



*THE FREAK FACTOR:*

*DISCOVERING UNIQUENESS BY FLAUNTING WEAKNESS* BY DAVID RENDALL



*“WE DO NOT BELIEVE IN OURSELVES UNTIL SOMEONE REVEALS  
THAT DEEP INSIDE US SOMETHING IS VALUABLE,  
WORTH LISTENING TO, WORTHY OF OUR TRUST, SACRED TO OUR TOUCH.”  
— e.e. cummings*

## 1. WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?

*"It's never too late to be who you might have been."*— George Eliot

What is your biggest weakness? Nearly every job interview includes this question. Once you get the job, the same question will be asked during performance evaluations, and this time your manager will have their own perspective. Your co-workers and subordinates might even offer their opinions as part of 360-degree feedback.

Your family also has strong feelings about your flaws and limitations. Even complete strangers are eager to offer feedback regarding your driving skills. Given this constant criticism and your own self-awareness, you have probably developed some sense of what is wrong with you.

What should you do with this knowledge? How should you respond?

There are three basic options for self-improvement.

1. fix weaknesses
2. build on strengths
3. do both

The most common choice is to build on strengths and fix weaknesses, usually with special attention to fixing weaknesses. This is prevalent at work where annual appraisals are focused on overcoming our apparent limitations. Similarly, in homes and schools, parents and teachers expect children to excel in all academic subjects, athletic activities and social skills. Those who are lacking in any particular area are confronted with their flaws and given strategies for improvement.

The obvious goal of these remediation efforts is to foster success by producing well-rounded people. However, do these efforts really work, and is being well-rounded a worthy or realistic goal? My experience as an individual, consultant, parent and leader indicates that efforts to fix weaknesses are ineffective. Furthermore, I believe that the goal of being well-rounded is both undesirable and impossible to attain. The purpose of this manifesto is to explain why I believe this and to offer a better alternative.

## 2. WHAT'S MY PROBLEM?

*"We are all apt to believe what the world believes about us."*— George Eliot

I have a lot of weaknesses. According to my parents, teachers, managers, friends and wife, I am:

- hyperactive
- impatient
- impulsive
- easily distracted
- resistant to authority
- need to be the center of attention
- not open to the ideas of others
- too focused on the big picture
- unable to manage administrative details
- a poor listener
- a bad team player
- disorganized

Even with these weaknesses, I've been able to achieve a moderate level of success. So, how did I do it? How did I overcome my problems? How did I finally conquer my weaknesses?

I didn't. I didn't overcome my problems or conquer my weakness. I didn't get better. Instead, I discovered that *my apparent flaws were clues to my true strengths.*

Because of this insight, I became a professor, speaker and consultant. Now, the hyperactive guy, who can't sit down or stay quiet, gets paid to stand up and talk. The guy who isn't a team player works alone. The guy who doesn't like authority runs his own business as a leadership and strategy consultant, which means that the guy who isn't good with the details helps people to see the big picture

when they are too busy with daily operations. All of my supposed flaws are still there, they just don't matter that much. In fact, I've succeeded because of my weaknesses, not in spite of them.

These examples from my life illustrate the three primary lessons of this manifesto.

### 1. There is nothing wrong with you.

Weaknesses are important clues to your strengths.

### 2. You find success when you find the right fit.

You need to match your unique characteristics to situations that reward those qualities.

### 3. Your weaknesses make you different.

They make you a freak and it's good to be a freak.

Before continuing, it would probably be helpful to define a few terms.

What exactly do I mean when I talk about strengths, weaknesses and freaks?

**Strength:** a pattern of passion and proficiency.

**Weakness:** a pattern of apathy, aversion or failure.

**Freak:** a person who is unique because of a natural positive obsession

*Unique* – different, unusual, weird, strange or odd.

*Natural* – we don't choose to be freaks; it is innate, part of who we are.

*Positive* – good, helpful, important, or meaningful.

*Obsession* – intense, extreme and excessive focus in a particular area.

### 3. FLAWLESS: THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH YOU

*“Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending.”— George Eliot*

There is nothing wrong with you. Each of us has unique characteristics. These characteristics have both positive and negative features. These features, which we usually refer to as strengths and weaknesses, cannot be separated. They come in pairs. The positive and negative elements are inextricably linked.

