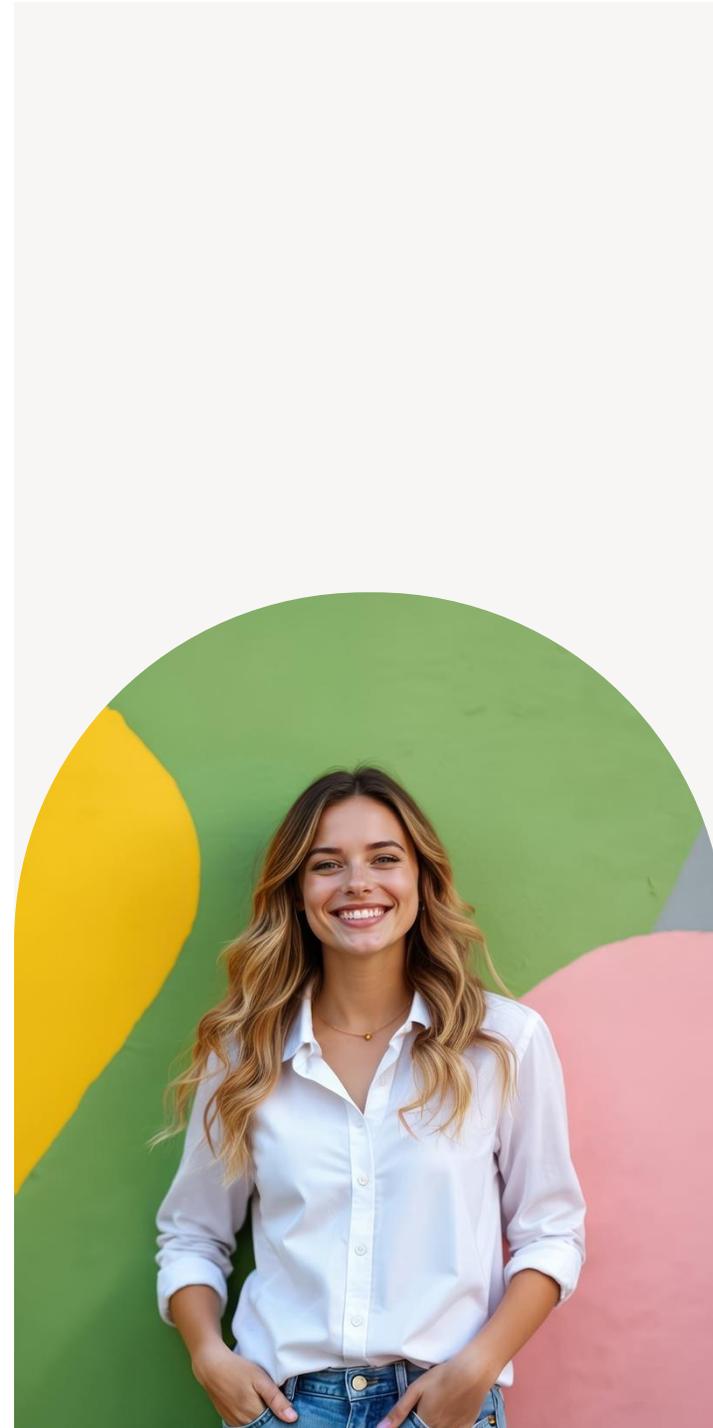


A view on character

Exploring the significance of character development

So, what is this publication all about?

This is a thought piece which aims to set out our understanding and perspective on character. Covering a wealth of material, it is set in the context of looking to demonstrate how character is the central pillar of Heartstyles thinking and that character is at the absolute core of the work we do. It's not the definitive interpretation of character, as you'll see when you read on that simply doesn't exist. Rather it is our interpretation of character, built upon years of academic study and application within the fields of psychology, human behaviour and business.



Setting the scene for our thinking

We are all tempted to have views on what character is, and on the character of others.

