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Everybody Needs a Fred

One thing I know is that every person has a dark side. You have personality and character flaws that you might not be aware of, but they are there. I have them too, many of them. Some of us have huge cracks, gaping holes that everyone else can see but often escape our notice. Some of you wonder why you fail to sustain close friendships or an intimate marriage or consistently get passed over at work.

It could be a relating pattern that pushes people away, and you're not even aware of it. It could be that you talk too much, don't listen, roll your eyes at others' suggestions, or sigh in meetings, which communicates boredom or disgust.

Maybe you're irritable, cranky, moody, easily miffed; maybe you're loud, arrogant, short-tempered, or selfish. Maybe you never pick up the tab, don't tip, and are rude to waiters and store clerks. Maybe you can't hold a confidence, which is why nobody wants to get close. Maybe you tend to power up and push your agenda. These are character flaws that negatively affect everything and everyone you touch. Deeper, darker flaws include dishonesty, anger, addictions, or sexual immorality.

A question members of our leadership team ask is, "What's it like to be on the other side of me?" That's a scary question to throw on the table, because if your colleagues are honest, they will come up with two or three flaws that get in the way of your personal and professional performance. These are character issues. And I repeat, we all have them. The question ✓ is, do you know what yours are? Because you can't manage or correct them if you don't.

It wasn't until I reached my fifties that I became somewhat self-aware and actually knew a thing or two about myself and about life in general. Seriously, what do you really know when you're in your twenties? Not much. In your thirties, you're consumed with proving your worth and climbing the ladder. In your forties, you've either found your groove or you spend all your energy trying to fix whatever you wrecked in your thirties. It's only in your fifties that you actually know anything, because you have more life behind you than you have in front of you.

By God's grace and a lot of family support, I was able to avoid any sort of fatal fall in

my twenties, thirties, and for-ties. Even though I went through some very lean years, I never made any life-altering mistakes. I got a great education, was never fired from a job, married a wonderful Christian girl had two great kids, and kept advancing in my career.

But something happened to me in my early forties that was very confusing to me. The church I was leading was growing by 20 percent or more each year, and a couple years it grew by 40 percent. We were building buildings and adding staff, and the number of requests for me to lead and teach outside our church were increasing. Eventually, I was asked to lead the preaching department at Bethel Theological Seminary as a permanent part-time professor; I couldn't have scripted my life any better. Everything I was doing seemed to fit who I was.

But about two years into it, I was miserable. I didn't see it at the time, but the demands on my life had outgrown my ability to keep up. I felt tethered to so many people and obligations that one day I took my canoe out to a local lake in the driving rain, paddled out to the middle, and just sat there for two hours. With rain and tears streaming down my face, I looked up toward the gray sky and said out loud, "What's wrong with me?" What confused me was that everything I was doing was good. But doing all of it was slowly sucking the life out of me.

Danger Signs

The cracks started showing up in harsh comments and bursts of anger toward my wife, kids, and staff. I had become a virtual recluse at the office. My staff no longer had access to me. I sequestered myself behind my door, because I had to crank out a sermon, lesson plan, or news article. Tensions between my staff and me were completely dismissed and swept under the rug. If someone got hurt, it was tough luck, suck it up, and just do your job. There was no relating. Just get it done, and don't bother me, because I was in demand and people should understand that.

I was even worse at home. I was a brooding and angry man who reacted to the smallest things with hurtful comments and gestures. The kids learned to stay clear and wondered quietly to my wife, "Why is Dad like that all the time?"

Between Laurie and me there was plenty of yelling and tears, followed by days of staying out of each other's way. But I was blind to my problems and didn't understand why I felt or behaved that way. I thought everybody else was the problem and that they just didn't understand my world. I excused my behavior because I truly believed I was doing what God had led me to do. And that was true, I was doing what God had led me to do, only I was doing too much of it.

I had a sense that something inside me was breaking, but I didn't have the time or energy to address it. I was also too afraid to allow anyone to have access to my soul.

Emotionally, I was depleted, and it showed up in my in-ability to love or laugh. Bill Hybels once said, "The way I was doing God's work was destroying the work of God in me." My inability to love or laugh manifested itself in a very painful way on a family trip to the north shore on Lake Superior at a place called Blue Fin Bay.