This claim may seem far-fetched and that is why I created the chart at right. It lists 16 strengths and their corresponding weaknesses. Do any of these resonate with you? Have you seen these pairs in your own life or the lives of friends, co-workers or employees?

<b>Strength</b>	<b>Weakness</b>
Creative	Unorganized
Organized	Inflexible
Dedicated	Stubborn
Flexible	Inconsistent
Enthusiastic	Obnoxious
Calm	Emotionless
Reflective	Shy
Adventurous	Irresponsible
Responsible	Boring
Positive	Unrealistic
Realistic	Negative
Assertive	Intimidating
Humble	Weak
Self-Confident	Arrogant
Patient	Indecisive
Passionate	Impatient

Unfortunately, instead of seeing a weakness as natural and unavoidable consequence of its corresponding strength, we see weakness as a problem to be eliminated. Our efforts to eliminate weakness are doomed to fail because any characteristic has particular advantages and disadvantages. The following three examples illustrate unique relationship between strength and weakness.

### **Disorganization**

It's good to be neat and it's bad to be messy. We've all heard that "cleanliness is next to godliness" and "a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind." Furthermore, most people believe that they would be happier and more successful if they were more organized.

Being disorganized seems like an obvious weakness. Therefore, people who can't get organized have a flaw that they need to fix. Don't they?

Not necessarily. In *A Perfect Mess*, David Freedman and Eric Abrahamson argue that messiness is actually a strength and should be "celebrated rather than avoided." They provide evidence that there are significant benefits to disorder. Andy Rooney agrees saying, "creativity doesn't come out of order, it comes out of messiness."

Additionally, Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin while sorting through his cluttered lab after returning from a long vacation. Albert Einstein, probably one of the most creative minds of the 20th century, was also a proud member of the messy desk club saying, "If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, then what is an empty desk a sign of?"

In this case, the seeming weakness of disorganization is offset by the strength of creativity. However, disorganization could be considered a personality trait or behavioral preference. What about actual disabilities?

## Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a disability. People with dyslexia get letters and words mixed up and this leads to major problems with reading and writing. This, in turn, is a major barrier to success. Or is it?

A recent study showed that 35% of small business owners have dyslexia. This is significant because only one-tenth of Americans have dyslexia, but they make up more than one-third of entrepreneurs in the US.

Another study found that people with dyslexia are far more likely to become millionaires. In fact, almost half of the millionaires in the study had dyslexia. Examples of wealthy dyslexics include Virgin founder, Richard Branson, JetBlue founder David Neeleman, and Kinko's founder Paul Orfalea. The subtitle of Orfalea's book is *Lessons from a Hyperactive Dyslexic who Turned a Bright Idea into One of America's Best Companies*.

How does this happen? What explains their success?

Researchers explained that “most people who make a million have difficult childhoods or have been frustrated in a major way. Dyslexia is one of the driving forces behind that.” Having dyslexia makes the person a freak and leaves them “outside of the mainstream social groups in school.”

However, it seems that dyslexia is a two-edged sword. The obvious weaknesses and problems are accompanied by important strengths. When asked if his dyslexia has hindered his business success, Branson said “strangely, I think my dyslexia has helped.”

Experts suggest that people with dyslexia are often better than most at being “creative and looking at the bigger picture” and this can make them better strategic thinkers. Daniel Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind*, believes that some of these advantages might result from a greater ability to use

the right side of the brain. Others suggest that “individuals who have difficulty reading and writing tend to deploy other strengths.” They don’t focus on their disability. Instead, they focus on their unique abilities.

Disorganization and dyslexia both illustrate the dual nature of certain characteristics, but what about destructive behaviors that are truly harmful, like addiction?

### **Addiction**

In 1993, Todd Crandell had been a drug addict for almost 15 years. He was homeless, destitute, afraid and alone. He had lost everything that mattered to him.

In 2007, he is the founder of a successful nonprofit organization and the author of a bestselling book *Racing for Recovery: From Addict to Ironman*. He has completed numerous Ironman triathlons (2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike, 26.2 mile run) and has a loving wife and four children.

How did he do it? How did he transform his life?

He harnessed his addiction. Todd hasn’t really stopped being an addict. He’s just addicted to something new, Ironman triathlons.

