— 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

03

Accidental Defaults

"What you don't question, you accept — and what you accept becomes the way things are."

Think of the last time you drove somewhere. How conscious were you of the actual act of driving? You might have been thinking of where you're going, who you were meeting with, or even what you were going to have for lunch. But we are willing to bet money you weren't thinking about how far down to push the gas pedal, when to use your blinker, or what side of the road to drive on. Those are actions, decisions, and processes that are ingrained in us after years of use. We rarely stop to think about them nor about where they came from unless something changes. But these defaults can also have unintended consequences.

Blake, a co-founder and CEO of Pulse for Good, once faced a moment where his "default" settings nearly led to disaster. After spending two decades living in the United States, he moved to Australia to participate in religious services for a few years. A few days after arriving, it was time for him to attempt his first drive in the country. Things started off poorly when he instinctively opened the passenger door, expecting it to be the driver's side. Only after a moment of confusion did he realize the steering wheel was on the other side of the car.

Once in the correct seat (or the "right side," as his Australian friends often joked), he turned on the car and headed for the parking lot exit. As he went to make a right turn, he absentmindedly flicked the blinker—only to activate the windshield wipers instead. Embarrassed and flustered, he fumbled to turn off the wipers, found the blinker, and made the turn. But in his haste, he instinctively drove onto the wrong side of the road, straight into oncoming traffic.

Had someone asked Blake before this experience if he could drive, his answer would have been a confident "yes." But at that moment, he wasn't so sure. Something that had always felt natural and automatic suddenly felt foreign and dangerous. His default settings were entirely wrong for this new context.

Defaults, by their nature, are things we don't consciously think about. They allow us to focus on bigger challenges, like what to say in a meeting, instead of worrying about which side the blinker is on. But as Blake learned, defaults can trip us up when they no longer fit the situation. Even decades after returning from Australia, he occasionally finds himself flicking the windshield wipers instead of the turn signal.

Technology provides another clear example of defaults at work. Open the settings on any smartphone, and you'll see hundreds of tiny decisions already made for you: screen brightness, call notifications, battery optimization, and more. These defaults are designed to make things faster and easier, allowing us to focus on what really matters—texts, apps, calls—without getting bogged down by endless choices. These technological defaults demonstrate the power of assumptions in shaping user experiences, but they also remind us that assumptions, when applied to serving vulnerable populations, can lead to unintended harm. Slowing down and questioning these automatic settings becomes crucial, as the unintended consequences of our assumptions can have a real and lasting impact.

When Defaults Become Dangerous

The book Invisible Women[6] by Caroline Criado Perez analyzes data bias against women. She mentions that back in the 19[70]s, a male engineer designed crash test dummies based on the "average" male: 5'9" and 1[71] pounds. For women, he used a much smaller model based on his wife—just 4'1[1]" and 1[08] pounds. This might have seemed reasonable at the time, but the problem was these dummies were used to test car safety for everyone, and they didn't accurately represent the average woman.

According to the Department of Transportation's (DOT) Female Crash Fatality report[7], women are 2[8]% more likely to die and 7[3]% more likely to be severely injured in crashes compared to men, largely due to flawed crash test dummy standards. Sadly, even today, current female dummies are just scaled-down versions of male models, failing to accurately represent female physiology. According to Ms. Magazine[8], the DOT has started developing a more accurate female dummy, but economic considerations have limited its use, especially in the driver's seat.

The tragic reality of car safety is real and frustrating. But it wasn't done out of malice. Instead, it came from a default assumption of what works for men should work for everyone. And as a result, the consequences are difficult to swallow.

The same problem happened within the pharmaceutical industry. For years, this industry mostly tested drugs on men, assuming they would work the same for women. This "one-size-fits-all" thinking overlooked how different men's and women's bodies can be, leading to some medications being less

effective—or even risky—for women. It's only recently that we've started to realize the importance of testing drugs on both men and women to make sure everyone gets safe and effective treatments.

The first step toward meaningful change is questioning the assumptions we've always worked with. Every step forward begins with a question: are we serving people as they are or as we assume them to be?

See People as They Really Are

We often put people into "boxes" based on our first impressions or assumptions about them. It's hard not to do. These boxes are a mental shortcut our brains use to quickly categorize people, helping us make sense of the world faster. But instead of really getting to know the person, we end up interacting with this simplified version we've created in our minds.

To truly see someone, you need to fight the instinct to categorize them quickly and recognize them as a whole person instead. Think about how much more meaningful your interactions would be if you saw beyond the assumptions. That donor who gives a small amount every year? It might not seem like much at first glance—but for them, it could represent a significant sacrifice. And that teenager who's acting out in class? They might not just be "trouble"—they could be carrying challenges at home, like instability or neglect, that are shaping their behavior in ways you don't see.