After four hours on the road, we unpacked our stuff at Blue Fin, and I discovered that I had packed all the skis but no ski boots, which was just enough to tip me over the edge. I voiced my frustration by saying things like, "How can I be expected to keep track of everything? How can I be responsible for the kids' stuff, my stuff, and everybody else's stuff? No wonder I forget stuff!" I was blowing off steam that had been building for weeks. By day three my lousy mood had pretty much ruined the entire trip, but I thought maybe a three-mile family hike to Carlton Peak along the Superior National Trail would lift our spirits. When I mentioned the hike to my family, I should've picked up on the silence, but I guilted them into going-in the fog, in silence, in protest.

Finally, about halfway up the mountain I stopped, turned around, and began lecturing everyone about their attitude, about family vacations. I said, "Is this the thanks I get for trying to plan a fun outing?" Two of four family members started crying, and the other two were just plain mad, so we turned around in the fog, in silence, in protest.

That afternoon it was quiet around the condo. I'd gone off to my room by myself; the others had gone off by themselves. But an hour later I heard a soft knock on my door, and it was my fourteen-year-old daughter, Meggie. She walked into my room and handed me a card that she'd made. Then without saying anything, she turned and walked away.

With different colored markers she had written on the outside:

DAD.

On the inside it said,



She had drawn four little hearts near her name, and it broke my heart, because I was the one who had the bad at-titude. I was the one who was angry. I was the one God had to change, not my daughter, son, or wife. Meg doesn't know this, but I hung on to her note for a full year, and every time I read my Bible and wrote in my journal, I looked at Meg's note and was reminded over and over again, every day, for a full year that the person who needed to change the most in my family was me. But I didn't know how.

The Moment of Truth

So God in his wisdom and grace sent me a messenger. Just like God sent the prophet Nathan to confront King David with his sin, God sent Dean Hager to confront me. Dean respected my teaching and leadership, and so one day he wrote me a personal letter saying how God had been nudging him to find a role to play at Eagle Brook. One thing led to another, and after a couple years of being in a mentoring group together, Dean became our church chairman.

One of the reasons Dean agreed to the role was because he wanted to help me become a better leader. As he got closer to me, he saw some of the deeper cracks, so he decided that the best way he could help me was to empower the board to help me work on my leadership skills. But when Dean dug further into it, he began hearing disturbing rumblings from staff and lay leaders about my relating patterns. Dean has always had a unique ability to discern a train wreck in the making, and this train was headed toward a big crash.

Dean spent several months interviewing key lay leaders and staff. He always kept me abreast of what was being said and what he thought I (and the board) should do. I

knew there were some serious problems, but I didn't know how serious until a board meeting in February 2004.

Dean had gained the full trust of the board and me, and he knew it was time to call for an executive meeting with my leadership role as the only agenda. Dean summarized his concerns, and though I had spent fourteen years leading our church, Dean said to the board, "The question before us tonight is this: is Bob Merritt the one who should continue to lead us?"

I was so stunned that I couldn't speak. To have that question raised shook me to the core. I realized that these eight people held my fate in their hands, and at that moment I knew I had some serious flaws to overcome or I'd lose almost everything I'd given my life to.

Fred

The consensus that night was that I was still the guy they wanted to lead our church, but it came with a condition: I would enter a yearlong intervention with a leadership coach whose name was Fred. Fred has an office in Minneapolis, and he coaches CEOs throughout the country. The year would be filled with numerous one-on-one interviews with Fred, taking every personality profile under the sun, and with Fred facilitating several group interventions between the board and me.

Fred and his assistant interviewed all my family members, most of my staff, and all of my closest friends using sixty questions that essentially asked, "What's good about Bob, and what's bad about Bob?" Those interviewed held nothing back, and their candid responses were recorded in a two-hundred-page document that Fred and his assistant read back to me, word for word, during a two-day meeting. When my leadership team asked me what that was like, the phrase "it felt like a leadership vasectomy" came out of my mouth. I felt completely exposed. And snipped.

For two solid days I sat in a chair and listened to Fred read statements like, "Bob overlooks relationships and lacks interpersonal skills in working with people." "Bob doesn't listen well." "Bob doesn't manage his staff." "There's no love." "He's unapproachable." "Bob speaks before he thinks." "Bob has a love problem." "I know that Bob cares, but he's not gifted in showing it."

