one needs the right tools of engagement. *The Six Stages of Cultural Mastery* is a tool I highly recommend for your toolbox. Ricardo lays out a clear path to being a highly successful leader in today’s culturally demanding organizations. This book will ready you to plug in and power up to lead and serve more effectively in any diverse corporate environment.”

— Sharon Frame, author of *Wired to Win*, former CNN anchor and CEO of LeadHerShip.

*“The Six Stages of Cultural Mastery* will equip you to more effectively lead, sell to, and enjoy deep and long-lasting relationships with people of diverse backgrounds. Ricardo does a masterful job of laying out the specific stages leaders must follow in order to develop into Cultural Masters. ¡Bravo!”

— Pegine Echevarría, MSW, CSP, Member C-Suite Advisors,  
Motivational Speakers Hall of Fame Inductee,  
CEO of Team-Pegine, Inc.

“Leaders in today’s world need to make sure that their voice is being heard clearly by people of all cultures and backgrounds. Ricardo has done a great service to all leaders to help them to find a voice that will resonate with others in a culturally relevant manner. This book will surely help you extend your influence in our world.”

— Steve Cockram, author of *5 Voices*, co-founder of  
GIANT Worldwide.

*“The Six Stages of Cultural Mastery* takes leaders through a very refined process to move us to true levels of Endearment in Stage Six. This book should be read and digested by all organizational and community leaders as the insights Ricardo shares are transformational.”

— Steve Akinboro, founder and CEO, LoveIQ and Council  
Member of the Gerson Lehrman Group



# **THE SIX STAGES** *of* **CULTURAL** **MASTERY**

A Roadmap for Leaders in a  
Culturally Complex World

**RICARDO GONZÁLEZ**

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### *Dedication*

To my great-grandfather TT, who in his advanced senility would hang stray dogs in front of a very young me in the mountains of Puerto Rico. That horrifying experience taught me that all creatures matter, great and small, and we shouldn't reject them, let alone destroy them, just because they are different or wounded.





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To Ginger Schlanger, thank you for your encouragement and for doing the very first edit on this content. You made me a better writer.

To my wife, Maribel, without you this simply wouldn't be possible. You are so amazingly patient and self-sacrificing. I love you!



# Foreword

AS AN AUTHOR, SPEAKER, and business leader, most of my days are spent communicating—and candidly, up to this point in my life, I thought I was fairly good at it. But my skills fall woefully short of characterizing the life-changing thoughts and methodology that Ricardo González presents in *The Six Stages of Cultural Mastery*.

I truly believe that to match the power and potential impact of this book on the world, the foreword should have been written by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, or the blessed Mother Teresa. The positive legacy of those leaders is consistent with the lessons in this book—and the benefit that its readers could have on their family, community, organization, or nation is boundless. Every decade or so a book is written that can truly change the world. This is one of those books.

In our literature, there have been very few simple, digestible, and inclusive books that have the ability to create peace and harmony, regardless of the age, gender, religion, or political affiliation of the reader. Certainly, there are religions with their sacred writings, nations with their constitutions, and institutions like marriage, with their rituals and vows. But the

simple truth is, many of those examples are *exclusive*. What Ricardo shares in these pages is *inclusive*, and I have no doubt that it could influence all of humanity.

I have spent my life studying people and serving others, and I have been blessed to call Ricardo a friend for a long time. Anyone who knows us knows that we've been living the lessons he shares in this book, and we have been fortunate to see the results firsthand.

I travel the globe regularly, working with dozens of diverse cultures. I promise you, if you follow the stages in this book, and remain open to the idea that to master culture, you must first master yourself—you can make magic happen with others.

Now it's up to you. If you've been wondering how to change the culture of your workplace, or are hoping to unite a community, or are taking on a bigger challenge like ridding the world of poverty, war, or hatred—this book is the answer. My hope is that you'll read, digest, and apply the Six Stages of Cultural Mastery, and that you will join us as we continue striving to make a positive impact on the world.

Humbly,

Duane Cummings

Founder, The Sensational Group; Former CEO, Leadercast

# Preface

I GREW UP IN A crazy, bilingual, bicultural world where one grandmother was talkin' at me in her Southern drawl, "Now, Ricky, now stop that, Ricky! I'm a tellin' ya, Ricky, stop it now!" and my other grandmother was looking at me a bit more lovingly and saying, "Ricardito, por favor, mi amorcito lindo, ay pero Ricardito, ven acá a tu abuelita." You see, my father is Puerto Rican. He was one of 27 children and came to the United States with an eighth-grade education, speaking no English. And my mother was from the hills of Kentucky. So I am literally a Puerto Rican hillbilly!