His former coach put it this way, “He’s changed his addiction to a positive addiction and he’s now used it as a platform to help others. And so, he has no choice, his body’s going to have to fall apart before he’ll stop.”

Crandell is still abusing his body. He’s still obsessed. He’s still addicted. ESPN SportsCenter reporter, Tom Rinaldi put it this way, “he found his new focus in a passion as extreme as his addiction, the grueling pursuit of a triathlon.”

Todd's weakness was his intensity, but it was also his strength. In an interview, Crandell said, "The same tenacity I put into destroying myself, I just needed to switch it and put it into repairing myself." Crandell isn't a new person. He hasn't undergone a fundamental change in personality. He has just discovered and applied the positive aspects of his unique personality.

So it isn't surprising that he didn't stop with just one new addiction. He also founded Racing for Recovery, a nonprofit organization that helps addicts find hope and health through athletic pursuit. However, "providing that hope became Crandell's new addiction, but like his old one, it's come with great financial and emotional cost."

He has lost everything again. He's had cars repossessed and houses foreclosed and that is after becoming sober. His financial losses are due to his fanatical pursuit of the organization's mission and he makes no apologies. "How can you look at who I was and who I am today and not say 'this is what I'm supposed to do'?" Crandell can't do anything just a little. He can't take it easy. He can't slow down.

His strength is his weakness. The two are inseparable. His pursuit of the Ironman is "an addiction, perhaps, but also a mission and a purpose – to keep making the journey from addict to inspiration."

**Freak Fallacy:** *There's nothing strong about my weakness.*

**Freak Fact:** *Every weakness has a corresponding strength.*

## 4. FORGET IT: DON'T TRY TO FIX YOUR WEAKNESSES

*“You can’t put feathers on a dog and call it a chicken.” – Dr. Phil McGraw*

In a survey by the Gallup Organization, 59% of respondents believed that fixing weaknesses was an essential part of personal development. There are a number of problems with this approach.

1. It is slow. It is difficult to make progress in our areas of weakness.
2. It is painful. We don’t enjoy working on our weaknesses.
3. It distracts us from activities where we could make significant progress and find fulfillment.
4. It doesn’t actually work. Even if we remediate a weakness, it still doesn’t become a valuable strength.

**Freak Fallacy:** *I can be whatever I want to be.*

**Freak Fact:** *We all have limitations.*

## 5. FOUNDATION: BUILD ON YOUR STRENGTHS

*“Success is achieved by developing our strengths, not eliminating our weaknesses.”*  
—Marilyn vos Savant

Your strengths are patterns of passion and proficiency. They are what you love to do. They are what you do well. There are three primary reasons to build your existing strengths.

1. It feels good. It is enjoyable and energizing to work on your strengths.
2. You have the greatest potential in your areas of strength.  
These are your natural gifts and provide you with your best chances for success.
3. Your strengths make up for your weaknesses.  
Well-developed strengths often make your weaknesses irrelevant.

**Freak Fallacy:** *I don't need to work on my strengths because they will always be there.*

**Freak Fact:** *If you don't use it, you lose it.*

## 6. FOCUS: YOU CAN'T DO BOTH

*“When you choose anything, you reject everything else...so when you take one course of action you give up all the other courses.”— G.K. Chesterton*

When I ask students and seminar participants if they should fix weaknesses, build strengths or do both, most choose to do both. However, there are a number of problems with this approach.

1. We have limited resources. Most people have too much to do and not enough time or energy to do it. It requires more time and energy to try to do both, instead of focusing exclusively on building strengths.
2. Focusing on both activities limits progress. We end up with the worst of both worlds, expending a lot of effort without achieving the desired results.
3. Doing both prevents us from becoming exceptional in any one area.
4. Most importantly, since weaknesses and strengths are linked, attempting to fix a weakness can actually diminish the corresponding strength.

This final point is the most important and is illustrated by the discount retail industry.

Wal-Mart's main strength is low prices and its weaknesses include poor quality merchandise, long lines and unhelpful employees. On the other hand, Target's main strengths are higher quality products from well-known designers, attractive stores and helpful associates who are quick to open a new checkout lane. Unfortunately, Target's weakness is that its prices are not as low as those at Wal-Mart.

So, what would happen if Wal-Mart tried to do both? What if they tried to build on their strengths and fix their weaknesses? What would happen to their low prices, their primary strength, as they added

better products and extra employees at the registers? The answer is simple; their prices would climb, thus diminishing their strength.

