INSIGHTS

The Four Domains of Character

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The content of your character is your choice.
Day by day, what you choose, what you think
and what you do is who you become.
– Heraclitus

The word "character" is used in so many ways. For example, screenwriters and novelists create fictional characters. Several social media platforms restrict the number of "characters" we can use. And how many times do you think back to someone you knew in high school and say to yourself, "what a character!"

Then there is that well-known saying "Hire for character, train for skill." I love sports, and every year during the NFL and NBA drafts, I'm always eager to find out which athletes may drop in the draft because of their character. Of course, the military also emphasizes the importance of character, as highlighted in two recent books, ***The Character Edge*** and ***Becoming a Leader of Character***.

When it comes to a person's character, here's what we know. It's not your personality. You can be an extravert or an introvert and have good character. You can be "carefree" or a "worrywart" and still do the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, and for the right reasons.

Inspired by the Heraclitus quote above, character has long been defined as knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good. Many of us in the field of character development use the phrase "habits of head, heart, and hands." Of course, this definition begs the question: *What's the good*?

For centuries, the term virtue was used to describe "the good." For example, Plato and Aristotle wrote about the "cardinal virtues" (justice, courage, prudence, and temperance) and in the New Testament we learn about the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.

More recently, scholars have established four discrete domains of character. They undertook this effort, in large part, because practitioners (including parents, educators, coaches, youth leaders) were seeking a more useful and comprehensive approach to explain, model, and reinforce the constellation of different virtues.[1] Personally, I am grateful for their trailblazing scholarship. These four domains have helped me to better understand and explain "character" to a broad range of audiences. Before these four domains surfaced, most people interested in character formation either had a narrow perspective (i.e., character meant nothing more than being honest and trustworthy) or they thought that character was a person's fixed and predetermined personality.

Today, these four domains offer families, schools, and workplace leaders, including the miliary, a powerful roadmap to help people of all ages care about and practice a wide range of character strengths. Here are the four domains (in no particular order):

Moral Character (our 'ethical self')

Honesty, integrity, and trustworthiness. For many of us, these virtues are at the core of what it means to be a person of character. A person who does not lie, steal, or cheat, whether that person is a ninth grader or an officer in the military.

Performance Character (our 'best effort self').

Self-discipline, responsibility, and perseverance. It's hard to imagine a person of character going through life always saying "oops." Rather, these are the virtues needed to pursue excellence in any area of endeavor, especially in the face of a setback or a difficult time.

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1   In recent years scholars and practitioners have used other terms besides virtue to describe goodness in action, such as traits, morals, character strengths, core values, principles, and positive qualities.

Intellectual Character (our 'critical-thinking self')

Curiosity, open-mindedness, and humility. You may not think of these qualities as character strengths, but they surely are. These virtues, or "habits of mind," enable us to ask great questions or to appreciate the perspective of others. They also enable us to learn from our mistakes.

Civic Character (our 'common-good self')

Fairness, respect, compassion, and contributing to the common good. Historically, these virtues were part of what scholars called "moral character." However, I think it's critically important– especially in our "it's all about me" culture – to elevate the importance of treating others with respect, courtesy, and dignity. In addition, civic character is about taking responsibility, as a citizen, to strengthen the common good through volunteering and other acts of service.

Clearly, there are a few virtues and character strengths that don't easily fit into one domain or another. For example, I study the virtue of courage and while I would place courage in the "moral character" domain, acts of courage are also seen as examples of performance or civic character.

Gratitude is another virtue that's difficult to place in just one domain. To me, gratitude is an example of moral character, but it's also a "habit of mind" (thus fitting into the intellectual character domain). There is also the virtue of kindness. Am I being unethical if I don't show kindness? Or does kindness fit more parsimoniously into the civic character domain?

What I do know is that there are real benefits to integrating these four domains into our personal and professional lives. I have a dear friend who was a long-time CEO of several telecommunications companies. He was a superstar in his industry. Yet, I'll never forget the time that he told me he needed to become a better listener. He didn't want his team to think it always had to be his

way (or the highway). Over several years, he intentionally worked on developing humility as one of his character strengths.

Leaders don't just have to look into the mirror to see the benefits of utilizing these four domains. They should use these domains as a tool to strengthen and enhance their commitment to leading a character-centered team or organization. For example, are you taking intentional steps to ensure that everyone on your team is being honest and showing integrity for *intrinsic reasons* (instead of complying only to avoid getting in trouble or being punished)? How are you fostering and developing the performance, intellectual, and civic character strengths of your team?

In sum, these four domains offer leaders the opportunity to reflect on the "habits of head, heart, and hands" that are dynamically forming and shaping their own character as well as the character of their team or organization. The four domains also offer each of us a "workout plan" to strengthen the different character strengths we all need to be our best selves, especially during the storms of life.