My formative and teen years were painful as I watched two people from two very different cultures somehow try to make a go of it. Well, they didn't, and I suppose perhaps they couldn't. The culture clash in our family was quite dysfunctional.

So my interest in culture and cultural mastery is very personal. Every time I can help someone, or some organization, or some community get it right, it is redemptive to me. I experienced this many times in my work at Bilingual America, where since 1992 our mission has been to "bridge the gap between Latinos and non-Latinos so they can enjoy highly successful



and productive business and personal relationships with one another” through cultural leadership and language training.

But over the years I noticed that even in this context, which by nature encouraged openness, people continued to stumble over cultural nuances. Why? What was missing?

Part of the problem, I realized, was that the thinking at the time (as now) was focused on diversity. And diversity is all about inclusion, tolerance, and acceptance. That’s fine, but personally, I have never seen people work well together who are just tolerating one another, or just accepting of one another’s differences. That’s merely a baseline so we don’t hurt one another; it’s not necessarily healthy.

What’s more, sometimes the push for inclusion and acceptance seems foreboding to people: It forces them to accept what they aren’t prepared to accept based on their worldviews. When people are pushed to something they aren’t capable of accepting, the obvious happens—they push back. This pushback creates cultural instability, strong judgment from both sides, divisions, and in the worst-case scenario, hate. Sound familiar?

Then, a few years back, the answer came to me.

I was on a flight to a conference, thinking it over, making notes on a napkin when it came flowing out—the Six Stages you’re about to enter today. I felt excited and hopeful. The plane landed, I went about my business, I let the idea go. When I came back to it several weeks later it still seemed right. It still resonated.

We tested the Stages with clients for a few years, and I can tell you that the results are nothing short of life-changing. We have seen the Six Stages of Cultural Mastery fundamentally

change how leaders work and engage with people of other cultures. In fact, I would go so far as to say that no business leader, public servant, or even diversity or multicultural manager can ignore these principles and enjoy the highest levels of success.

I'm very excited to greet you, and I expect great things from you. The world desperately needs Cultural Masters. We need *you*. Let's get it right.

—Ricardo González



# Introduction: Why the Six Stages?



**W**E LIVE IN A time of rapid change in a very culturally complex world. Change creates cultural shifts. Rapid change creates seismic cultural shifts that can unsettle companies, communities, and countries unless people are properly led and managed. Corporate and community leaders in today's world must skillfully navigate rapid cultural shifts or get buried beneath the debris.


One of the countless recent changes that you've probably noticed is a shift in awareness about culture and diversity. We now have change management specialists, multicultural leaders, and even Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officers. Such titles or positions rarely existed less than 20 years ago. In fact, in 2005 less than 20 percent of Fortune 500 companies had a Chief Diversity Officer. These positions have developed rapidly over the past several years due to a combination of internal consciousness and external societal pressures.

The change has affected the structure of business and civic groups in other ways as well. Wherever we work, worship, and find involvement, Americans are holding trainings and seminars to try to achieve harmony. We hold seminars almost daily on bias—implicit, explicit, conscious, and unconscious. Due to an event in a single store unit, Starbucks decided to close eight thousand stores in the United States so that all store employees could undergo anti-bias training. FBI Director Christopher Wray recently assured lawmakers that agents will be required

to go through anti-bias training. Due to heightened sensitivities, book publishers are even employing “sensitivity editors” to ensure that what they publish does not offend readers or arouse their negativity.

It’s hard to know what effect all this is having. It seems we measure our success by the number of separate groups there are: We now have Hispanic groups, African-American groups, groups for women, Asian groups, LGBT+ groups, and more—all meeting in separate convocations with their own budgets and agendas. We have minority empowerment groups, ERGs (Employee Resource Groups, defined by ethnicity), Hispanic chambers of commerce, African-American chambers, Asian chambers.

It looks like a lot of activity, doesn’t it? Yet we continue to struggle and stumble, perhaps more than ever. Negative biases don’t easily go away, and instead of achieving harmony, we find ourselves farther away from one another. We



*Although we have all this cultural movement and increased awareness, we still lack Cultural Masters—leaders who can inspire their people to the highest levels of personal and professional success, no matter their ethnic backgrounds.*

continue to fight and tug and pull on one another’s racial, ethnic, and cultural sensitivities. Nothing seems to have changed; if anything, things appear to be getting worse.

