**Chad Foster -Transcript MM**

**Max Irzak (00:02):**

Think back to your teenage years. Well, most of us spend this time preparing for the adventure of adult life. Chad Foster spent it watching the world he grew up in slowly fade to black, but going blind didn't stop him. And in the face of adversity, he decided to shatter traditional thinking of what others thought was possible. Chad finished college and went on to become the first blind executive to graduate from the Harvard business school leadership program. He wrote groundbreaking software that Oracle said was impossible, creating job opportunities for millions of other blind people. And now he leads a team at an innovative tech company, speaks internationally and teaches others to become resilient.

*This* is motivational Mondays. I'm your host Max Irzak and joining us is Chad Foster. Chad, welcome to the show.

**Chad Foster (00:05):**

Thanks max. Appreciate you having me.

**Max Irzak (00:50):**

If you had to describe who you are and what you do in two sentences, what would you say?

**Chad Foster (00:55):**

I would say that I am a Deal-maker, commercial architect and technologist, and I'm also a motivational speaker, a resilience leader, a black diamond skier and an author.

**Max Irzak (01:21):**

That's incredible. The double black skier just gets me every time. So unbelievable.

**Chad Foster (01:28):**

Well, yeah, especially as a blind guy, right? I left blind out, which I guess is a little unusual. You don't find a lot of blind guys who are knowingly and willingly strapping in the bindings and going down some steep trails.

**Max Irzak (01:41):**

Uh we'll get into that one. For those unfamiliar with your story, you weren't actually born blind. You had your sight as a teenager, and then the world around you slowly started to fade. How do you mentally deal with that experience as a teenager, knowing that you were losing control and there was nothing you can do to stop it.

**Chad Foster (02:03):**

Yeah. Candidly, not very well in the moment, right? It's a terrifying experience. Don't really wish it on anybody. But I learned some of the most valuable lessons from my life through that experience. So as you can imagine, as you're going through it, it's a really difficult time because you have all of these hopes and dreams for what you want to be when you grow up. I was going through that very tenuous period in my life where I'm trying to figure out what do I want to be when I grow up? And it wasn't blind. You know, we asked kids all the time, what do you want to be when you grow up? But none of them say they want to be blind. So it was this odd period of “what's my self identity,” —everything that I had planned to be when I grew up was called into question.

**Chad Foster (02:50):**

I wasn't sure what I wanted to be because I wasn't even sure what I could be, what I could do. Now. A lot of this happened when I was in college and I was going into the medical field because I wanted to help other people. And now all of a sudden, I wasn't even sure if I could help myself. So all of the fear of the unknown, all of the uncertainty about my future, all of the expectations that others had. And I had about my, my new self, you know, the, the bar was sort of lowered in a lot of ways. What, what I, what would my life be like? Would it just be, you know, reading books on tape, would I be able to finish college? Would I be able to get a job? Yeah. There was a lot of, uh, fear and uncertainty and anxiety and embarrassment and even shame about my situation. I was ashamed of the fact that I didn't have eye sight that was as good as it used to be, or as good as my classmates or peers. So it was a really challenging time for me.

**Max Irzak (03:54):**

I'm curious what you wanted to do before all this happened. You mentioned medicine.

**Chad Foster (04:01):**

Yeah. I wanted to go into the medical field. I saw myself as a hard charging young man, ready to make a difference in the world. And yeah, like I said, after I started losing my eyesight, I realized that it's pretty hard to see yourself as hard charging when you cannot even walk on your own. So it was, uh, it was definitely a difficult time because you start to reevaluate everything in your life. Like how do you see yourself? And it all gets back to self identity. And yeah, if you see yourself as someone, you know, as an example, right? If you see yourself as someone who goes to the gym every day, do you see yourself as someone, you know, as a smoker, as a non-smoker? Self identity really is everything. And I never really saw myself as someone who was disabled, never really saw myself as someone who was blind, but all of a sudden I was blind.