We might say “That’s out of character for her;” or “that’s so in character for him.” We might imagine ourselves as children: eager, trusting, impetuous, reckless, naïve, vulnerable and many more things. We might then ask: Are we the same as adults? Were we the same as teenagers? Can we remember what it was to act in those ways? As we grow, we learn and adapt, or change our character. But this is impossible to do in a consciously organised way if we are unaware of ourselves and the character traits we display. As Dr Mara Klemich, one of the founders of Heartstyles, observes:

Whether that’s in a drastic situation, fighting for a relationship, or something that you believe in, in your work or whatever that is, whatever that context is, the principle and the characteristics of what you’re doing are similar.

How could we transform our own character? How might we set about this?

Character is consistently important in all our relationships, in home, family, society, and work.

What, then, do we talk about when we talk about character? We might begin with a definition; there are many, of course, but this is what we have settled on at Heartstyles:

Our character is the sum of our best intentions and deepest values. When we strengthen our character, we’re better able to select the behaviours that reflect those intentions and values - even in stressful situations.

We might seek to observe this in others. But it is more difficult to identify those best intentions and values in ourselves in daily life. That is the first challenge, getting information about our own character. Once we are informed, we can address a second set of challenges: what do we think about our own character? What language might we use? How might we understand it? How does it reveal itself to us and others? And finally, if we like what we see, and more importantly if we do not, here is our third challenge: do we have a sense of the possibilities and the realities of our character? How could we transform our own character? How might we set about this?

Our best intentions and deepest values need to be identified, understood and developed. These three stages are the Heartstyles framework for thinking about character: informing ourselves, revealing our character, and then transforming our character for the better. **Inform, reveal, transform.** We will look at these three in turn.

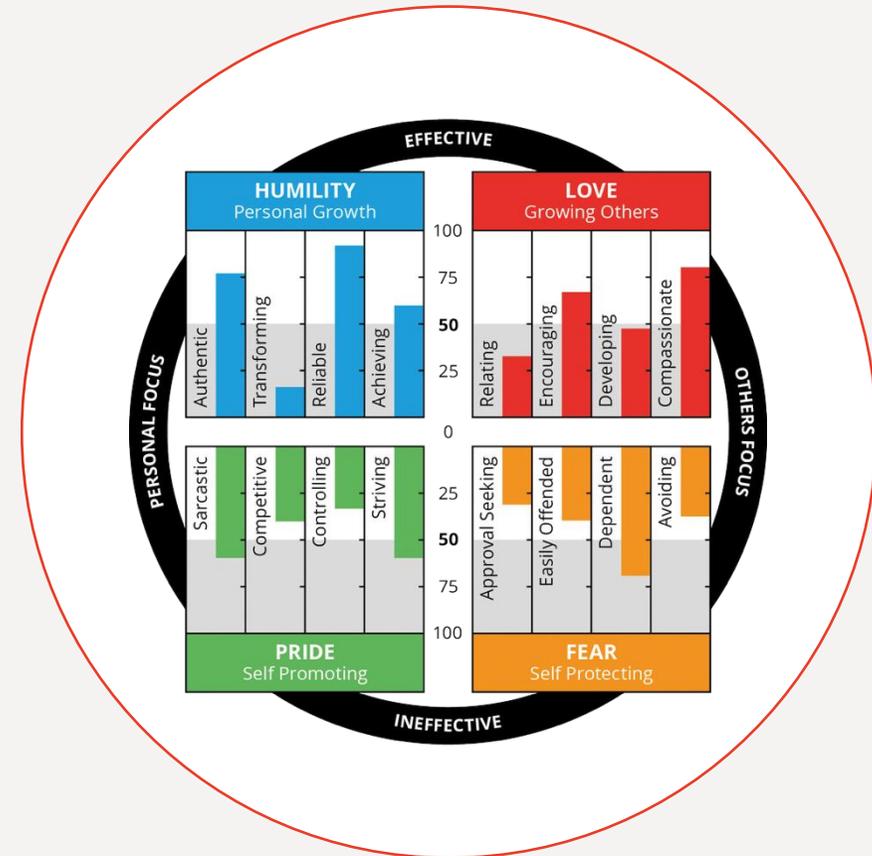
Information about our Character

Information about our character – to be informed is to be empowered

We cannot examine or change what we are not aware of.