Although we have all this cultural movement and increased awareness, we still

lack Cultural Masters—leaders who can inspire their people to the highest levels of personal and professional success, no matter their ethnic backgrounds.

I believe that you can be one of these much-needed masters of culture, and that this book will help you along that path. The Six Stages of Cultural Mastery have the power to fundamentally transform you as a leader—and through you, those you influence.

## A Frustrating and Disturbing Pattern

Several years ago, my staff and I noticed a disturbing pattern among leaders who went through our Success with Hispanics cultural leadership training at Bilingual America. This training teaches participants all about Hispanic culture and helps them to develop a strategic plan for how to successfully work with and do business with Latinos. But we noticed that after the training, back in the “real world,” many of our clients continued to misfire. They would say or do things that were misunderstood, things that sometimes were actually quite offensive.

How could people who were well trained, people who could even pass a test on cultural competency, continue to do and say things that just didn’t work, bringing consternation to all engaged? I was frustrated, to say the least.

Then I had an epiphany. I was on a video training call with a group of leaders from a company in Dallas, and I had just made a specific suggestion regarding a strategic approach to employee attraction. They laughed at me. They told me that what I was saying would never work, even though I knew it would, based on years of experience. At first, their laughter annoyed me. Then it made me think. What was the disconnect? These were smart people. How could they be so closed-minded? What weren’t they getting?



Then I realized that I was putting the problem all on them, so I started asking myself better questions. What wasn't I giving them that they needed? What wasn't I teaching them that they needed to be successful in their cultural leadership?

These leaders were products of their own culture and experience, just as I was. Maybe they just weren't ready to receive the message. Maybe I needed to help them do the necessary *internal* work before they could effectively apply the *external* principles.

It was then that I started asking myself how one would, in fact, become a cultural master, or if you will, a highly skilled leader who knows how to lead people of diverse cultures. What does it take to become highly skilled in leading people of diverse cultures? This book is the answer to that question.

The Six Stages of Cultural Mastery give you the keys to unlock a big door—the door that many leaders hit their heads against as they attempt to manage and lead people from various cultures. If we follow and honestly work through these stages, both we and the people we lead will be transformed for good—and forever.

## The Leader's Greatest Challenge

The greatest challenge facing today's leader is the challenge of leading diverse groups of people. Your organization has perhaps had trainings on "How to Avoid Cross-Cultural Faux Pas," "Implicit and Explicit Bias," "Cultural Competency in Corporate America," or even "How to Communicate with Your Millennial Workforce." But these can fall short, as you may have noticed. Because becoming a cultural master takes more than learning

a few things about the people you work with and getting a few strategies for how to reach them, or not offend them. It certainly implies more than being culturally competent. I don't want to simply be competent and get by—I want to be a master and enjoy great levels of success in my cultural leadership. Without undergoing the deeper work, most of us will still likely find ourselves faltering in culturally complex relationships. At the very least, we won't come close to approaching the levels of success that is actually possible.

I've seen far too many leaders try to succeed with people of diverse backgrounds, only to fail—alienating or offending them at the most critical moments. In today's culturally sensitive environment, this type of failure can cost you your reputation, your career, and even your business.

My friend Arnold Dhanesar, whom you'll meet later in the book, took a cultural mastery trip with me not long ago. At the time, Arnold was Group Director of Talent and Development for the Americas at The Coca-Cola Company. Among our many great conversations during this time was one about today's new leader.

We discussed how early leadership teachings propagated the idea that IQ (intelligence quotient) was a differentiator. Leaders needed to have at least an acceptable IQ to have the credibility to lead. Then in the 90s the concept of EQ (emotional quotient) began to garner serious attention in the leadership community.

Now, in today's world, high CQ (cultural quotient) is an absolute necessity as businesses expand internationally and also hire large numbers of diverse talent. Arnold said to me, "Ricardo,

the equation for today's holistic leader is truly  $IQ+EQ+CQ = \text{The Super-Successful Leader.}$ "

The good news is that leaders can greatly improve their CQ. They can become Cultural Masters and succeed at the highest levels with their teams. The Six Stages of Cultural Mastery will provide you with a clear roadmap for how to lead effectively in our culturally complex world. The Six Stages will prepare you internally to enjoy high levels of success with people of all backgrounds and cultures. They will also protect you from making those unintentional, but serious, mistakes with people of other cultures. I can promise you that the result for you and those you influence will be life-changing. In addition, once you are a true cultural master, you will be in a much better position to lead meaningful cultural transformation in your organization or community.