**Chad Foster (04:54):**

Now, did I allow that to affect the way that I saw myself moving forward as disabled or, you know, was I going to continue to push for the life that I wanted, as opposed to some of the things that were being offered to me, like these opportunities or legitimate reasons for mediocrity or failure? And, that's, uh, you know, that's a big part of what I talk about in my book. Big part of what I talk about when I'm on stage giving a motivational presentation or teaching a resilience workshop, it's figuring out what your standards are for you.

**Max Irzak (05:24):**

While losing your sight is uniquely terrifying. Each one of us has something that scares us. What's your advice for people to power through their fears and take control of this situation?

**Chad Foster (05:40):**

None of us are immune to fear. Courage is not the absence of fear. It's doing something despite the presence of fear. So everyone faces fears. We all have fears, not having fear is just not possible, right? We all have fears and the key to success, the key to growth, the key to expanding your comfort zone is having the courage to just step through the fear. And so for me, what I like to do is I like to think about what are my fears and what are those counter fears. So I'll give you a quick story. When I accepted my first job out of college, I realized that I was going to have to learn to move to Atlanta and then learn how to use the bus and transit system without being able to see. And I was accepting a job in the consulting space. It was going to be traveling 75% of the time of the top consultant company.

**Chad Foster (06:32):**

And I'd just gone blind little less than two years before that it was just me and my guide dog. And as I started to think about all the things I would have to learn— learning a new city, learning how to get my groceries, learning how to get to and from my apartment and get my clothes laundered, stuff that a lot of people take for granted, just being able to find my apartment building because I couldn't see, and I didn't know the area getting to and from the office, traveling all over the country, navigating the airports and hotels and office buildings. And in addition to learning a new job, I was taking on a technology job and I was a business administration major. And so all of those things started to weigh on me and I started to get absolutely terrified about the fear of all of these challenges. Was I able to do it? Was I capable?

**Chad Foster (07:24):**

And the thing that I kept coming back to, there's a little bit of a mental exercise where I fast forward in my life, 30, 40, 50 years. And I look back and what am I going to be able to live with? What fear am I going to allow to dominate my decision-making? Because when there are fears, there always counter fears. So this was the fear of failure. I could fail at this new job. I could fail at this new city, but is it better to take the chance of failing at that or to not even know what's possible unless you try. And that's the fear that scared me the most, not knowing what was possible unless I tried. So I chose to step through that fear. I was absolutely terrified, almost paralyzed with fear, but I couldn't let that control my decision-making.

**Max Irzak (08:17):**

To say that you've had to overcome a challenge is an understatement. You took something that could have been crippling and said, no, I won't be a victim. And instead became an inspiration for millions of people. As a leader. How do you teach this overcomer mindset to others on your team?

**Chad Foster (08:38):**

Well, it starts with defining our own expectations for ourselves and not letting other people define our vision of our future. So for me, I could have chosen to accept the expectations placed upon me by society, you know, and then some of that is, well, okay, you know, you went blind and maybe you'll be content with reading books on tape or whatever the case may be. You have to just define your own vision for your future. I had to figure out what I could live with. What were my standards? What was I willing to accept and what was I unwilling to tolerate? And then once you figure out what that is, a big part of it is holding yourself accountable to take that next action, whatever that next goal is. And so for me, it was hard to relearn how to learn in college. I had to switch majors, turned out I was a better blind student than a sighted student.

**Chad Foster (09:32):**

I made the straight A's. I made the Dean's list, ended up going on to work for a top consulting firm. And so you have to hold yourself accountable, regardless of your circumstances. A lot of us can find legitimate reasons to fail, but they don't serve us legitimate reasons to fail, although they may comfort us in the moment they don't take us any closer to our goals. I can find a legitimate reason to fail. And so can you, so can all of your listeners, we can all find legitimate reasons to fail, but they're not carrying us to where we want to be. So we have to take inventory of what's more important to us, finding a reason to excuse ourselves in the moment, or really holding ourselves accountable, to get to where we want to be in the long term. And then another key part of this is being able to visualize greatness for our circumstances.