For two days I listened to page after page of how people didn't think I cared about them and how I'd been dismissive and hurtful toward them. I heard repeatedly that I needed to manage my mouth and measure my words and body language carefully. My colleagues and friends said some affirming things about my teaching and leadership,

but what I learned is that those things get lost and don't matter if I'm a jerk.

But what really nailed me was when I heard these words from my son, David: "My dad is angry a lot." When Fred read those words to me, he looked up from the page and let them sink into my soul. I had to look away. After several seconds of silence, Fred offered some loving words of counsel and solace, but I was unable to hear him. I couldn't get past the raw emotion that I was feeling. I couldn't believe I had been so blind, that instead of love, laughter, and kindness, my son was experiencing anger from me. It wrecked me. Never in my life had I been so convicted of how flawed I was.

Broken

When you hear the same themes repeated over and over again from a variety of people who've experienced what it's like to be on the other side of you, you know the truth. You can hear the same themes from your kids or your spouse, but you tend to blow them off. You assume they're just ticked off about something or they're being hypercritical. You hear them, but you dismiss them. But when person after person says, "Bob doesn't listen well," or "Bob uses hurtful words a lot," or "I don't feel like I could ever approach Bob with honest feedback," you know that you might have some issues.

It became clear to me that it wasn't very pleasant to be on the other side of Bob Merritt. Fred put the mirror up to my face, and for the first time I saw the ugly cracks.

It broke me.

I was embarrassed and deeply saddened.

And it was the beginning of my new life.

Part of what confused me was that I had been successful doing what I had always done and behaving the way I'd always behaved. Why was I running into so many problems now?

I learned a vital leadership lesson: what got you where you are won't get you where you need to go. Instead of leading a church of three hundred, I was now leading a church of ten thousand. Instead of leading three staff members, I was now leading two hundred. What worked before wouldn't work anymore; the landscape had changed. And when the landscape changes, you have to change with it. The number of people and systems depending on my leadership had multiplied exponentially, which meant that my leadership abilities had to grow in order for the church and my life to go forward.

Talent Isn't Enough

I had always thought that as long as I delivered the goods, that was good enough. As long as I taught well, led well, and didn't screw up, that's all that was required. But I learned that being a competent teacher and leader wasn't enough. People expected me to be nice. Imagine that! They wanted me to be conversant, approachable, and interested in their lives. They wanted to have some access to my time and actually have some sort of relationship with me.

I began seeing for the first time that talent can take you only so far. I was getting As on the talent side but Fs on the relationship side. And what Fred and others were saying to me was that if I didn't start getting some Cs and Bs on the relationship side, I could take my talent and go find another job was on the verge of losing my staff, because instead of feeling encouraged and empowered by me, they felt devalued and defeated. What's worse is that my staff had begun to adopt some of my bad habits, because the leader sets the tone and pace.

I've never had much trouble doing the task side of my job; it's been the relationships side where I've had a consistent struggle. If I could improve that side of the equation, the possibilities for influence and achievement would multiply, because then we'd be doing things as a team. And a good team always outperforms individual talent always.

I think part of the reason I failed to see the value in team-ing up with other people was that for so many years I had led solo, and it seemed like everything depended on me. I had to pay my way through school, get my papers written, recruit volunteer youth leaders, plan the youth retreat, arrange for the bus, even drive the bus. When I got my first full-time job As a pastor in Falun, Wisconsin, I had no staff, so in addition to writing messages and finding musicians, I put together the weekly bulletin, photocopied them, and ran them through the folding machine. I did everything but hand them out on Sunday morning. For the first twenty years of my professional life, I was a one-man wrecking crew. I had some volunteer help, but I carried the mother lode, and it seemed like people were happy to let me carry it.

But then things started to grow and become complex.

There were more programs, processes, and meetings; more worship services, Bible studies, and small group functions. In short, there were more people, and I had never learned how to lead people well, because I never really had to. I mostly did my own thing without people. When I had to enlist the help of others, I had enough relating skills to get by. If I would happen to lose my temper, power up, or cut people off, most of them let it go and attributed it to my youthful immaturity. Almost nobody had the courage or permission to confront me with the ugly truth. And that's what landed me in front of Fred.

Was Change Possible?

The question that haunted me was, could I change? Marcus Buckingham asks, "How much of a person can you change?" His response is, "Not much." You are who you are. And that's true. You are who God made you to be, created uniquely in his image. Much of who we are is hardwired into us.

