When people size you up, what are they looking for? The short answer is they want to understand your character. We humans have evolved a whole lot of neural circuitry for making split-second character judgments about each other. These judgments are a big deal, shaping every aspect of our lives.

And when we decide how to feel about someone, we’re not just making one judgment — we’re making two. The criteria that count are strength and warmth. Both of these traits are especially important for legislators as they seek to lead others in their communities and inside capitals.

STRENGTH GETS THINGS DONE

As a personal quality, strength is a measure of how much a person can impel their will on our world. Strength consists of two basic elements: the ability to affect the world and the gumption to take action.

In short, it is a combination of skill plus will. Grudgingly or gladly, we respect people who project strength. We look to strong people as leaders because they can protect us from threats to our group. Strength is essential to effective leadership in any group setting.

BUT STRENGTH ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

To move beyond respect to admiration, you also need to be liked. And to do that, you need to project warmth. For our purposes, warmth is what people feel when they recognize that they share interests and concerns. It is the sense of being on the same team.

If strength is about whether someone can carry out their intentions, warmth is about whether you will be happy with the result. When people project warmth, they like us. Warmth encompasses several related concepts, including empathy, familiarity and love.

YOU DON’T HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN STRENGTH AND WARMTH

Once you grasp these insights about strength and warmth — and how they impact our character judgments — it opens up a whole new window on the human experience. You can understand why certain people are appealing by looking closely at how they project strength and warmth. Or you can see what makes others seem cold or weak.

Knowing that strength and warmth matter is one thing, but acting on that insight turns out to be tricky, because it’s very hard to project both at once.

Strength and warmth are in direct tension with each other. Most of the things we do to project strength of character — wearing a serious facial expression, flexing our biceps or our vocabulary — tend to make us seem less warm. Likewise, most signals of warmth — smiling often, speaking softly, doing people favors — can leave us seeming more submissive than strong. This presents each of us with a dilemma. Do we choose to project warmth, so people like us? Do we instead show strength, so we command respect? Or do we try our best to project strength and warmth, knowing that one undermines the other and we might end up failing at both?

It turns out to be a false choice. Strength and warmth are complements, not mutually exclusive opposites. Someone who lacks strength comes across as weak, not warm, and an absence of warmth reads as cold rather than strong. A balance of strength and warmth signals capability in service of others — an aspiration any legislator can understand.

THE CHOICE IS YOURS

Character is a matter of who you choose to be. People judge your character by the way you act, and especially by the way you interact with them. Even if a lot of behavior is unconscious, nearly all of it can be subject to conscious choice. You can choose to learn how to behave differently: You can take steps that change your unconscious reactions in the future.

Once you discover the lens of strength and warmth, it changes the way you see others … and yourself.

APPLICATION DEADLINE FOR 2020 BILLD PROGRAM: APRIL 8

Legislators in their first four years of service are encouraged to seek a 2020 fellowship to the BILLD program — the premier legislative leadership program in the Midwest. Thirty-nine fellowships will be awarded this year through a competitive application process run by the BILLD Steering Committee, a bipartisan group of state and provincial legislators. The application deadline is April 8. The BILLD program will be held Aug. 7-11 in Minneapolis and include a mix of sessions on leadership training, professional development and public policy. Close to 900 legislators have participated in BILLD since it began in 1995.