The challenge is that the more we think we know someone, the easier it is to rely on these boxes we quickly put them in during our first impression of them. Over time, we stop seeing the person in front of us and interact instead with our mental version of them. It's like returning to your hometown and being treated as if you're still fifteen. People aren't seeing you as you are now; they are stuck on the mental image of who you were when you were younger and less experienced.

Breaking out of this habit means making a conscious effort to see and engage with people as they truly are. When we do this, we inject empathy back into our relationships and decisions and become much more inclusive. We start to see the real experiences and needs of others outside of the preconceived box we put them in.

If you have put someone in a box, don't feel too bad. We all have our own accidental defaults we need to overcome. Just like when you get married and realize you and your partner have completely different ideas about what the

thermostat should be set at. You likely assumed everyone likes the same temperature, but it's just your personal default.

These defaults show up everywhere in our society. We're programmed in certain ways without even realizing it. Remember in Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse when Peter Parker realizes Doc Ock is a woman? His first reaction is to say out load, "Step one, reassess personal biases." It's a perfect example of how we jump to conclusions based on the experiences in our own lives. We do this all the time, not out of malice, but because it's how we're wired. But when these defaults go unchecked, they can lead to designing cars or medications that aren't safe for everyone. Recognizing accidental defaults will help nonprofit organizations make more inclusive and thoughtful decisions for the people they serve. Removing Defaults from Your Systems

When we set up feedback systems, it's easy to go on autopilot and stick to what feels familiar. But have you ever stopped to think about the hidden assumptions behind those choices? The methods we choose, the questions we ask, and even how we deliver surveys can all reflect default settings that might not serve everyone equally.

For example, surveys are a common method for collecting feedback, but are they accessible to everyone you're trying to reach? Do the people you're surveying speak the same language you do? Are you using internal jargon or industry language that might confuse them? Consider the logistics too: Does your survey require internet access, and if so, do your respondents have a data plan? Do you send out surveys by mail, assuming everyone has a

mailing address? Or do you expect people to comfortably answer sensitive questions face to face?

All of these are defaults that could significantly impact the quality of the feedback you receive. There's no one-size-fits-all approach, and different situations call for different methods. The key is to make these decisions consciously, rather than relying on automatic, unexamined defaults. Sometimes an email survey might be the best option, but this choice should be made deliberately, considering your audience's specific needs. Are they tech-savvy? Do they prefer digital communication? Simply opting for the easiest method for you could lead to missed opportunities for meaningful feedback.

The truth is, feedback is being given all the time, whether we realize it or not. The key is to make intentional, thoughtful decisions in how we collect and

respond to that feedback. Think of how our bodies give us feedback. Eating something sweet feels good, so our body wants more, even though we know too much sugar isn't healthy. This is a feedback loop that can lead to unhealthy habits if we're not careful.

When it comes to feedback systems, the defaults we rely on can shape everything, from the voices we hear to the insights we gain. By questioning those defaults, we open the door to truly hearing from the people we serve in ways that reflect their realities, not just our assumptions. The goal isn't to reinvent every process, but to ensure that each choice (whether it's the format of a survey, the language we use, or the method of delivery) is made with intention. When feedback systems are built thoughtfully, they become more inclusive, more effective, and ultimately more powerful in driving real change.

The Price of Unexamined Systems

> *Defaults are powerful because they shape our actions before we even realize they're at play.*

Defaults can streamline decisions, but when applied poorly, they can lead to devastating outcomes. Defaults are essentially assumptions made on behalf of others, and when those assumptions go unexamined, they can perpetuate harmful systems, silence voices, and cost lives. Let's explore how bad defaults manifest and the profound impact they can have in other industries.

In Outliers[9] by Malcolm Gladwell, a chilling example of bad defaults is highlighted in the aviation industry. Korean Air faced a series of fatal crashes, many of which stemmed from cultural norms around authority and communication. Co-pilots, hesitant to challenge their superiors, used what's known as mitigated speech, which is indirect, deferential language that avoided confrontation. Instead of directly pointing out dangers, co-pilots would make polite suggestions or observations that often went unheeded. This communication breakdown, rooted in cultural assumptions about hierarchy, cost lives.

To address this, the aviation industry developed Crew Resource Management (CRM) protocols.[10] These protocols encourage open communication, teamwork, and a reduction in hierarchical barriers to ensure that every voice in the cockpit is heard. CRM's success in reducing airline accidents is a testament to the cost of bad defaults and the value of rethinking assumptions.

On the topic of how authority plays into defaults, Hofstede's Power Distance Index, which measures how comfortable a culture is with unequal power and authority between individuals, provides a fascinating framework for understanding how individuals interact with

authority. In countries with low power distance scores, such as Denmark, people are more comfortable questioning authority. In contrast, countries with high scores, like Russia, tend to discourage such challenges.