Similarly, what if Target decided to fix their weakness by lowering prices? What would happen to the level of customer service and the great products that give them their advantage if they focused more on cost cutting? Again, the answer is straightforward, their quality and service would decrease, thus diminishing their strength.

If you don't believe me, just look at Kmart.

Kmart provides an illustration of what happens when a company—or individual—loses focus and tries to do both. Their historical leadership in discount retail was based on the blue-light special, a symbol of low prices. However, they did not focus exclusively on this price advantage and began to lose customers to Wal-Mart.

Kmart then began adding designer products from celebrities like Martha Stewart but wasn't quite ready to shed their low-price image. This allowed Target to capture higher-income customers that were design conscious. Kmart's failure to focus ultimately led to bankruptcy. They weren't the best at anything, so customers had no reason to shop there. Their failure illustrates the dangers of doing both, of trying to be well-rounded.

There is a compelling reason to go to Wal-Mart, low prices. There is a compelling reason to go to Target, a better shopping experience. There is not a compelling reason to go to Kmart, so people don't.

This is very important. If you try to be everything to everybody, you'll end up being nothing to nobody. Bad grammar, I know, but a good point.

**Freak Fallacy:** *I need to be well-rounded.*

**Freak Fact:** *No one will pay you for being mediocre.*

## 7. FIT: FIND THE RIGHT SPOT

*We need “a better process for matching talent with roles.”*

*—Marcus Buckingham and Richard Vosburgh*

Last year, I was watching the classic TV version of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and realized that it beautifully illustrates the importance of finding the right fit.

Just let the song run through your head for a minute.

“Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer had a very shiny nose, and if you ever saw it, you would even say it glows.”

Rudolph was different. He had a major and obvious flaw. He was a freak. This is the same for most of us. We are different. We have flaws. We are too impatient or too messy or too organized or too serious or too loud or too quiet. We are freaks.

“All of the other reindeer used to laugh and call him names. They never let poor Rudolph, join in any reindeer games.”

Rudolph’s flaw made him unpopular and led to his rejection and isolation. No one wants to be rejected. So what do we do? We often try to hide our flaws and fix our weaknesses. We become ashamed. We wish we could just be normal, like everyone else. We want to be accepted, so we try to change.

This is just what Rudolph and his parents tried to do. They covered up his nose with a black rubber cone, but it didn’t work. The red nose still shone through. It looked like Rudolph was destined for a life of pain and misery, *but then the situation changed.*

“Then *one foggy Christmas Eve*, Santa came to say, Rudolph with your nose so bright, won’t you guide my sleigh tonight?”

Rudolph’s nose wasn’t really a weakness. It was a strength in disguise. In the right situation, a “foggy Christmas Eve,” Rudolph’s nose was an irreplaceable advantage. *When the situation changed, the value of his unique characteristic changed as well.*

What made him a freak also made him a hero. *He didn’t succeed in spite of his weakness; he succeeded because of his weakness.* What would have happened if Rudolph would have gone to Hollywood and gotten a nose job?

“Then all the reindeer loved him and they shouted out with glee, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, you’ll go down in history.”

Rudolph’s legacy, his enduring fame, was a result of a *perfect fit between his unique qualities and the situation*. Do you want to succeed? Do you want to make history or at least make a difference? Find your foggy Christmas Eve. Look to your apparent weaknesses and flaws. They are strengths in disguise. They offer clues to how you can make a unique contribution. Don’t try to hide them or fix them. Just find the right situation, the one that offers the perfect fit between who you are and what is required. Unlike Rudolph, we don’t have to just wait for the right situation to come along, we can seek it out or even create it.

**Freak Fallacy:** *I need to adapt to fit the situation.*

**Freak Fact:** *You need to choose situations that fit your natural strengths.*

## 8. FREAK: THE POWER OF UNIQUENESS

*“Great spirits have always experienced violent opposition from mediocre minds.”*  
—Albert Einstein

In 1173, the builders of the Leaning Tower of Pisa had some trouble creating a stable foundation. Consequently, the tower started leaning before it was finished. The builders tried to fix it but were unsuccessful. That was a very lucky break for the city of Pisa.