We cannot examine or change what we are not aware of. Heartstyles is a set of Indicators which in the first instance can give us information about our character, make us aware of its elements; only then, with this information, can we understand and then change our character. But to say this is not to say that Heartstyles measures character. It sets out sixteen distinct categories or components of behaviour that we can use to develop or transform our own character.

These sixteen elements of behaviour are present in all of us, to a greater or lesser degree. In essence, for Heartstyles our character is an outward manifestation of four principles that shape us: humility (personal growth), love (growing others), pride (self-promotion), and fear (self-protection). As we grow, we become more aware, we understand more, and we can change.



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Is character the same as personality?

Character and personality are often used interchangeably because they determine types of people. Yet character is primarily a set of learned behaviour traits, whereas personality consists of inborn traits.¹ The concept of character has a longer history than the concept of personality and was the primary method of assessing individual differences from the ancient Greeks to the beginning of the 20th century.²

Character in human psychology is distinct from personality as a set of observable and deliberate actions.³ In contrast, the personality viewpoint presents the person to be passive and expressing their personality as they really are, without will and choice of expression. In field research, personality serves a more psychological purpose of building awareness, understanding and empathy for a person's behaviours which are usually demonstrated beyond their conscious choice and intentions.⁴

In exploring the relative depth of character and personality, there is a view that a person's personality traits may be assessed as good only when their character traits are also perceived to be good.⁵ The converse is not true; this means character is a deeper determinant of the evaluation of personality.⁶

What is common to both personality and character is that they can both be used to describe and predict behaviour, and can be assessed and explained.⁷ Those interested in character generally expect to explore beyond the surface of a person and mostly thus focus on a person's moral and ethical orientation.⁸

Deeper character examination, of course, goes beyond just Heartstyles, but Heartstyles works in this space by first making us see (and feel) the habitual traits that make up our character. The next stage after becoming informed is to discover and understand the interplay of these character traits.

¹ Banicki, 2017

² Banicki, 2017

³ Gill, 1983

⁴ Gill, 1983

⁵ Goldie, 2004

⁶ This does not mean, however, that personality cannot be measured without a measure of character, it simply means that such an evaluation will be made in terms of non-moral criteria or preferences (Banicki, 2017).

⁷ Banicki, 2017

⁸ Goldie, 2004

Information about our Character

From working over the years with people with people with cancer, I know that there's a switch in them, something that is not that easily definable; but now I would say it's character. It's that true sense of really digging deep into who you are and knowing that, not attaching yourself to the outcome and yet having the passion, the desire, and the discipline to fight with everything you have.

Dr. Mara Klemich
Consulting Psychologist & Neuropsychologist

Revealing character – awareness which sets us up for change

Our twenty-first century idea of character derives from the revelation of character as a learned set of behaviour, formalised in the 1930s and 1940s by a Freudian psychologist, Wilhelm Reich.⁹ He postulated five character structures: schizoid, oral, psychopath, masochist and rigid. In the early development of psychology, character was often defined mostly in the context of character disorders. Sigmund Freud defined character disorders as persistent, maladaptive ways of living and defined character as either the anal character (stubborn, stingy, and extremely neat); the erotic character (loving and dependent); the narcissistic character (aggressive and independent).¹⁰ Writing in the 1940s the psychologist Erich Fromm presented character types almost identical to Freud's, but he believed that character developed, since an individual can assimilate and successfully engage with society.¹¹

The Greek root of the word character means engraving: character is shaped and developed by the psychic marks or scratches that we gather throughout our lives. These life experiences can have both positive and negative outcomes, and generally set us apart from each another. Our learning and coping through these defining experiences can shape how we behave; and this might be far from straightforward, being the result of those internal battles that we fight with our impulses, drives, psychological defences, and coping mechanisms. Our behaviours become habituated, and are largely unconscious.

⁹ Reich, 1933, 1946-1949

¹⁰ Leonard, 1997

¹¹ Van der Hoop, 2007

Revealing Character

Five thousand years ago, the effort of the Stoic school of philosophy (stoa is the Greek word for porch, so a kind of practical and relaxed back-door wisdom from where its founder, Zeno, taught his students) was to make a distinction between those parts of life over which we have control and those we do not, and to make our unconscious behaviours more apparent to us. Character plays the key role in how we react:

Some things are in our control, while others are not. We control our opinion, choice, desire, aversion, and, in a word, everything of our own doing. We do not control our body, property, reputation, position, and, in a word, everything not of our own doing...