**Chad Foster (10:26):**

And what I mean by that is we all have to figure out there are things that are inside our sphere of influence and things that are outside our sphere of influence and for the things that we cannot control, we have to figure out how to make those things so good. I had to figure out how to make blind look good. And if I could not figure out a way to make blind look good to me, the things that were outside my control, my odds of moving towards acceptance or very low. And once you identify whatever that vision is, it's gotta be bold enough to inspire you to action, to take action, to hold yourself accountable and to keep working on the things that you can control, like relearning, how to learn like finishing college and getting a job and moving up the corporate ladder. All those things were difficult. Like learning how to write code, to program my software, without being able to see my computer screen. All those things were difficult, but they were possible. They were inside my control. And so I chose to focus my attention on those things and work diligently at them because I had this bold vision of greatness for myself that did not ignore things that were outside my control, these unchangeable facts, like my blindness.

**Max Irzak (11:47):**

Hearing your story and looking at your life from the outside, it looks like you're fearless, but what's the fear that you still struggle with?

**Chad Foster (11:56):**

Am I doing enough? Am I, am I connecting to as many people as I can connect with? Am I thinking big enough? Am I thinking broad enough? We will all die at the end of our lives. None of us are immune from that. And none of us will, you know, nothing is permanent, right? Nothing is infant. And the thing that always scares me is, am I doing enough while I'm here? Am I now it's, you know, there are elements of my job. Um, there's elements of my story, the elements of my story and what I'm doing on stage, what I'm doing with the book is am I structuring the communications in a way that leaves as few people behind as possible? Cause I feel like I've learned the happiness to the, excuse me, the keys to happiness and success. I know what that is. I know the formula that has worked for me.

**Chad Foster (12:51):**

It's not some academic thing that I read in a textbook. I didn't learn about resilience from, you know, uh, university of Tennessee or Harvard business school. Right? I read about those things, but I'd learned this stuff from my own life, right? The school of hard knocks. And I figured out how to live a happier, more successful life without eyesight than before when I could see. And so I feel compelled to make sure that I share that with as many people as possible. So the thing that continues to scare me, the fear that I live with more than anything is just making sure that I'm doing everything possible to share that with as many people as possible.

**Max Irzak (13:31):**

You mentioned that you taught yourself how to code, but you actually did far more than that. You created something that was believed to be impossible when you were working at Oracle. Can you tell us that story and what you develop that changed the lives of millions of people?

**Chad Foster (13:47):**

Yeah, well, I was, I was not actually working at Oracle at the time, but I did write code that fixed an Oracle application. So here's the net of it, right? I'm working. A buddy of mine from Accenture calls me and says, Hey, we've got a customer with a blind employee, unable to use this customer relationship management system. Will you take a look at it? So I go in, I take a look at it. It's Siebel —high interactivity framework. And I said, yeah, I'll take a look at it. I look at it after about three or four months, I fix it. I get it up and running, this guy's doing his job and think nothing of it for about a year or two. And then I get a message on one of these email message boards saying we would like to see if anyone has done any work with the Siebel activity framework.

**Chad Foster (14:34):**

And I replied back, said, yeah, I've worked on that. I made it work. This large bank in Canada replies to me privately and says, well, you know, Oracle's tells us that's not possible. I said, well, I've done it. So we hop on a phone call and it's me and this prospective customer, the Oracle technical account manager and my former client. I brought my former client along, along with the user who was using it and they were blown away. They thought it couldn't be done. You couldn't make the system inter-operate for this individual who couldn't see. And I, you know, let my former client take the mic. And he explained to them that he'd been doing his job for the last two years with the code that I'd written. So that obviously from that point forward, Oracle started sending business my way. So I guess in that case, ignorance was helpful because I didn't know that it was supposed to be impossible.