These Six Stages will take some work. They will take commitment on your part. They won't come to you overnight. You will be

*Cultural mastery will separate you from the pack and allow you to effectively lead varied and diverse teams to much higher levels of creativity, productivity, and yes, profitability.*

tempted to skip some of the early stages but will realize that they truly do build on each other. Each stage is

a building block, needed to reach the next one. The benefit, however, of being a cultural master is that you will reach a realm of leadership that few leaders enjoy, or perhaps even understand. Cultural mastery will separate you from the pack and allow you to effectively lead varied and diverse teams to much higher levels of creativity, productivity, and yes, profitability.

This isn't a long book. It's not a painstaking dissertation on culture. Think of it as a practical guidebook for leaders who sincerely want to become Cultural Masters so they can make a much greater impact on their organizations and their society.

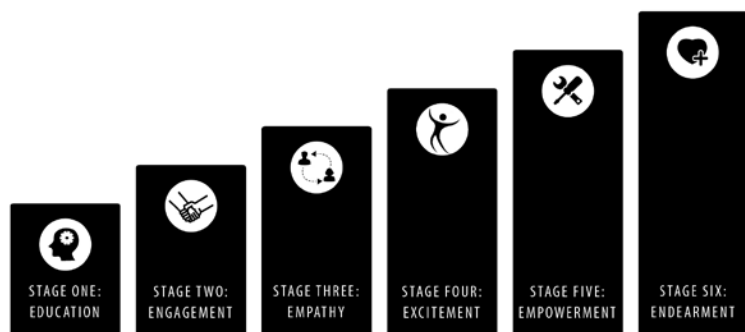
The book's organization is straightforward: After a chapter defining and discussing culture, each chapter focuses on one of the six stages. In each chapter, I'll tell a few stories that illustrate the particular stage, and then share with you the meaning of the stage, the real barriers to its application, and exactly what you should do to develop in that stage. Some of the stories in this book draw from my personal and professional experience in the Latino<sup>1</sup> world, but this book isn't focused on Latinos. The stories simply serve as windows to a much larger world as you work with people of diverse cultures and backgrounds.

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1 Technically speaking, the term *Hispanic* refers to people who speak Spanish. So it includes people from Spain, but not people from Brazil. Practically speaking, though, Spanish-speaking people outside the United States do not call themselves "Hispanic." They refer to themselves by their country of origin or as "Latinos." The term *Latino* refers to people from Latin America—Spaniards are Europeans, not Latin Americans. The fact is, most Latinos in the United States, myself included, use the terms interchangeably, although I prefer *Latino*. Many Latinos over 40 do not like the term *Hispanic*, which they see as derogatory.

## The Six Stages Unveiled

Each of these Six Stages builds on the previous stage. At first, they may seem simple (as all truth is simple at its core), but they are not easily attained. They will stretch you, they will challenge you, and best of all, they will change you.



You will notice something wonderful about the Six Stages: They are balanced between emotion and action. Cultural leadership is not just *what you do*, it flows out of *who you are*.

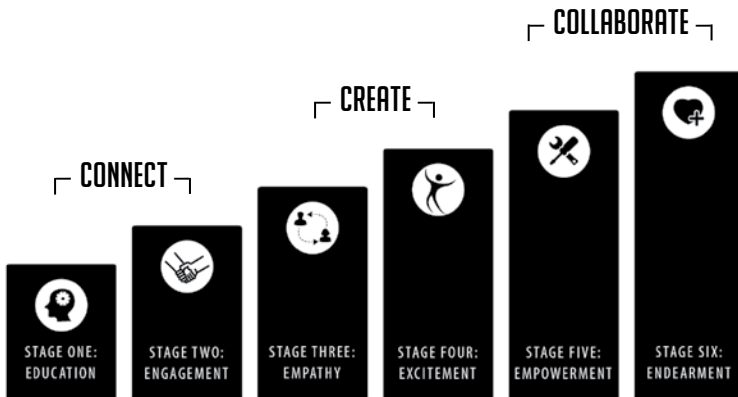
Education, Engagement, and Empowerment all require you to act in a proactive manner. You must *do* something.

