— A BOOK FOR NONPROFITS —

Candid

The Power of Psychologically Safe Feedback

— BY —

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PULSE FOR GOOD

Candid: The Power of Psychologically Safe Feedback
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CHAPTER

01

Feedback Basics for Real-World Impact

"Feedback acts like a lighthouse, piercing through the fog of our own biases."

During the American Civil War, Union forces found themselves stuck, unwilling to attack what they thought was a heavily fortified Confederate stronghold in Richmond, Virginia. From the White House, President Abraham Lincoln could see the intimidating cannons aimed toward his nation's capital. The sight alone was enough to make his generals freeze. Lincoln, desperate for action, kept pushing them to move, but fear of those cannons kept the troops idle for months.

But those terrifying cannons weren't cannons at all. They were "Quaker guns"—logs painted to look like artillery. The Confederates had staged an illusion of power, tricking their opponents into inaction. When the Union forces finally made their move, they realized they'd been held back by nothing more than a clever bluff.

When we operate with bad intelligence, inaction or poor decisions are often the outcome. Through our work with nonprofits, we've seen time and again that many of the obstacles organizations face are not as real as they seem. Without the right feedback, you might be making decisions based on "Quaker guns" of your own: problems that aren't as big as they seem, or solutions that aren't as effective as you believe.

The key is gathering real, accurate feedback (sending out your scouts, so to speak) and getting a true sense of what's happening. Without it, you risk stagnation, missteps, and wasted resources. But with the right feedback, you gain clarity and direction. Before we dive into how to gather that kind of feedback, let's start by breaking down what feedback really is and why it matters so much.

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FEEDBACK IS A BEACON

Florence Chadwick was the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions. During one of her attempts, a dense fog rolled in, obscuring her view of the shore. Disoriented and discouraged, she gave up, only to learn she was mere yards from her goal. The fog had clouded her perception of reality, just as our preconceptions can cloud our understanding of the world.

At Pulse For Good, we believe gathering feedback is a process by which we see the world around us more clearly. It acts like a lighthouse, piercing through

that fog. It illuminates the path, allowing us to see what's really in front of us, and it is often the difference between guessing and knowing, between acting on assumptions and making informed decisions. It does not have to come from a formal review or a structured process. It can come from a casual conversation, an offhand comment, or an unexpected observation. But each piece of feedback, no matter how it arrives, serves as a beacon that guides us.

This process of gathering and interpreting feedback prevents us from becoming disoriented by the fog of our own biases. Without it, we risk drifting off course and giving up, making decisions based on incomplete or inaccurate information. But when we actively seek out and engage with feedback, we open up to new perspectives and insights that can lead to better outcomes. Just as Florence Chadwick needed a clear view of the shore to complete her swim, we need feedback to ensure we are on the right path to fulfilling our mission.

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THICK SKIN, SOFT HEART

So, why don't more nonprofit organizations do everything they can to gather in-depth feedback? Unfortunately, in the nonprofit world, feedback can feel like a double-edged sword. It often reveals tough truths, and how we handle those truths can either propel us forward or hold us back. Over the years, we have noticed two common ways people respond to feedback: some take it deeply to heart, feeling crushed by criticism, while others dismiss it outright, convinced the feedback is misinformed or unfair.

Let's talk about the first group—those who internalize everything. For them, every piece of feedback feels like a personal failure. They can end up on an emotional rollercoaster, questioning their worth and doubting whether they're making a difference. We have seen amazing people on the verge of tears because they couldn't separate their personal value from the comments they heard. It's exhausting and, frankly, unsustainable in the already demanding nonprofit environment.

On the other end of the spectrum are those who completely brush off feedback. They read the comments, shrug them off, and continue down the same path without considering the validity of the concerns because they often feel like those providing feedback don't truly understand the limited time and

resources. This "thick-skinned" approach can protect them from the emotional toll of criticism, but it can also lead to stagnation. When you dismiss feedback entirely, you miss out on opportunities to improve, adapt, and better serve those who rely on your organization.

Neither extreme is helpful. The sweet spot is finding a balance: thick enough skin to take feedback without falling apart, but a soft enough heart to stay empathetic and open.

Thick skin means you understand that feedback isn't a personal attack. The goal of feedback is to improve the work, not tear you down. It lets you take in what's useful and filter out what's noise. You don't have to agree with everything, but you also don't have to let it wreck you.

A soft heart, on the other hand, keeps you grounded. It's about staying connected to the people you serve and letting their experiences inspire you to do better. It's what makes feedback not just data, but a call to action. Even when feedback is tough to hear, a soft heart ensures you're still motivated to create meaningful change.

Balancing these two qualities allows you to take in feedback, process it, and turn it into something actionable. We should use feedback to move closer to achieving our mission. So, when you receive tough criticism, take a moment. Step back and ask yourself: What's the message here? Is there a truth I can learn from? How can I use this to improve? Then remind yourself this isn't about you. It's about the work and making it better. With that mindset, you can face feedback head on without losing yourself in the process, and maybe gain someone's trust along the way.

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TURN DETRACTORS INTO PROMOTERS

Fred Reichheld, the creator of the Net Promoter Score (NPS)[2], introduced a simple yet powerful way to measure customer satisfaction. The NPS asks customers to rate their experience on a scale from one to ten. Those who rate a nine or ten are called promoters—people who are genuinely happy with your services and likely to recommend you to others. Scores of seven or

eight, while not terrible, indicate that the customer isn't thrilled, and any score six or below that often signals dissatisfaction.