Epictetus (Enchiridion 1.1-2)

If we succeed in revealing to ourselves how our own view of the world and our place in it are formed, we can change or alter them. In this thinking, character is the result of many choices over time. And, over time, we become what we habitually do.

The Greek thinkers Plato and Aristotle saw character as a whole lifetime's practice of virtues, defined as behaviours that display a high moral standard. They introduced the idea of consistent behaviour. The consistency of our actions shows up our moral disposition, and the more reliable these actions are over time, the more we are perceived to have integrity. Our behaviours are both predictable and morally desirable. This is an important extension of the definition of integrity beyond simply being reliable and consistent because reliability and consistency may not necessarily be of high ethical and moral standing.



Revealing Character

Summary of a review of character literature: ²⁵

1. Character is enduring over time.
2. Character is measured as behavioural consistency over time.
3. Character takes a long time to develop and is not easily changed.
4. Character becomes a sense of self that are viewed as normal and fundamental to who a person is. As a result, it is often viewed as a set of characteristics that cannot be changed.
5. Character is dynamic and transactional.
6. Character is not always transparent and public, as some elements of character may only emerge under pressure.
7. Character is often not truthfully demonstrated when people wish to hide aspects of their behaviour to protect their reputations
8. Character refers to aspects of our behaviour that are learned through socialisation, training, and experience.

The Heartstyles founders, Dr Mara Klemich and Stephen Klemich, also explored the idea of virtues in action; and the concept of character development emerged: “We had this intuitive sense of what was going on for people, and there was a little bit of work around character but not very much, it was really around virtues.” As a concept, virtues fit the idea of character as the result of thinking and action applied through choices and behaviours that become habits; these habits are based on past experience and life events, and influence the forming of virtuous behaviours.

This typical contemporary list of virtues¹² derives from a broad sample of socio-cultural perspectives including religion and philosophy:

- 1 Wisdom, a cognitive strength demonstrated by the seeking and applying of knowledge.
- 2 Courage, an emotional strength demonstrated through the perseverance to achieve goals in the face of resistance.
- 3 Humanity, an interpersonal strength that is demonstrated best through connecting and relating to others.
- 4 Justice, a civic strength that is demonstrated by investing in the community and the greater good of others and the collective.
- 5 Temperance, a strength that guards against excess.
- 6 Transcendence, a strength that appreciates the bigger picture and perspective beyond the self and into the spiritual realm.¹³

Seeing character through the lens of virtues gives us a language for describing ourselves and others: “she’s courageous and humane” or “he’s wise and just.” And this primacy of virtues is at the heart of the Heartstyles understanding of character. Stephen Klemich describes this:

True character strength is actually humility and courage and love and honour and respect and all of the values that produce a wonderful human being; and that’s where Heartstyles started and developed from in its journey.

Heartstyles places character at the centre of its ethos, not only by providing a means of awareness and a language for understanding character, but also a way of changing, developing, and strengthening character too.

¹² Peterson & Seligman, 2004

¹³ People are more positive when they are expressing higher levels of the virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, temperance, justice or transcendence in their daily lives (Bleidorn & Denissen, 2015).

²⁵ Leonard, 1997

“Your principles cannot be extinguished unless you snuff out the thoughts that feed them, for it’s continually in your power to reignite new ones... It’s possible to start life again! See things anew as you once did – that is how to restart life!”

[Marcus Aurelius \(Meditation 7.2\)](#)

Transforming character – patience and practice pay off

Our character is the sum of our best intentions and deepest values. No one would like to end up with baser intentions and shallower values; and, although there may be traumas for all of us along the way that challenge us, we can connect with our intentions and our values more often if we have the means to become aware of them. The Greek thinker Epictetus understood this well:

... philosophers warn us not to be satisfied with mere learning, but to add practice and then training. Epictetus (Discourses 2.9 13-14)

Character is having or developing the emotional intelligence to understand what we are feeling, and why, in any given context. But more than that, it uses that perspective to select effective behaviours that differ from the ineffective ones we may have tried before. If we can see a trivial accident or irritation for what it really is, we are less likely to let it derail a moment of actual significance by being angry or preoccupied.