However, power disparities amplify significantly in vulnerable populations, regardless of cultural norms. Vulnerable individuals, whether due to homelessness, poverty, or dependency on services, often behave as though they are in a high power distance environment, regardless of their cultural background. For example, in the U.S., where challenging authority is more common, vulnerable individuals might still refrain from voicing concerns, fearing retribution or loss of access to essential resources.

This fear-based compliance mirrors the same dynamics that led to communication failures in aviation. Without addressing these amplified power disparities, organizations risk perpetuating systems where those in need remain silent and underserved.

The consequences of bad defaults are particularly stark in healthcare. One report found that healthcare providers often operate under unexamined assumptions or implicit biases that disproportionately harm vulnerable populations.[11] For example:

- Stereotyping: Healthcare providers may assume certain symptoms are less severe in

  minority patients, leading to underdiagnosis or misdiagnosis.

- Communication Barriers: A default reliance on medical jargon or digital access assumes

  patients are literate, fluent, or digitally connected, leaving many behind.

- Resource Allocation: Decisions about who gets prioritized for treatment can inadvertently

favor more assertive or well-resourced individuals, sidelining the most vulnerable.

As PBI Education, an organization dedicated to providing high-quality, clinical and academic based continuing education programs notes, these mistaken assumptions can have deadly consequences. For instance, ignoring a patient's pain report due to unconscious bias or assuming someone "looks fine" can lead to delayed or insufficient care.[12] These are bad defaults in action—defaults that harm the very people they're meant to help.

Bad defaults are not just inefficiencies; they are barriers to equity and effectiveness. Whether it's an airline crash, a vulnerable person unable to voice their concerns, or a patient receiving substandard care, the cost of leaving assumptions unexamined is far too high. Nonprofit organizations should slow down, identify their defaults, and ask critical questions: Who are we leaving out? What assumptions are baked into our processes?

Who Feedback Is Really For

Another accidental default not often discussed is why an organization might feel the need to gather feedback. Typically, we gather feedback for one of two reasons: to get validation or to improve. When you ask someone, "How do I look?", are you genuinely seeking an honest critique or simply fishing for compliments? The same logic applies to organizations.

Many times, feedback is collected because the organization wants to feel validated, not because they're focused on making meaningful improvements for their customers or clients. A restaurant that pushes Yelp reviews, for example, may be more interested in receiving high-star ratings to attract more customers than in using feedback to enhance the actual dining experience. The motive behind feedback matters.

It's easy to seek out only the positive. Everyone enjoys a pat on the back, but it's the tough, constructive feedback that helps us grow and make impactful changes. Unfortunately, most organizations gravitate toward validation. This is the path of least resistance. But the real work, and the real value, comes from asking for feedback that challenges the status quo.

Think about how feedback is often incentivized. If the purpose of feedback was truly to improve the client's experience, would there be a need for gift card

rewards or discounts just to get them to respond? Probably not. Incentives become necessary when people feel like their feedback won't make a difference to them personally. When feedback loops are designed to benefit the people providing feedback (because they know their input will lead to improvements), the need for these external motivators disappears. The incentive becomes the change they experience.

So, what kind of questions are you asking in your feedback surveys? Are they designed to make your organization look good, or are they genuinely aimed at improving the customer experience? Too often, feedback questions are skewed toward validating the organization's performance. For instance, a question like, "How satisfied are you with the company's leadership?" doesn't necessarily help improve the customer experience. It's self-serving—designed to boost internal morale rather than creating a space for constructive criticism.

A great example of this is seen on platforms like Glassdoor, where companies frequently ask about approval ratings for the CEO. That's feedback for the organization, not for the employees providing it. It highlights where the focus really lies.

Ultimately, the feedback you gather should be for the benefit of the people you serve, not just your organization. When organizations design feedback systems that serve their own

interests, they fall into an accidental default of validation over improvement. Questioning and correcting this default is one of the best ways to help those you hope to serve. The most valuable feedback challenges the norm and forces growth. The key is to ensure your feedback system is built to serve the needs of your customers and clients, not just to make your organization look good. Homework Here are a few things you can do today to challenge your accidental defaults:

- Audit your current feedback processes and identify any accidental defaults that may limit

  genuine feedback.

- Reflect on whether you're seeking validation or improvement. Are your feedback

  questions pushing for growth or just reaffirming what you already know?

- Check if your survey questions focus on customer experience rather than organizational

  performance. Revise if needed.

- Ensure your feedback systems are easy to use, accessible, and inclusive for all audiences.

You can't change everything all at once. Start small and work your way forward.

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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