

Seven Strategies for Character Development



[Seven research-based strategies for character and leadership development \(Lamb et al., 2021\)](#)

Seven Strategies

1. **Practice:** This strategy supports the development of character by prompting students to put virtue into practice. Just as one acquires the skills of a painter with intentional, repeated practice, one develops virtuous character by repeatedly striving to think, feel, and act in appropriate ways until they gradually become habits.
2. **Exemplars:** Much as beginners often develop their own style by first studying celebrated artists, students of virtue can gain a great deal by studying and emulating those who have lived exemplary lives. Such exemplars need not only be great figures of history but might instead be parents, teachers, or peers. In addition to providing a sense of “elevation” that strengthens our desire to do good, such exemplars demonstrate what it might look like to embody given virtues in concrete circumstances.
3. **Reflection:** Although acts can be performed simply out of habit, virtue requires us to understand why and how we act as we do. Encouraging students to reflect on their personal experiences helps them to wrestle with the morally relevant features of the situations they have confronted, identify possible alternative ways they might have responded, explore their own motivations, and consider how they would like to grow in the future. This strategy is especially useful in cultivating practical wisdom and the capacity for good judgment.
4. **Language:** Exploring the shape of the virtues and their bearing on particular situations, this strategy allows students to wrestle with potentially difficult scenarios that they have faced or are likely to face, to think through the complexities of such cases, and to learn from one another so that they gain a greater appreciation of the ways virtue might be embodied in a variety of real-life contexts.
5. **Systems:** One’s character is never shaped solely by one’s own intentions. Among other factors, it is always shaped at least in part by the cultural influences, common modes of thought, and specific features of the situations that one encounters. This strategy promotes increased awareness of these variables and their formative power so that we can recognize their influence and seek to counteract them when needed. In addition to helping overcome biases, such an approach also encourages students to be mindful of the kinds of situations that are likely to bring out the best—and worst—elements of their character.
6. **Reminders:** When we are likely to forget something, we find it beneficial to create a reminder to jog our memory. When we might forget the kind of people that we want to be, moral reminders serve a similar function. Whether in formal practices, such as honor pledges, or informal mechanisms, such as inspirational quotes placed in prominent locations, moral reminders prompt us to recall our moral commitments and live into them.
7. **Friendships:** Friendships of mutual accountability support the development of virtue in a number of ways, including by providing a context that encourages specific behaviors, creating space for reflection and dialogue, and exposing us to relevant and attainable exemplars. Not only that, but friends often prove invaluable when we encounter difficulty, helping us through tough times and holding us accountable when we fall short of our ideals.



Language

We open up new possibilities by adopting new terms.

You can strengthen your character by using a robust vocabulary of virtues and vices.

EXAMPLES

DEFICIENT VICE

Cowardice

Untruthful

Vindictive

VIRTUE

Courage

Candid

Forgiving

EXCESS VICE

Reckless

Belligerent

Exploitable

“

We should cease to grow the moment we cease to discriminate between virtue and vice.

”

Mahatma Gandhi

CHALLENGE

- 1 Which virtue do you want to cultivate?
- 2 Reflect on your behaviour by identifying 1-2 times you exhibited this virtue and its associated vices.
- 3 Review an extensive list of virtues and vices by visiting [our website](https://www.oxfordcharacter.org).



Habituation

We become what we repeatedly do.

Similar to physical exercise, you can exercise your character qualities to strengthen them.

TRY THESE

COLLABORATION

Use “yes, and” rather than “no, but” in conversations.

DRIVE

Define your own version of success rather than someone else’s version.

HUMILITY

Express thanks to those who have contributed to your successes.

“

The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be.

”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

CHALLENGE

- 1 Which character quality do you want to cultivate?
- 2 Choose an exercise you can do each day for the next week.
- 3 Create your own or visit [our website](https://www.oxfordcharacter.org) for more ideas.



Reminders

We achieve consistency in maintaining core commitments with the help of reminders.

You can implement small interventions to help you activate your character strengths.

TRY THESE

TIME

Set an alarm as a reminder.

STATE

Identify a physical or mental state that can act as a reminder.

LOCATION

Use your surroundings to cue a reminder.

“

Your habits change depending on the room you are in and the cues in front of you.

”

James Clear

CHALLENGE

- 1 Which character strength do you want to cultivate?
- 2 Choose an appropriate reminder.
- 3 Create your own or visit [our website](#) for more ideas.



Reflection

We learn deeply when experience is followed by reflection.

You can create practices of reflection to guide your character development.

TRY THESE

JOURNALING

Use a journal to capture your thoughts.

ASSESSMENTS

Use character assessments to inform areas for development.

DIALOGUE

Engage in reflective dialogue to help you explore new ideas.

“

The way we experience the world around us is a direct reflection of the world within us.

”

Gabrielle Bernstein

CHALLENGE

- 1 Which character strength do you want to cultivate?
- 2 Explore character assessment tools on [our website](#) to help you learn about your character and areas for development.
- 3 Journal about how cultivating this character strength can transform your life.



Exemplars

Our lives reflect those we admire.

You can seek out exemplars to help you understand how to act and cultivate those actions.

TRY THESE

STORIES

Read or watch fictional or true stories.

SONGS

Learn from artists and their lyrics.

OBSERVE OTHERS

Learn from everyday people you are surrounded by.

“

Each of us, famous or infamous, is a role model for somebody, and if we aren't, we should behave as though we are – cheerful, kind, loving, courteous. Because you can be sure someone is watching and taking deliberate and diligent notes.

”

Maya Angelou

CHALLENGE

- 1 Which character strength do you want to cultivate?
- 2 Find a person, story, or song that inspires you to cultivate that character strength.
- 3 Visit [our website](https://www.oxfordcharacter.org) to explore more ideas.



Friendships

We become our best selves when supported by friendships of mutual accountability.

You can actively build communities to support your character development.

TRY THESE

ACCOUNTABILITY

Who are you accountable to and how?

COURAGE

What do you wish you had more courage to do?

HUMILITY

How have others contributed to your successes?

“

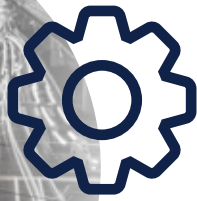
Surround yourself with only people who are going to lift you higher.

”

Oprah Winfrey

CHALLENGE

- 1 Which character strength do you want to cultivate?
- 2 Identify 1-2 people who consistently exhibit this character strength and ask them how they have cultivated it.
- 3 Visit [our website](https://www.oxfordcharacter.org) for more conversation starter prompts.



Systems

We develop resilience when we are aware of the systems we live within.

You can create systems that are conducive for your character development.

CONSIDER THESE

ATTITUDE

What is your perceived benefit of exhibiting the target virtue?

SUBJECTIVE NORMS

Is your target virtue a commonly practiced virtue?

PERCEIVED CONTROL

Do you believe you are capable of developing the target virtue?

“

Situational variables can exert powerful influences over human behavior, more so than we recognize or acknowledge.

”

Philip Zimbardo

CHALLENGE

- 1 Which character strength do you want to cultivate?
- 2 Identify one way you can strengthen the systems you operate within to better support your character development.
- 3 Visit [our website](https://oxfordcharacter.org) to explore more ideas.