But all of us pick up some additional junk along the way. We pick up weird ways of relating from our parents, siblings, friends, and TV that become habitual and hurtful. The goal was to identify the flaws that were a product of my own sin and selfishness and deal with them. The goal was to become aware of and correct my destructive patterns around the office and at home.

For example, Fred's data revealed that my body language and facial expressions were often dismissive and belittling to people, and so I lost credibility with board members, architects, consultants, and other leaders without even knowing it. I learned that my mood swings were potent and that my choice of words carried enormous weight. I unknowingly violated basic leadership rules like "Praise in public, admonish in private." I had a habit of admonishing in public and not giving much praise at all. This diminished my leadership and staff morale.

These are the things that Dean and Fred began to teach me and to which they held me accountable. I still slip up, especially when I'm depleted, and I have ongoing tune-ups with Fred, because lifelong patterns are difficult to overcome. But letting a professional counselor probe around in my life saved my career, renewed my marriage, blessed my kids, and caused our church to surge to new heights. I always thought I could avoid the proverbial crack-up. I'd read about other leaders who'd blown it and thought it would never happen to me. I was smarter than that. But there I was.

Permission to Breathe

One of the things Fred said I had to do immediately was resign my teaching role at Bethel Seminary. When he evaluated my life, he wondered why I hadn't collapsed already. He told me that no human being could sustain the pace I was keeping. Who's your Fred? without doing severe damage to their soul and relationships. He said it was a deal breaker.

Why did I need to have a professional tell me that? Part of it was that I was filling a genuine need that Bethel had in the preaching department, and it seemed to be working. I was able to add value to young preachers, and what could be more

honorable than that? Again, how could something so good be so wrong? The other part is that you don't know where the wall is until you hit it. Burnout was new territory for me. So I kept adding more roles and responsibilities, because I didn't know my limits. Eventually, however, I found myself in a position where the demands exceeded my ability to meet them. But I didn't know how to get out of it. I felt like I would be letting people down if I stepped away from my obligations.

Fred gave me the permission I needed to resign, and that single decision probably saved my career and kept me out of the loony bin. After three years of being away from Bethel, I agreed to go back and teach a one-week intensive preaching class. I was breathing again.

Who's your Fred? Who has access to your life and has permission to give you honest feedback about your flaws? Who has permission to take the scalpel and skillfully cut out the character cancers that maybe you can't see but if not dealt with will eat away at your life? Proverbs 12:15 says, "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise person listens to advice." For about forty-eight years, I thought my way of leading and behaving was the right way, and I had a decent track record to back it up. But the Bible says that only fools think that way. Only fools think that their way is the only right way. On the other hand, it says that a wise person listens to advice. Wise people admit they don't have all the answers; instead, they seek out advice from others who are wiser and further down the road than they are. Do you remember football coach Mike Holmgren? I was sitting in O'Hare Airport on Christmas Day in 1996. I picked up the Chicago Tribune and saw an article I have saved for nine years. Holmgren is considered the best quarterback coach in the history of the game; he's coached Joe Montana, Steve Young, Brett Favre, and others. In the article, Holmgren said, "I watch every snap my quarterbacks take. I've watched thousands of snaps in practice, and you see little things, little tendencies and flaws that could make all the difference in a win or loss."

He watches every snap the quarterback takes; not every pass, play, or handoff; every snap. Here's my question: who's watching your snaps? Who's watching every snap you take to help make you better. Everyone has at least one flaw or habit that tends to hurt relationships and performance. If someone were to watch your snaps, they could help you become a better person.

Three Vital Questions

Why Aren't More People Open to Receiving Help or Advice?

Some people think that if they ask for help it's a sign of weakness. But the reverse is

actually true: asking for help is a sign of strength and courage. Everyone around you already knows your flaws, so when you admit you need some help, it shows that you're becoming more self-aware. When the board saw that I was genuinely open to receiving help, they rallied around me. They viewed it as a strength, not a weakness.

Another reason why people don't seek advice is because doing so requires change, and change is uncomfortable and requires work. It's not easy to put a magnifying glass to your flaws; it can be embarrassing. And it means you have to put effort into changing. Some people simply don't want to do the hard work.

Another reason people close themselves off from advice is because they're afraid they won't be able to change. It might mean more failure, and they're not sure they can handle that. So they make excuses for their behavior and say things like, "That's just who I am." But excuses keep people stuck and confined to a life of low achievement.