Empathy, Excitement, and Endearment are emotional in nature. They are all about the heart. If I don't do the internal, emotive work of these three stages, I will never truly succeed as a cultural leader. One word of caution here before we get started. Almost all leaders want to jump immediately to Stage Four, which is the vision-setting stage. It's tempting to completely skip Stages One to Three because we want to do something. But Cultural Masters are strategic. They understand that the stages of Education, Engagement, and Empathy are needed to create vision together.

Cultural Mastery is a skill set. It's not about being culturally sensitive—it is about being culturally skilled. This is a process for building deep and meaningful relationships with people culturally different from ourselves. Cultural Masters have the ability to successfully and consistently connect, create, and collaborate with people different from themselves.

*Cultural Masters have the ability to successfully and consistently connect, create, and collaborate with people different from themselves.*

In Stages One and Two we learn how to connect; in Stages Three and Four we learn how to create together; and in Stages Five and Six we learn to collaborate with one another for the common good. Each stage moves us naturally to the next stage.



Before we get started on the Six Stages of Cultural Mastery, let's discover together what culture really is and how it works.



# What Is Culture?





THERE IS NO WAY for us to become Cultural Masters without an understanding of what culture is and how it works. This chapter will set an important foundation for our considerations throughout this book. It forms the backdrop against which all Six Stages will play out.

Culture, simply put, is the DNA of a group, organization, or society. It's the product and the expression of a people's shared experience. It both defines and drives the group. It defines the internal relationships of the group, and it drives the behavior of the group members both internally and externally. Yet it's not static; it's constantly changing.

Culture *is*. We must understand this before we go any further. Culture *is*. (As Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth-century German philosopher, said, "What is, is.") In other words, a culture, in itself, is neither right nor wrong. It simply is.

Certainly, every culture has elements that work and elements that don't work. We are all human—we all do wrong and our wrongs can be perpetuated in our cultures. But once I start judging another culture, I judge the people of that culture. Once I judge those people, I disqualify myself from leading or working with them. This does not mean that I don't believe in good and evil or right and wrong. I simply don't

*Culture is. Culture is learned. Culture  
is transmitted. Culture permeates.  
Culture drives. Culture defines. We  
are all shaped by our cultures.*



believe one should be so arrogant as to say that one culture is *better* than another, or to behave as if it is.

We may not like some element of a culture, we may not agree with it, we may even think it's wrong, but that judgment won't change anything for the better. Culture is, and until we accept the realities of a given culture without making moral judgments on it or its people, we have no chance of working effectively within its constructs. If we do not fully accept the realities of a given culture, we will be frustrated as leaders, and we'll also be frustrating to those we lead from within those cultures. Whenever we make judgments on another culture, we take ourselves out of position to actually have positive influence in and on that culture. *We simply cannot lead people effectively if we are resisting them or their culture emotionally.*

We'll learn how to avoid this resistance throughout the book. First, let's look at the sorts of things you can find in every culture.

## The Main Elements of Every Culture

To understand a given culture, one way to start is to look at its parts. The following five elements are present in every culture, whether it's a community culture, a corporate culture, or even a family culture.

### **1. Beliefs**

Cultures rally around common core beliefs. This is why organizations rally around mission or vision statements. This is why religions all have stories that illustrate their belief systems. And why movements publish manifestos. And countries have constitutions. Typically, when people come together as a group, they do so around a common set of expressed beliefs.

## **2. Values**

These are the foundational aspects that a culture deems good or valuable. Values grow out of a culture's belief system. For example, some cultures value individualism and see it as a good and desirable thing. This value may be based, in part, on a belief that the group does better when individual talent and skill is fostered and supported. In other cultures, a person's contribution to the group is much more important and rewarded than individual achievement, and this value may be based on a belief that the whole does better when everyone knows where they fit in. Values have a significant impact on how people within a culture behave and develop.

## **3. Language**

Every culture has its own language. This may be an actual language, such as English, Spanish, or Arabic, or it may be the "lingo" that is spoken within a particular culture. Religious groups, for example, have their own language. Every culture's youth has its own lingo. Language is necessary to effectively communicate beliefs and values to the members of the culture.

## **4. Norms**

Every culture has expectations of its members. These norms can be written (laws, policies, encyclicals) or unwritten. Norms outline expected behavior. Members who do not follow the norms may be seen as odd or rebellious. They may be ostracized, marginalized, ignored, or in the worst cases, separated from the group through firing, expulsion, imprisonment, or even death.