Developing character does not mean better intentions or more noble values. It means accessing those things more often. After all, our intentions and values tend to be broadly similar. While we universally value humility and love, and the inner and outer benefits they bring, not one of us is always driven by them. Instead, we are often driven by our reaction to those things we cannot control; and it is here, in the exercise of how we choose to react, that character emerges and growth can take place.

So how do we strengthen character?

The same way you build physical strength. Dr Mara Klemich puts it this way: “Character development is just like going to the gym. The key is consistency and coaching. Physical strength isn’t built in a day and neither is character. And in both cases it’s helpful to have someone by your side...” Just as we might head to the gym with a goal in mind (and a plan for the exercises to do to achieve it) so when it comes to building character we need to know where to place our attention. Whatever the case may be, moving forward is about having the self-knowledge to know what needs work, and the support to get it done.

Will, action, and perception

What might be the specific exercises we could start doing to transform character? It is useful to think of three areas: first, our will; this means how we deal with those things we cannot change, and how we understand our place in the world; our will determines what we assent to or reject according to logic, wisdom, and judgement. Second, action and how we act; this means what we choose or refuse to do, have the impulse to do; and this gives us the opportunity for ethical and courageous behaviour. And third, perception: this means how we perceive the world around us, what we hope for or fear; and developing our perception gives us the opportunity for self-control and mental clarity.

Any exercise, therefore, that allows us to examine our will, our action, and our perception will help us grow. The Roman Emperor and General, Marcus Aurelius, one of the most powerful men in the world, wrote in his Meditations: “All you need are these: certainty of judgement in the present moment; action for the common good in the present moment; and an attitude of gratitude in the present moment for anything that comes your way.”¹⁴ We can practise and develop all these character traits: intellectual judgement, moral sense, ready gratitude.

¹⁴ Meditations 9.6

Transforming Character

And, finally, where might we transform our character? In our social groups, our families, for example. One obvious place is at work. Organisations are emerging that are more alert to meeting the developmental needs of their employees. These organisations have higher expectations of how all their employees and, specifically, their leaders grow and develop, and are guided by the following beliefs:

- 1 All adults can grow and learn; and are expected to evolve over their career and life cycle.
- 2 Attention to the bottom line and the personal growth of employees is desirable, and the two are viewed as interdependent and not independent of each other.
- 3 Profitability and individual development rely on structures that are built into every aspect of how the company operates.
- 4 People develop through the skillful combination of challenge and support over time.¹⁵

These developmental organisations demand continuous development from their leaders and believe that commercial success is built on that development work.¹⁶ We have looked at the three stages of Heartstyles' thinking about character. These are: gathering information about our character, revealing our character, and then transforming our character for the better.

Information, revelation, transformation.

How might these then be applied in our working lives?

¹⁵ Kegan et al, 2014

¹⁶ Kegan et al, 2014



Character & Leadership at Work

At work, why might awareness, understanding, and development of character be so important for those who lead? There is a link between character and leadership. A leader's character matters because it is likely to affect the experiences of others.

The components of leadership character:²⁶

1. **Universalism of character** – the outward expression of leadership character as observed through the leader's levels of respectfulness for others, fairness, cooperativeness, compassion, spiritual respect, and humility.
2. **Transformational character** - how leaders achieve universal and benevolent outcomes. Transformational leaders demonstrate their character through courage, passion, wisdom, competency, and self-discipline.
3. **Benevolent character** - which is associated with consistent and enduring loyalty, selflessness, Integrity, and honesty.