**Max Irzak (15:30):**

That's so cool. College students frequently struggle with self limiting beliefs, where they could see possibilities. They often see obstacles, but you say that people need to learn to tell themselves the right stories. How can we switch the story that we tell ourselves, where do we begin?

**Chad Foster (15:49):**

This is probably the most fundamental concept that I talk about in blind ambition. It's the most fundamental concept that I talk about on stage and in resilience workshops. It's the most important thing in all of our lives. The stories we tell ourselves will either limit us or propel us towards our goals. If you're telling yourself a story of poor me, that's who you're going to be. If you're telling yourself a story of I've got this and I'm going to make this situation look good, then that's who you're going to be. We all will become the stories that we tell ourselves. Now look at my situation. I went blind in my late teens, early twenties, and I could have told myself that I'm blind because I have bad luck. That's one story that I could choose to tell myself. Another story would be. I went blind because I'm one of the few people on this planet with the strength and the toughness to overcome it and help other people with it.

**Chad Foster (16:53):**

Now, technically both of those stories are correct. One story frames me up as a victim. I have bad luck. The other story frames me up and frames up my situation as a strength. I went blind because I'm strong enough to deal with it and overcome it and help other people with it. It takes my struggle, my blindness, and reframes it into a strength. So the stories we tell ourselves, and it's called, if you look it up, it's called cognitive reframing. It's the very foundation for resilience. The meaning we attach to our events is far more important than the facts alone. The way we choose to tell the stories to ourselves. The inner dialogue that we have will determine whether we're going to be a victim who stays trapped or a visionary who bounces back.

**Max Irzak (17:50):**

One of the fascinating things that I learned about you is that even as a blind man, you still ski black diamond mountains. And for those of you who don't know, black diamonds are very steep Hills and can feel like a vertical drop when you're flying down while learning to ski. I imagine that you've fallen a lot. How do you keep pushing yourself to live outside of your comfort zone?

**Chad Foster (18:15):**

Well, if there's one thing you need as a skier, but especially a blind skier, it's a really good helmet because you do fall a lot. You hit a lot of stuff. You can't be scared of falling, right? And I'll say that whether you're skiing or in your academic world or in your professional world, if you're not failing from time to time, you're not aiming high enough, you should be falling. You should be failing. Cause that tells me that you're flirting with the edge of your control. Now with skiing, I've, I've sort of learned that I love being on my edge. And I know that on my edge on skis it's, it's, it's very similar to life in general. So, you know, growing up, I've lived a lot of my life outside of my comfort zone, not knowing the limitations of my eyesight as a youth going blind.

**Chad Foster (19:16):**

That was pretty uncomfortable going blind and getting a guide dog and walking into my university classes with a hundred pound German shepherd, and then walking into job interviews with a German shepherd and all the expectations and preconceived notions that people have about a blind person. Then traveling the country, going into conference rooms, airports with the German shepherd, then eventually flying all over the world, going to China, Singapore, Japan, Korea, where you can't read the signage. You can't speak the language and you have a guide dog, which is extremely uncommon in certain cultures. Those were all really uncomfortable. And then, you know, deciding that I'm going to get up and do my 5:00 AM workout, regardless of the fact that I don't know my way around this hotel. I don't know the language. I can't really communicate with people, but I'm still trying to find my way to my machine for a 5:00 AM workout.

**Chad Foster (20:11):**

All those things are outside my comfort zone, but they conditioned me to get used to, to get comfortable with discomfort. And that's a really important thing because once we start getting familiar with the feeling of discomfort, it becomes kind of normal. And then all of a sudden, we look for ways to expand our comfort zone, which is really important because if you're not getting outside of your comfort zone, you're not growing. Life begins outside of our comfort zones. And for me, skiing provides lots of opportunities for that now. Yeah. I started off on the magic carpet and the bunny slopes and, and all of that. I went to learn what to learn, how to ski at the young age of 38 years old, there was a lot of falling. And the first time, the first year I went, I separated my shoulder. Wife wasn't happy when I called about that one, that was, I got a little story about that.