> *Thick skin to take feedback without falling apart; soft heart to stay empathetic and open.*

Interestingly, Fred's research revealed those who rate their satisfaction as a one or a two actually represent your greatest opportunity to create promoters. Why? Because these customers are experiencing direct, specific problems that, if addressed effectively, can turn their dissatisfaction into loyalty.[3]

When someone is deeply unhappy, they are often very clear about what's wrong, and they give you actionable feedback filled with specific things that need to be fixed. This clarity gives you a chance to step up, address their concerns, and transform their experience. If you can successfully resolve their issues, they will likely be converted into enthusiastic promoters. Yet, unfortunately, many write these people off as "complainers."

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COMPLAINTS VS. FEEDBACK

It's easy to think of feedback as complaints and to dismiss the input. Especially if we believe they don't understand the challenges your organization faces or they don't truly know what would help them. What if instead, we shifted our perspective? We believe a complaint is actually a subset of feedback, a valuable form of communication that tells us something isn't working as it should. If we view complaints solely as negative, we miss out on the opportunity to understand the underlying issues and make improvements.

Instead of putting someone in a box as a complainer, try to see their feedback as a gift. Whether someone is complaining to get something fixed or just to express frustration, the core

message is the same: something needs attention. Complaining is a signal that points directly at opportunities for improvement. When someone takes the time to voice a complaint, they're essentially providing you with a roadmap to enhance your product, service, or process.

The key to turning complaints into constructive feedback lies in how we choose to receive and respond to them. If we approach complaints with an open mind and a willingness to listen, we can uncover actionable insights that might otherwise be overlooked. But we also acknowledge that sometimes, nonprofit organizations receive feedback they can't do anything about.

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HANDLING FEEDBACK YOU CAN'T ACT ON

It's natural to feel anxious when you realize that, despite asking for feedback, gathering it, and analyzing it, you can't implement the changes people are asking for. But you don't always have to fix everything. Sometimes, simply acknowledging the feedback and validating the person's concerns is enough.

Too often, when we can't address a complaint, we inadvertently invalidate the feedback by dismissing it as unimportant. This can make the person who issued the complaint feel ignored or devalued. Instead, focus on letting them know you hear them, you care about their perspective, and you're doing what you can within your limits. When people feel heard, even if their issue can't be resolved right away, they are more likely to remain engaged and supportive.

A good example of this exists at airport customer service desks. When a flight is canceled, the representative on the phone, or in front of you, can't change the fact that the flight is canceled, but they can acknowledge the frustration, show empathy, and try to offer alternative solutions like booking the next available flight or providing a credit. Even when the outcome

isn't ideal, the experience of being heard and valued can change a negative situation into a positive one. If you've had this experience before, you know that when this situation is handled well, you leave that customer service desk feeling heard and taken care of, even if you are still in that same frustrating situation.

When receiving feedback, don't overlook the power of acknowledgment. Making someone feel heard, even without immediate change, builds trust and keeps them open to sharing feedback in the future.

As we mentioned in our introduction, the feedback problem is pervasive, and we have seen it time and time again. These basics give you an understanding for how to view feedback, so you can start this process centered around the values that will lead to success as you implement the strategies in this book. We

will also include a homework section at the end of each chapter to help you start thinking about the current systems you have in place and how to change them. Below is your first one. Homework

Take a moment to reflect on how feedback flows within your organization. Like a juggler relying on flashes of movement to keep multiple balls in the air, your organization depends on those moments of insight to adjust. In the next chapter, we'll dive into the role feedback plays in helping nonprofits adapt, improve, and make a greater impact. But before diving in, consider this: are you listening deeply enough to uncover the real issues, or are you skimming the surface? Here are a few questions you can ask to analyze your current feedback process:

- Identify areas where you may be operating with "Quaker guns." Where might you be

  acting on assumptions rather than real feedback?

- Review your current feedback channels. Are there opportunities to ask for feedback in a

  way that encourages honest, constructive input?

- Examine how you process criticism. Are you balancing thick skin and a soft heart when

  dealing with tough feedback?

- Reflect: Are complaints viewed as opportunities for improvement? If they aren't, next

time you hear a complaint, pause, and remember detractors often have the most valuable feedback.

FROM THE BACK COVER

Transform how you listen. Change lives at scale.

Feedback is often the most untapped resource in a nonprofit — the one that holds the power to drive real impact. Too many organizations end up collecting surface-level feedback or missing the mark when it comes to truly understanding the needs of those they serve. *Candid* is your guide to building a feedback system that gives you the insights you actually need.

The team at Pulse For Good has collected more than 375,000 anonymous feedback responses across hundreds of locations since 2015, transforming the way nonprofits connect with the people at the heart of their work. Their mission is simple but powerful: to give leaders the data they need to make the best possible choices.

Through this book, you'll discover practical, actionable strategies to gather honest input, close the feedback loop, and build trust both within your organization and with your community. Written for nonprofits of all sizes, *Candid* shows how to turn feedback into real impact at scale.

With candid feedback, you can create lasting impact for those you serve.

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