Character Strategies: Blending Hakomi and IFS

One lens, a handful of common shapes,
and the multitude of protectors underneath

One Lens Among Many

Every child comes into the world needing a handful of things: safety, food and touch, someone glad they exist, room to try out their own will. Most of us got some of that and had to work around the rest. Character strategies, a map from the Hakomi Method, describe the workarounds. Hakomi names nine of them. Internal Family Systems (IFS) holds that a person is a multitude of parts, each with its own story, and that the managers and protectors among them are the ones doing the working around.

This is one lens, and only one. Your temperament, your culture, your body, your ancestors and plain luck all shaped you too. Use the map the way you would use a trail guide to country you already live in, as something to look around with.

Where a Strategy Comes From

A strategy forms where a need meets a caregiver who could not or did not meet it. The child is small and cannot leave, so the child gets clever. Whatever worked got repeated, and the repeating became a way of being. By adulthood it runs without being asked. It lives in posture, in how you ask for things (or don't), in what you do when someone you love comes closer.

Strategies grow in relationship, so they vary with the relationship. Maybe you got warmth and welcome from your mother and distance or demand from your father. The child who learned to open toward one parent and brace against the other carries both.

As an adult you may find yourself reaching in one friendship and going self-reliant in another, or leaning on a partner and bristling at a boss. Siblings raised in one house often land on different strategies, because each of them met different people in the same family.

Most of us are a blend, with one or two strategies in front. The one that appears under stress is often different from the one that shows up on a good day. In IFS terms, you may carry several parts for each of these shapes, each with its own history.

The Strategies and the Needs Behind Them

The Hakomi Institute organizes the strategies around five developmental themes: Safety; Needs and Support; Authenticity and Intimacy; Freedom; and Worth and Inclusion. Teachers use slightly different names for some of them. The middle column puts each theme in plain words. Nine is a short list of recurring shapes. Your own protectors will be more particular than any row in it.

Strategy	The need behind it	What the strategy does
Sensitive/ Withdrawn	Safety. A world that felt like too much, and a welcome that came with a price.	Goes inward, thinks, keeps distance, makes privacy where it can.
Dependent/ Endearing	Needs and support. Help that was thin or unreliable when you were small.	Stays close, asks sweetly, leans, makes itself easy to care for.
Self-Reliant	Needs and support, from the other direction. Needing got you nowhere.	Does it alone, needs little, is the one who helps.
Merging/ Compliant	Backing for the first steps toward a separate self.	Stays close and goes along; separating brings guilt and the fear of being selfish.
Tough/ Generous	Authenticity and intimacy. A softness that was not safe to show.	Takes charge, stands strong, gives generously, keeps the tender part out of sight.
Charming/ Manipulative	Authenticity and intimacy. Wanting out loud was unsafe or went unanswered.	Asks sideways, through charm, humor, hints and angles.
Burdened/ Enduring	Freedom. Room to use your own will and negotiate with the big people.	Holds in, obeys on the surface, resists out of sight, carries on.
Industrious/ Overfocused	Worth and inclusion. To be valued for existing, apart from what you produced.	Works, achieves, stays on task, stays busy.
Expressive/ Clinging	Worth and inclusion. Steady attention that did not depend on being a show.	Turns up the feeling, reaches, holds on, stays visible.

Every strategy carries a gift. The Industrious one builds things that stand. The Sensitive one sees what the loud ones miss. The Tough one steps between other people and harm. The Charming one can make a room come alive. Keep that in mind while you read the right-hand column.

Protectors: The Multitude Behind the Nine

In IFS language, a strategy is a recognizable shape that many protectors take. Managers run the steady ones, like working hard or staying self-reliant. Firefighters run the sudden ones, like turning up the feeling or going numb. A person may have several Industrious parts of different ages, a Self-Reliant one who handles work and a Dependent one who comes out with a partner. Hakomi's nine are one way of sorting a crowd. Your system may hold dozens. Underneath there is usually a younger part who carries the unmet need: the one who was never welcomed, never helped, never allowed to say no. The protectors guard that young one, and they believe it is the same year it always was and the danger is at the door.

Meeting a strategy as a part changes the tone of the whole thing. You can get curious rather than trying to fix it. You can ask what it is protecting you from, what it fears would happen if it eased off, how old it thinks you are, and what it would do with its days if it were not on duty. Try giving each protector a name, like the Fixer, the Ghost, the Night Manager or the One Who Smiles, and ask which of the nine it resembles, if any.

Self, the calm and curious presence in each of us, can thank the strategy for what it has carried. Over time Self can offer the younger part what it needed all along: welcome, help, room, a place at the table.

Making It Up and Seeing What Happens

Hakomi calls these experiments, and the heart of the method is that nobody has to know the answer first. You make something up, small enough to be safe, and watch what happens inside you. A strategy responds better to an invitation than to an argument. It can be asked to try something slightly different while you stay curious about the result.

What makes it an experiment:

- It is small.
- The part is asked, so it feels more like "would it be okay if we tried this?" than an order.
- You can stop at any point.
- Nothing counts as a wrong result. A flinch is information. Relief is information. A flat nothing is information too.

A few to play with, invented on the spot. Yours will fit better:

- **Self-Reliant:** ask someone for something small, like the salt, and see what it is like to receive it. If that's too small, ask for something bigger.
- **Industrious:** sit with a cup of something warm for ten minutes with nothing to produce and listen to what the busy part says.
- **Burdened/Enduring:** say "no, thank you" to something harmless, out loud, to a tree if no person is handy.
- **Sensitive/Withdrawn:** stay five minutes longer than usual with one trusted person, with the exit open in your mind.
- **Charming/Manipulative:** ask for what you want in one plain sentence, no flourish, and see what happens in you and in the room.

Take any of these outdoors if that suits you. Open sky and moving air make a generous witness. Afterward, ask the part that ran the experiment what it learned, and write it down. Next week, change one thing and try again.

What This Lens Cannot Tell You

Character strategies are a clinical map from one tradition, and a map is not a diagnosis. Almost no one fits a single box. If a description fits you exactly, treat that as a clue and leave the verdict alone. If none of them fit, the lens may simply not be yours. Nine strategies also cannot hold a person made of many parts.

Trauma, culture, neurodivergence, poverty, racism and chronic illness shape a person in ways a developmental map cannot hold. Take what is useful and leave the rest.

Older Than Your Childhood

Some strategies are older than you are. A grandmother who survived by keeping her head down, a line of men who learned to be tough because the alternative was ruin: these can travel down a family as ways of being that were never yours to start with.

If that rings true, bring it into the work. Ask the part whose strategy it is where it learned it. Some people ask their ancestors what they were guarding, or sit with a spirit guide, a river or an old cottonwood and let the Greater Something that holds all of us be the witness while the young part speaks.

Questions to Carry

- Which strategies feel like home, and which feel like somebody else's coat?
- What did you get from each of your parents, and what did you have to find somewhere else?
- Which strategy are you grateful to?
- What small experiment are you curious about this week?

Credits and Further Reading

The Hakomi Method was developed by Ron Kurtz, and the character strategy maps are taught by the Hakomi Institute (hakomiinstitute.com). Parts language comes from Internal Family Systems, developed by Richard Schwartz.

Ron Kurtz, Body-Centered Psychotherapy: The Hakomi Method (1990).

Halko Weiss, Greg Johanson and Lorena Monda, editors, Hakomi Mindfulness-Centered Somatic Psychotherapy (2015).