What Compels People to Seek Advice?

I think the two driving forces behind those who seek help are fear and pain.

Fear is a powerful motion. I was genuinely afraid of losing my job. I was frightened into getting help. Once I started getting answers to my problems and what I had to do to fix them, the fear subsided.

Fear comes from the unknown. If I'm in the dark about how I'm performing or how I'm being perceived, that causes me to be afraid. But if everything's on the table, then I know what I'm dealing with. Nothing frightens me more than when a board member or leadership team member says to me, "I'm concerned about something. Can I talk to you about it tomorrow?" That kills me, because my mind wanders all over the place wondering what I did wrong. Tell me now or just shoot me. The unknown scares me. Getting the issue out on the table, even if it's ugly, reduces the fear because at least now I know.

The other motivator for seeking advice is pain. Pain is a powerful incentive. Unfortunately, some people wait until the pain is so severe that it's too late. They have a heart attack, and then they get advice on diet and exercise. They lose their marriage, and then they join a support group. They become depleted to the point of losing their job, and then they solicit the help of a life coach. They watch their teenager run away from home, and then they get motivated to attend church as a family.

Pay attention to the pain levels in your life. Pain is God's way of telling us that something's out of whack and needs attention. Fear and pain are signals that you

might need out-side help.

What's the Difference between Those Who Get Better and Those Who Don't?

When I started seeing Fred, I told him I was afraid that I might not be able to change. Fred has seen hundreds of CEO types, and he says that the success rate is around 40 percent. The other 60 percent continue to stumble and often end up losing their jobs and families. He said that the difference is humility. Those who turn the corner and take their leadership and lives to a new level are those who are humble enough to receive the feedback and take it seriously. They demonstrate a sincere willingness to look at the data, accept it, and commit to work on it. James 4:10 says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." That verse is absolutely true. It's not the prideful and arrogant whom God raises up; it's the humble. Humble yourself before God, and he will raise you up. In other words, the way up is down.

So if you've hit a wall, are worn out, or are confused; if you're afraid and somewhat paranoid about what others are saying about you, thinking about you, even conspiring against you; if you're angry, alone, and feeling misunderstood, I urge you to ask these three questions: First, am I genuinely open to receiving feedback? Second, am I experiencing fear and pain in my relationships? And third, will I be humble enough to address the cracks?

A Second Chance

A year after Fred started digging around in my life, my family went up to the north shore again, and it was day three. It was a crystal clear morning with a blue sky. A foot of fresh snow had quietly fallen overnight, and it was seven degrees. It'd been a great three days; I had made sure of it. And we were just hanging out by the fire when Meg came up to me and said, "Hey, Dad, wanna take a hike to Carlton Peak?"

My wife looked up from her novel and smiled. This was a gift from God, and I knew it. This was Meg's way of forgiving me for what had happened the year before. For a full year I'd carried that failure in my heart, and I knew God was giving me a second chance. It was just me and Meg, dad and daughter.

It was a postcard morning. The sun sparkled off the fresh snow, and when we stepped out of the truck, our boots disappeared in white powder. We cut our own path up through the spruce trees, whose branches sagged with new snow. We inched our way around the steep boulders near the summit, and we reached Carlton Peak about an hour later with rosy cheeks and coats unzipped. We looked out over miles of pure white that cascaded into the deep blue expanse of Lake Superior.

There are certain moments in life that God gives you that can't be captured in print. This was one of them. Meg and I stood on that peak, and neither of us could say a word. I reached over and hugged her with both arms, and she returned the hug. That was our moment, a God moment that can never be repeated. And we drank it in with pure joy and gratitude. Every time I think about that day my eyes get moist and I get a lump in my throat.

Then we dared each other to slide down one-hundred-foot drop-offs. We held hands and slid on our butts, spraying snow and laughing like a couple of third-graders. I should be dead. Thanks to God and Fred, I'm more alive today than I think I've ever been.

In Psalm 139, King David prayed, "Search me, O God, and see if there is any offensive way in me" (vv. 23-24). That's hard to do, to slice open your soul to God and ask him to search all through your being. What would God find in you that is offensive and flawed? It can be painful. But that's where breakthroughs begin, because the way up is down. Humble yourself before God, and he will lift you up.

Everybody needs a Fred.