## 5. Symbols

Cultures have ways in which members identify and brand themselves so everyone knows who they are. Countries have flags and monuments; religions have flags and symbols; companies have brands and logotypes; teams wear a common uniform and have an identifying symbol on their hats, helmets or shirts (often worn by fans as well); gangs have identifying clothing or tattoos; families have a common last name. You can even look at food and dress and possessions like cars and homes as cultural symbols. These are the symbols that bind together a culture.

Of course, there are other elements, like religion, music, art, sports, health, government, and law, that are found in many cultures. But not *all* cultures. Your organization probably doesn't have a common religion, for example, or a traditional dance. (Although maybe it does, and you see it every year at the holiday party!) But in all cultures, including the one you lead, you can find these five elements.

## What About Race?

You may notice that race is not listed here as an essential element of culture. That's because even defining race is difficult; it depends on the discipline that's defining it. Many of us are quick to accuse others of racism when the reality is we may be dealing more with ethnicism or culturalism.<sup>2</sup> What looks like racism is often something else.

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2 According to Wiktionary.com, "ethnicism" is now used to mean "a prejudice based on ethnic origin."

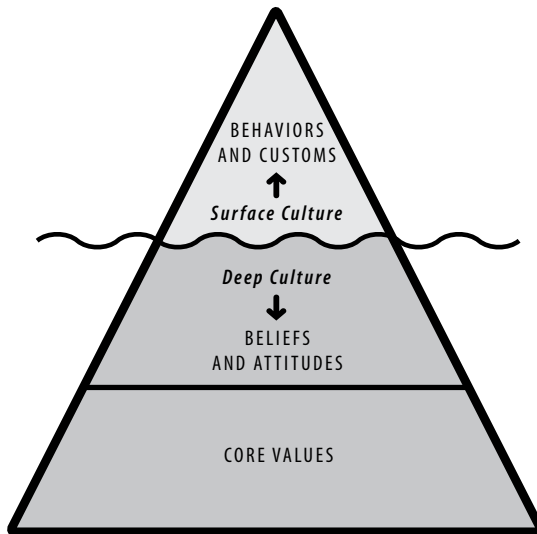
For example, *Latino/Hispanic* is not a racial group. The group is, in fact, composed of people of all racial groups. The broad group we know as *Latino/Hispanic* is also composed of many nationalities: Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Cubans, Colombians, Argentines, and so on—all with their own unique cultures. And within the national groups is a multiplicity and a blending of ethnicities. The common bond is the Spanish language, and of course, language is an essential element of culture. But even there, the closer you look, the more complex culture gets. For many people who might be identified as “Latino,” the primary language is not Spanish but Nahuatl, Mixtec, or one of the many other languages indigenous to Central and South America.

This kind of nuance is also at work among peoples with African ancestry; African-Americans can be seen as an ethnic group distinct from, say, Jamaicans, or Senegalese, or Nigerians. In the traditional *Asian* racial category we have multiple ethnicities, including Japanese, Taiwanese, Korean, Chinese, and more. And within each of these major ethnicities, there are many subcultures.

So, we should be very careful about our use of the words “racism” or “racist.” The reality of a particular bias or stereotype may be more rooted in ethnicism, or we might even say, culturalism. This is important because Cultural Masters do not use cultural terms loosely and are precise in their thinking and semantics.

## The Iceberg Analogy and How Culture Shapes Us

A helpful way to look at the elements of culture is presented in “the Iceberg Analogy of Culture.” This excellent analogy, developed by Edward T. Hall in 1976, essentially says that a culture, like an iceberg, is partly visible but mostly invisible.<sup>3</sup> The visible elements of culture are those at the tip of the iceberg—surface things that we can see, touch, hear, taste, and smell, like food, music, dress, religion, language, and behavior. The invisible, intangible elements of culture, the things we don’t quickly see or understand, are deeper, more internal elements like beliefs, values, gender roles, social norms, concepts of time, and so on. Plus all the assumptions and prejudices that go along with these.



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3 Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Anchor Books, 1976).

What's above the water line in culture is pretty easy to identify—like special dishes, or a traditional song or religious ceremony. These items are learned explicitly. And they're relatively easy to change. When people come to a new country, for example, within a couple of generations they often let go of big chunks of their tip-of-the-iceberg culture—things like their traditional dress, their diet, even their language.