**Chad Foster (21:10):**

That didn't go over so well, but I decided I was going to keep doing it because I loved the feeling of independence and freedom and autonomy because I wasn't tethered to a cane or to a guide dog or anything. But one of the things I really loved is that I could continue to expand my skill and my comfort zone. And as I did that, I found that know I got more fulfillment and enjoyment than I ever thought possible. You know, if you're, if you're not getting outside of your comfort zone, then you're not growing. If you're not growing, then you're slowly dying. Right? And so you have to figure out a way to keep pushing yourself to grow. Fortunately, downhill skiing for me is an excellent opportunity to do all of that.

**Max Irzak (21:53):**

We can talk about disadvantages that come with losing your sight and really having one of your core senses taken away. But I'm curious if you actually feel like you have any unique advantages?

**Chad Foster (22:07):**

Yeah, I think I have several advantages. Honestly. I think the first one that leaps to mind while we're on the topic of skiing is the fact that I'm blind, skiing. A lot of people they'll look at a black or a double black and go, Oh, Holy smokes. There's no way of skiing. It's terrifying. That doesn't bother me at all. Right. I'm not in, at not the least bit intimidated by the terrain, which, you know, we were out a couple of years ago on Cirque headwall and Snowmass, Colorado. A buddy turns to me and says, man, it's a good thing you can't see what's around us because it is intimidating. I wasn't intimidated by it because I couldn't see it. I was only focused on the next maneuver. I was just focused on the next left turn. And then right. Turn, how many of us in our lives, we're looking at the big scary mountain either literally or figuratively, and we're not able to make that next move.

**Chad Foster (22:55):**

We're terrified or paralyzed by the fear. And instead of just focusing on that next move, all we can see is the big, scary mountain. And so we don't ever take that next best turn. And so I think from that angle, it helps me with skiing. I think in more day-to-day interaction, I have an advantage because I see people more purely, I think for who they are on the inside. I'm not distracted by what my eyes tell me when I'm in a meeting, people could be having a bad hair day. People could be wearing clown outfits, and I would never know I'm not distracted by any of that. I'm only focused on the content of the message and the character of the person. So it forces me to be a much more active listener, paying attention to what's being said, and the intent behind what's being said, and that allows me to meet where they are as opposed to where I assume they should be.

**Chad Foster (23:49):**

I think a lot of people get distracted by what their eyes are telling them and not having that information coming to me allows me to focus more intently on what's being said and unpacking the meaning behind that. And so I think that is another advantage. I think the other thing that I get from not being able to see is the opportunity to reflect. So yes, my eyesight is not nearly as good as it used to be, but my vision has never been better. So a lot of people, they get distracted by looking all around them and the best vision comes from looking inside them. And that's an opportunity that I have to do all the time to reflect and think very deeply about what is it that I want out of my life and out of this situation. So lots of time for reflection and contemplation that improve my vision.

**Max Irzak (24:40):**

Oh man, what a, what a wonderful answer. And you're, you're totally right. Usually I have guests and, you know, we have the, the camera going and I think you nailed it. You know, we spend a lot of time kind of looking at each other, making sure that, um, you know, we're, we're focusing on our posture, what we're wearing, how our hair looks, but here I'm actually able to really hone in on the conversation. It almost feels, it feels like it's on a different wavelength than a lot of the interviews that I have. It's cool.

**Chad Foster (25:08):**

Yeah. A lot of people get distracted by that. When I was in college, I remember hearing 70%, 80% of what we learned was visually. So that tells you how much of our brain it ties up. Think about how much capacity you could free up if you didn't have to do that. And a lot of I've read where a lot of people, you know, famous innovators and entrepreneurs, they'll take just quiet time in a room, no lights so that they can think and re-imagine, and really contemplate what it is. The answer to the problem is. So in a lot of regards, you know, obviously we would all like, you know, I'm not going to sit here and tell you that I wouldn't like to be able to see again. Sure. But in some ways it can actually hinder us from, from really thinking three-dimensionally about the problem at hand. Yeah, definitely. You have

**Max Irzak (25:57):**

Yeah, definitely. You have his new book that just came out titled blind ambition. How to go from victim to visionary. What's the number one lesson you want people to walk away with after they read it?