Millions of people have spent millions of dollars to visit the city for one reason, to see a tower that leans. The problem those builders were trying to fix is the very reason that so many people travel to this otherwise obscure location. As one website explains, “because of its inclination, and its beauty... the Tower has been the object of very special attention.”

However, some people just couldn’t handle a broken tower. In 1934, Benito Mussolini declared that the tower should be straightened. Fortunately, the effort to fix the tower failed and actually caused it to lean even more.

In 1964, the Italian government took steps to keep the tower from falling down. However, this time they decided it was “important to keep the current tilt, due to the vital role that this element played in promoting the tourism industry of Pisa.”

We can learn five important lessons from this famous tower.

1. People go to see the tower because of its obvious and unique flaw, not in spite of that flaw. The flaw is “vital” and has made the tower the “object of very special attention.”
2. Fixing the flaw would destroy the tower’s uniqueness, but that didn’t keep people from trying.
3. Efforts to fix flaws usually fail.
4. It is worth the effort to maintain the flaw, to “preserve the inclination,” “to keep the current tilt.”
5. People will always try to get you to straighten up, to be normal, to stop being a freak. Don’t pay attention to them. Just ask them how many people would travel halfway around the world to see The Perfectly Vertical and Normal Tower of Pisa.

As with disorganized geniuses, dyslexic billionaires, famous reindeer and discount retailers, it seems that our success is directly related to our uniqueness.

**Freak Fallacy:** *It is good to be normal.*

**Freak Fact:** *It is better to be exceptional.*

## 9. FREAK FACTORY: PUTTING YOUR QUIRKS TO WORK

Here are some specific ways that you can increase your freak factor.

### **As a person:**

#### 1. Increase your energy efficiency.

You don't need more self-control. We all have a limited supply of time and energy.

The best way to be more energy efficient is to find the right fit.

- a. Move yourself into situations that maximize your strengths. We are energized by activities that use our strengths. Therefore, they require less energy and might even create an excess supply.
- b. Move yourself out of situations that put a spotlight on your weaknesses. We are exhausted by activities that require us to overcome our weaknesses. Therefore, they consume more energy and leave us unable to tackle additional challenges. (Yes, this does mean that you might have to quit your job).

#### 2. Engage in permanent procrastination.

Instead of procrastinating activities that you don't like, just stop doing them altogether.

#### 3. Find people who are strong where you are weak.

Seek out people that complement you. Partnership and teamwork are great ways to get important things done without doing it all by yourself.

#### 4. Find the freak in others.

It is not enough to expect other people to recognize and accommodate your unique characteristics; you need to do the same for them. Start with your children, spouse, parents, co-workers, boss and friends.

**As a manager:**

**1. Don't try to change people.**

People don't change that much. You can't train people to be strong where they are weak.

**2. Choose the right people.**

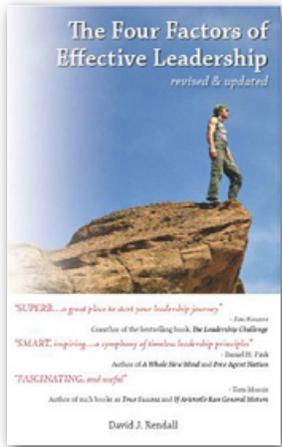
Since you can't change people, it is vital that you find people who have natural strengths that fit your organization's needs.

**3. Find what is right with people.**

Remember that people's weaknesses have complementary strengths.

**4. Let people be freaks.**

Don't expect everyone to do everything. Don't confuse equal participation with identical participation. Your employees will create more value for you and the organization when they are allowed to do what they do best, which also means being allowed to avoid doing what they do poorly. 🧐



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Rendall is a speaker, author, consultant and entrepreneur. He earned a doctor of management degree from the University of Phoenix and has undergraduate and graduate degrees in psychology. In 2004 he founded Rendall & Associates [www.drendall.com](http://www.drendall.com), a consulting firm that specializes in leadership development and strategic planning. He is a management professor at Mount Olive College and was nominated for Teacher of the Year in 2006. Previously, he managed nonprofit enterprises that provided employment for people with disabilities. He is the author of *The Four Factors of Effective Leadership* and, forthcoming, *The Freak Factor: Discovering Uniqueness by Flaunting Weakness*. You can contact him at [dave@drendall.com](mailto:dave@drendall.com).

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