The under-the-water parts of culture are more unconscious, and therefore they change more slowly. They're not learned explicitly, as are a dance or a recipe, but through a kind of osmosis, or assimilation.

Take our beliefs about the value and meaning of work. Where did we get those beliefs? Our parents didn't sit us down and give us books to read on the subject. Instead, we learned what we believe about work by watching our parents and other people work; we learned without really knowing we were learning. As a consequence, we can find it hard to realize that there are other ways of looking at work.

In fact, it's usually not the external parts of culture that get us into trouble—it's the internal, intangible parts. We may have no problem when someone's clothing, music, or food is different from ours; we may really love that diversity. But watch out when our concept of work or time runs up against someone else's: Icebergs colliding!

Let's take a little journey together to see how all the elements of culture, tangible and intangible, pervasively influence us. For



the reality is, we are all shaped by our cultures. And by that I mean the culture we grew up in, the culture we learned as kids.<sup>4</sup>

Take me, for example. I grew up in the Puerto Rican island culture in the 70s, and sure enough, I love eating rice and beans and fried plantains. I love the music of Hector Lavoe and El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico. My favorite game is dominos and I drink strong coffee, just like my *abuela* used to give me. These are some of the ways my culture has shaped me.

Then there's my friend Carlos, who grew up in Mexico, and sure enough, he roots for El Tri (the Mexican national soccer team), reveres the music of Vicente Fernández and Ana Gabriel, and instead of listening to the Red Hot Chili Peppers, he eats them! Carlos is Catholic, and he has a deep respect for the elderly. (He lives not only with his wife and kids but with both his mother and his mother-in-law!) These are some of the ways Mexican culture has shaped Carlos.

My friend Warren is white and grew up in the Deep South of the United States. He loves corn bread, grits, BBQ, and country music, and he attends church every Sunday—and most of the time even on Wednesday nights. Of course, there are some other things about him that one wouldn't automatically associate with Southern culture, but these are just some of the ways that culture has shaped him.

You get the point, right? Chances are, if you were born into an Amish farming community in Shipshewana, Indiana, and

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4 As you think this through you may realize that you live in several cultures at once. There's a culture at work, and one at home. There's the culture of your faith. If your family is bicultural, then you straddle cultures there. There's your regional culture, your national culture, your corporate culture and so on. (The deeper we dig, the more varied and beautiful our world becomes.)

decided to stay there, you would wear plain Amish clothing, not use electricity in your home, farm your land with nonmotorized equipment, and if a neighbor's house burned down, you would help rebuild it without question.

Chances are, if you grew up African American in Harlem in the 80s, you would enjoy, or at least appreciate, hip-hop music. You would likely have voted for Barack Obama, and perhaps you'd believe that you have to work double hard to make it because the system is not stacked in your favor.

We could go on with other examples. Of course, individuals respond to culture in unique ways that don't fit our expectations. There are outliers in every society: Many Mexicans are not Catholic; many Southerners don't enjoy grits; many African Americans belong to the Republican Party. The point is—in most cases, our first culture, from its food to its politics, has an impact on our tastes, our activities, and our beliefs.

Can you imagine what your life would be like today if you had been raised in a different culture? It's difficult, isn't it? Trust me, it's hard for me too. We'll get there. But before we strain our brains too much trying to imagine that, take a moment and think about your own culture.

Ultimately, you'll want to understand and master the culture (or cultures) of the people you lead. But let's start with *your* culture, the culture of your family of origin. An important step in becoming a cultural master is learning to recognize the shape of your *own* cultural iceberg, the one you grew up on. That's the culture that really shaped your under-the-waterline beliefs and values. What are the tangible, external parts? The internal beliefs and values? Starting with the five elements of every

culture outlined above, what did your family's culture look like when you were a child? What were its core beliefs? Its values? What language was spoken in your home? What were some of the social norms that dictated correct behavior? By what symbols did your family and neighbors express their identity?

