

Understanding a Complex Cast of Characters

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There are many lenses through which to understand personality types and people's motivations, from Myers-Briggs to Values Modes to archetypes.

In my novel-writing research, I've discovered one which I thought had interesting parallels with any 'cast of characters' one might find in change work – that of Character Alignment.

Just as change work requires understanding of people's motivations and values, defining those same things in works of fiction is integral to creating a robust, believable character.

Incorporated in early editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, Character Alignment enabled players to choose between three alignments when creating a character – lawful, neutral or chaotic:

Lawful characters think having an ordered society is important and beneficial

Chaotic characters don't necessarily oppose this but think the freedom of the individual comes first

Neutral characters tend to judge such situations on a case by case basis

This is known as the 'ethical' axis, or where characters sit on the spectrum of order vs chaos.

In *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, a second 'moral' axis of good, neutral and evil was introduced, creating a nine-alignment matrix as follows:

Lawful Good	Neutral Good	Chaotic Good
Lawful Neutral	True Neutral	Chaotic Neutral
Lawful Evil	Neutral Evil	Chaotic Evil

Indiana Jones could be considered Lawful Good, James Bond Lawful Neutral. The Joker in *Batman* and Bellatrix LeStrange in the *Harry Potter* series would be considered Chaotic Evil; the Sheriff of Nottingham in *Robin Hood* would be considered Lawful Evil (or maybe Lawful Neutral) and Robin himself Chaotic Good. *Pirates of the Caribbean's* Cap'n Jack Sparrow is Chaotic Neutral.

Applying [archetypes](#) to this matrix helps illustrate what each is about, and might help you begin to relate the kinds of 'characters' to people around you:

<p>CRUSADER Lawful Good</p>	<p>BENEFACTOR Neutral Good</p>	<p>REBEL Chaotic Good</p>
<p>JUDGE Lawful Neutral</p>	<p>UNALIGNED True Neutral</p>	<p>FREE SPIRIT Chaotic Neutral</p>
<p>DOMINATOR Lawful Evil</p>	<p>MALEFACTOR Neutral Evil</p>	<p>DESTROYER Chaotic Evil</p>

The best way to illustrate these archetypes is to use examples of well known casts of characters.

There are different versions created by different people based on their interpretation of the character(s) and the meanings of each different part of the matrix, but you can grasp the idea regardless (don't worry about the text underneath each picture, just which character has been placed in which alignment).

Below are character alignment matrices for The Muppets:



...and Alice in Wonderland:



Now while this is all very interesting (and good for a giggle), what's it got to do with creating change?

Everything, because *these characters can be found in any group or organisation.*

They won't be brandishing swords, blowing things up or unleashing magic, yet the same basic motivational forces *are* there, in a 21st century guise. The Crusader, the Rebel, the Judge, the Dominator – and if you are truly unfortunate, the Destroyer – are all character types most of us have encountered (or been) at one time or another.

No person is completely one alignment, and people may shift in and out of alignment types depending on the situation. But being able to identify people's typical alignment(s) will help you understand their motivations, how they will or won't work, and [offer insights into what they may do](#) in a given situation:

***Lawful** characters tell the truth, keep their word, respect authority, honor tradition...On the downside, lawfulness can include close-mindedness, reactionary adherence to tradition, judgmentalness, and a lack of adaptability.*

***Neutral** characters have a normal respect for authority and feel neither a compulsion to obey nor a compulsion to rebel.*

***Chaotic** characters follow their consciences, resent being told what to do, favor new ideas over tradition, and do what they promise if they feel like it. On the downside, chaos can include recklessness, resentment toward legitimate authority, arbitrary actions, and irresponsibility.*

What can you tell about the alignments of people around you? Do they act in accordance with the rules, or do they subvert authority? Do they act to secure their own interests, or those of the wider group?

Armed with this insight, you will know that appeals to uphold process may not work with neutral and chaotic types, of whatever flavour; that neutral types may be more difficult to predict than the others; that you may be able to work with a 'lawful evil' if you can frame things in a way that suits that person's interest.