**Chad Foster (26:06):**

Number one. Lesson is, gosh, it's hard to pick the number one. I guess the number one thing is you're limited by the way that you choose to see your situation, whatever that is, whatever your situation is, how you choose to look at your situation, and that as a choice. It can either limit you or it can carry you forward. I chose to look at my blindness initially as a burden, but now I've found out that it's actually a blessing and you couldn't have convinced me of that as I was going through it. But now I know that blindness was the beautiful gift that came disguised in some really ugly wrapping paper. I'm a better person because of my blindness. Not in spite of it. It forced me to reevaluate my focus, my effort, and my determination in pursuit of my goals and all of this really gets back to, and as I learned in the book, you know, and I'll talk about this a lot, but it's gratitude. And it's learning to appreciate the things that you have and how I learned that the hard way, but that really is the anchor for everything. And especially our perspectives.

**Max Irzak (27:25):**

I've heard you say that circumstances can either limit us or propel us towards our goals. What propels you to keep moving forward?

**Chad Foster (27:36):**

I think it's just knowing that I'm reaching my full potential. So I continually look for opportunities to expand because I've lived so much of my life outside of my comfort zone. The thing that makes me uncomfortable now, as complacency, I start to get really uncomfortable, irritable, um, itchy. You know, if I'm not, if I'm not expanding and growing, then I, I get really uncomfortable. So for me, that's one of the things that I continue to come back to is what am I doing to be a better version of Chad each and every day? Because I know at the end of my life, I may not be accountable or I may not be responsible for all of my circumstances, but I have to be accountable for my life and its outcomes. It's my life. I have to own it. It's your life. You have to own it. We all have to own our life and its outcomes. If we don't, who will?

**Max Irzak 1 (28:35):**

And finally, what's some actionable advice that our listeners can apply to their lives starting today?

**Chad Foster (28:42):**

I think number one is start documenting journaling, the stories that you tell yourself. So at the end of the day, take five minutes and start writing down the stories that you tell yourself about any situation. So take a situation in your life with personal, professional, whatever, and start writing down the stories you tell yourself and start catching yourself as those stories replay in your mind. Now in college, we did this thing called the "Um" exercise in one of my public speaking classes and what it was is to count the number of times you hear somebody else say. Um, and what that did was it caused you to pay conscious attention to somebody else's use of the word. Um, well guess what, subconsciously you started paying attention to your own use of the word. Um, and so your speaking ability improved as a result of that, because you didn't have a lot of ums and ands and all these things that distract people when you're talking well, the more you can bring your conscious attention to the stories that you're telling yourself by journaling, the more you can start to change the narrative of those stories and start moving from the negative stories to the positive stories.

**Chad Foster (29:56):**

Now, we all have negative stories that replay in our minds. I have those, you have those, every human on the planet has those. The key is which ones are we going to give airtime to? We're going to give airtime to the negative stories or the positive stories? We have to be very focused and intentional about ensuring the stories that get all the airtime or the stories that are the positive stories that take us to our goals. Because at the end of our lives, all of us will become the stories that we tell ourselves.

**Max Irzak (30:24):**

Chad, it's been truly rewarding, hearing your story. Thank you for helping us see the world through a different lens. And for showing us that our own circumstances can either limit us or propel us. But the choice is ours.

**Chad Foster (30:38):**

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for having me, Max.

**Max Irzak (30:40):**

And thank you everyone for listening. I encourage all of you to order Chad's new book, "Blind ambition. How to go from victim to visionary." Just follow the link in the description below. We'll see you all next time on Motivational Mondays.