When a leader's learning is reasonably adequate and socially-responsible, virtuous behaviour - "good character" - can be expected.¹⁷ That "good character" directly affects the relationships they have. These relationships are interdependent. Studies show that managers mainly value the competence levels of their direct reports, while employees are dependent on the character of their leaders; and leaders are primarily reliant on the results of their employees.¹⁸ The reference to dependence on the character of a leader illustrates first the power differential between a leader and their followers, and secondly raises awareness of the responsibility that a leader has to demonstrate good character. It can be assumed that "bad character" may be expressed as socially irresponsible, ineffective, dysfunctional and with little regard for its impact on others.¹⁹

Moreover, in the work environment – and also in social or faith or sports groups – character is the source code, the DNA for developing leaders. If we want to develop as a leader we must be aware of how we show up in different circumstances – a difficult conversation, a tough day. As the Roman thinker Seneca says: "Each person acquires their own character, but their official roles are designated by chance..."²⁰ Character abides. And character is a combination of overlapping psychological dimensions such as interpersonal traits, intrapsychic processes, interests or preferences, attitudes, morals, and values. In fact, it is a significant twenty-first century intrapersonal and psychological hypothesis that character influences a leader's thinking and behaviours. Often the examination of the effects of character in businesses is only partial and preference-based.

¹⁷ Sperry, 1999

¹⁸ Hogan & Kaiser, 2005

¹⁹ Sperry, 1999

²⁰ Moral Letters 47 15b

²⁶ Leonard, 1997



“Can we model those behaviours of achievement and authenticity, humility? I can be humble and I can admit mistakes; I can welcome other people’s opinions; and I don’t have to be perfect and I don’t have to have all the answers, all the time. That’s very liberating and very freeing.”

[Stephen Klemich](#), Founder and creator of Heartstyles

Character & Leadership at Work

Character in the boardroom ²⁷

The Ivey Business School surveyed 219 company board members representing 443 companies in North America. The survey sought to understand the respondents' observations of the impact of an senior leader's character on the boardroom:

- 94% of the respondents believed that the character of a Chief Senior Officer had a significant impact on the health and functioning of a company's board.
- 70% of the respondents judged company boards to have spent insufficient time and effort assessing the character of potential nominees before they join a company's senior management and/or company boards.
- 92% of company boards in North America believe that a leader's character is not adequately developed through business schools and formal education.

A lack of rigour to assess leadership character in the hiring process is thought to contribute towards many boards gravitating into group think, ineffective conflict management, and debate processes and behaviours. One consequence of this lack of character development is believed to be a negatively compromised and inferior quality of judgement, decision making and oversight, and a lack of the appropriate impartial guidance and support that senior management teams and company boards need to function optimally.

There is growing interest in character as a concept within leadership research.²¹ The application of character theory to leadership primarily explores how a person's character impacts the experiences and relationships with others, whilst also providing deep insight into these actions and reactions towards others.²² If a leader's socialisation process is reasonably adequate and without significant developmental arrests, then adaptive, creative, and socially responsible behaviour called "good character" can be expected.²³ Interestingly, studies have revealed that managers mainly value the competence levels of their direct reports, while employees most value and respect the estimation of their leader's character.²⁴

In other words, leaders place most value on the performance of their followers, and followers most value on the consistent behaviour, judgement and moral orientation of their leaders. So even if leaders may dismiss the importance of their character, their followers consider it of primary importance.

There is growing interest in character as a concept within leadership research.

²¹ Barlow, Jordan, & Hendrix, 2003

²² Barlow, Jordan, & Hendrix, 2003

²³ Sperry, 1999

²⁴ Hogan & Kaiser, 2005

²⁷ Seijts et al, 2015

Conclusion

Firstly, we need to learn what character is, how it is defined and demonstrated. This can give us **vital information on what character** is and what constitutes it.

Secondly, we should undertake a character diagnostic – like the Heartstyles Indicator - that provides a revelation of our behaviours; effective and ineffective character traits. This can help us **reveal the traits of our own character**.

Finally, we must appreciate that transforming our **character** is a lifelong enterprise, and requires constant attention and reflection; and that it is substantially supported when we are surrounded by strong and virtuous communities of peers who support our development over time. This development has an application in **leadership at work**.

Information, then revelation, then transformation... All three are vital in character growth. Our character determines our behaviour and our relations with the world; yet it also can influence the collective behaviours of those around us, a team, an organisation, or even a society. Our character rests upon our moral orientation and the consistency with which we apply our moral judgement over time. And this can prepare us for anything.



As one senior leader in a listed company once said:

“Ineffective behaviours are arguably the biggest hidden cost in your business.”

If you're interested in exploring how character development can enhance effective behaviours in your organisation, we'd love to have a conversation with you.

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