If this way of looking at people's make-up and motivations has resonated with you, you can extend your knowledge of this approach by delving deeper into each of the nine elements of the ethical-moral matrix on Erick Edwards's site:

Lawful Good	Neutral Good	Chaotic Good
Lawful Neutral	True Neutral	Chaotic Neutral
Lawful Evil	Neutral Evil	Chaotic Evil

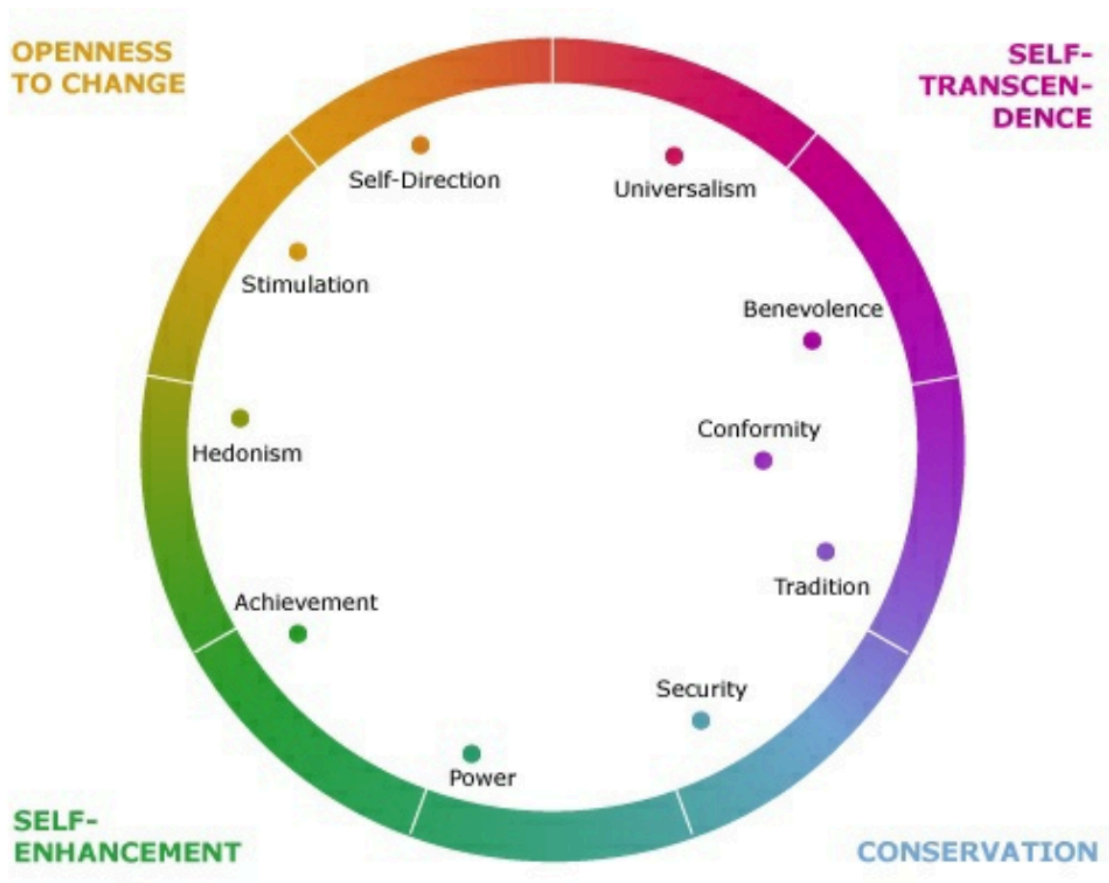
While some of the content is more applicable to game-playing character creation (such as references to whether or not a character is likely to kill) as distinct from how a character's alignment affects their worldview or likely actions in organisations or groups, the overall characterisation is still relevant.

In each of the nine areas, he includes a chart about *how that particular alignment sees all the others*, which could be hugely helpful if you are trying to broker co-operation or understanding between different 'characters'. For instance, Lawful Good aligned characters see Neutral Good as 'humane but unreliable'; Lawful Evil characters see Lawful Good as 'honourable but self-righteous'.

Understanding what makes yourself and others tick is often a learning curve in itself, but being aware of *how different people see each other* is a challenge on a whole new level.

Edwards also [overlays the character alignment chart](#) over that of the extensive values research undertaken by psychologist Professor Shalom Schwartz at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Schwartz developed the [Schwartz Value Inventory](#) (SVI) based on an extensive survey of over 60,000 people. The survey identified common values that acted as 'guiding principles for one's life'.

These ten common values grouped multiple values into a single category, which sit along two major axes – openness to change vs conservation, and self-enhancement vs self- transition:



One realisation I have had as a result of investigating character construction is that there is a wealth of psychological insight out there in the RPG community that people working in sustainability and other change areas could benefit from – so if you turn up to your next training session and there are some folks kitted out in *Dungeons & Dragons* gear, you're probably in good hands!

This post is for 'Tim the Enchanter' – not the Monty Python character, for whom he is named, but in-joke about a particular person who played a key role in scuttling more than one initiative that I'd worked for years on and cared about. I still haven't worked out whether he was lawful evil or chaotic neutral. But stripped of his sword, he is not an influencer.