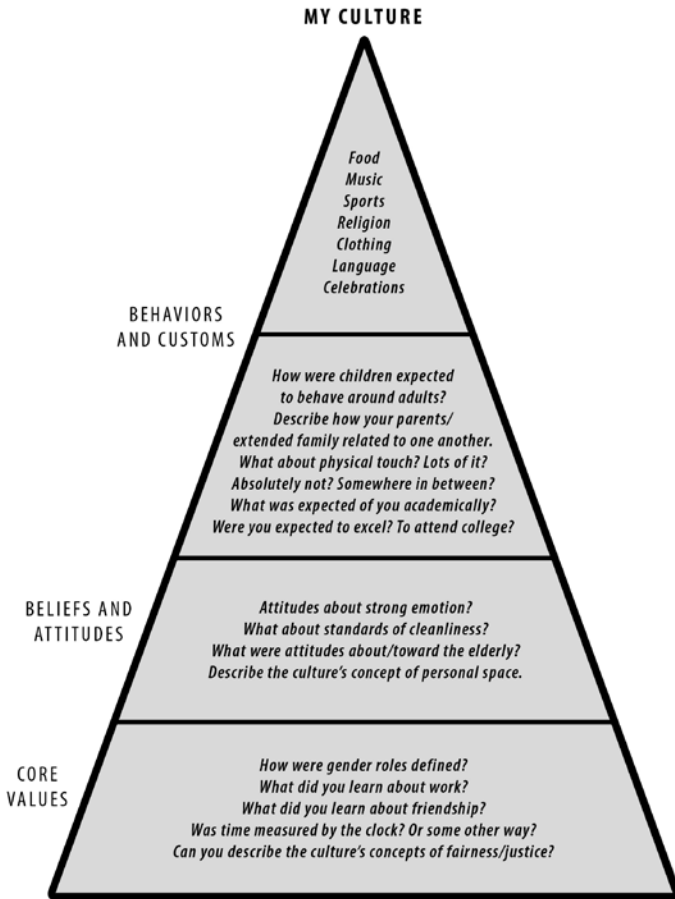
Don't expect everything to be logical or consistent. Culture is rich and complex; it's an intricate mosaic—that's the beauty of culture. The more fluent we are with culture, the more comfortable we become.

You can use the image on the next page to begin to consider your own cultural iceberg:

Culture is. Culture is learned. Culture is transmitted. Culture permeates. Culture drives. Culture defines. We are all shaped by our cultures.

If we don't, or won't, accept that culture is the driving force behind virtually all human behavior, then we will never become Cultural Masters and will be rendered incapable of effectively leading people from multiple cultures and worldviews.

Now that we have a clearer understanding of culture and its impact, let's unveil Stage One of Cultural Mastery.



## Resources

- **Iceberg analogy of culture:** Do an Internet search for this phrase and you'll find an endless supply of explanations and lessons. Hall's book *Beyond Culture* (Anchor Books, 1976) and his other works as well provide one place to start.
- **Culture:** Of course, your investigation of ideas about culture could last a lifetime. One fun way to initiate your search is to go to YouTube, watch a video, and let YouTube make more suggestions based on your choice. Same for other video sources such as Netflix and Amazon. Here are a couple of ideas for starters:
  - "India Is Not Chaotic." TEDx talk by Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik. [youtube.com/watch?v=xKOh9DfQBgU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKOh9DfQBgU)
  - *What Makes That Black?* Books and website on the African-American Aesthetic. [amzn.to/2mqcp34](http://amzn.to/2mqcp34). I would also recommend watching Smokey Robinson's Def Jam Poetry titled "Black American" on YouTube. It will introduce you to a modern singer's view of being a black American as opposed to African American.
- **Google Alerts:** If you want to stay up on a particular culture, or cultural events, simply go to Google Alerts and ask to be kept updated. Every time something comes up with your keywords, Google Alert will send you an email with a link to that article or event. This is a great way to stay up on current events in the culture of your choice.

STAGE ONE

# Education

*Education is the most powerful weapon  
you can use to change the world.*

—NELSON MANDELA

— STAGE TWO —

# Engagement

*Once we accept our limits, we go beyond them.*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

~ STAGE THREE ~

# Empathy

*I think we all have empathy.  
We may not have enough courage to display it.*

— MAYA ANGELOU



STAGE FOUR

# Excitement

*It is always with excitement that I wake up  
in the morning wondering what my intuition  
will toss up to me, like gifts from the sea.  
I work with it and rely on it. It's my partner.*

—DR. JONAS SALK

~ STAGE FIVE ~

# Empowerment

*As we look ahead into the next century,  
leaders will be those who empower others.*

—BILL GATES

STAGE SIX

# Endearment

*To love without knowing how to love  
wounds the person we love.*

—THICH NHAT HANH

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