— 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

# 04

# Feedback Loops

*"Without a complete loop, you're just collecting data. You aren't creating change."*

Think of a feedback loop like your home thermostat. It queries the current temperature, collects that information, analyzes it, then implements a change if needed (either heating or cooling) and notifies you of the new temperature. This process is ongoing; the thermostat constantly checks and adjusts the temperature to keep things comfortable, moving through the feedback loop continually in the background as you go about your day.

Feedback loops in your organization should work the same way. They should be continually running so you can respond to marginal changes as needed. And just like the thermostat, these feedback loops should be ongoing, including the process of asking for feedback, collecting it, and analyzing the data, so you can stay on top of minor issues before they turn into major problems.

All around us, feedback loops exist, and they guide how systems work and adapt. In biology, they help regulate our body temperature—when we get too hot, we sweat, and when we get too cold, we shiver. These loops also play a role in processes like childbirth, where contractions create pressure, leading to more contractions until the baby is born. In business and nonprofits, feedback loops shape behavior. When we do something and get positive feedback, we're likely to do it again. Most of our body's chemistry, like the release of dopamine, is driven by these loops, reinforcing behaviors that feel rewarding.

The first steps of a feedback loop often happen automatically. For instance, with a product, gathering feedback might be easy. But analyzing it and making changes takes more effort. As your feedback loop becomes more advanced, it takes more work to make significant changes. Just like exercising! At first, you get sore quickly and see muscle growth, but over time, you have to work harder to achieve the same results.

There's a lot of research around feedback loops in biology, psychology, and other fields. They govern so much of what we do and how systems around us function, both for better and for worse. Understanding these loops helps us see how small actions can lead to big changes. Then we need to learn how to take charge of them.

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## POSITIVE VS. NEGATIVE FEEDBACK LOOPS

Positive feedback loops often encourage you to do more of something. For example, if you receive praise or see success from a particular action, you're likely to repeat that behavior. But it's also important to note that even positive feedback loops lead to negative outcomes. Sometimes, we can get stuck in a runaway feedback loop which isn't healthy for us. Like when we binge watch TV or eat way too much candy. These things feel good, so we want more of them. Technically they are positive feedback loops, but they aren't necessarily good for us, which leads to a negative outcome.

Positive feedback loops are often easy to spot because they feel rewarding. When something works well or gets a good response, it encourages us to keep doing it. For instance, in a nonprofit, if a fundraising campaign brings in a lot of donations, the positive feedback loop would suggest running similar campaigns in the future. This kind of loop can lead to growth, success, and repeated wins.

However, positive feedback loops can also create blind spots. If you're only focused on what's going well, you might miss underlying issues or areas that need improvement. In some cases, a positive feedback loop can even escalate into something harmful—like the tech bubble, where in the early 20$^{00}$s, excessive speculation on internet-based companies led to inflated valuations and eventual market collapse when many failed to deliver sustainable profits to their investors.[13] It's important to remain aware of the broader context and not get too caught up in the immediate rewards.

On the other hand, negative feedback loops are those that discourage certain behaviors. They don't always have a negative outcome. If you see brake lights ahead and slow down, that's a negative feedback loop. It's stopping something, yet creating a positive outcome. Negative feedback loops, while often seen as less desirable, are just as crucial. They act as a check on behavior, signaling when something needs to stop or change. For instance, if a program isn't meeting its goals and receives critical feedback, this loop helps you reassess and adjust before further resources are wasted. In everyday life, negative feedback loops often keep us safe.

Both positive and negative feedback loops are essential. They help us understand what actions to continue and what actions to reconsider or stop altogether. The real challenge—and opportunity—comes in balancing positive and negative feedback loops. Both are necessary to create a healthy, adaptive

system. Positive loops drive innovation and progress, while negative loops provide the necessary corrections to keep things on track. Together, they help you understand what's working, what isn't, and how to make informed decisions that lead to long-term success. But remember, you can't put a feedback loop in place and leave it alone.

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## 5 STEPS OF THE FEEDBACK LOOP

Now that we've established that feedback loops are always happening, whether positive or negative, it's time to take charge of how we collect and use that feedback. Instead of letting feedback happen by accident, we can structure it intentionally to make sure it's meaningful and actionable. This is where the five steps of a feedback loop come in. By following these

principles, we can create a system that gathers the right feedback and helps us respond effectively.

Here is a visual representation of the feedback loop we should follow:

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## STEP 1: ASK

Curiosity drives us to seek more information or clarity on something specific. For example, a nurse asking, "What's your pain level today?" or measuring blood pressure are common ways we gather information. Asking comes naturally to most of us—it's something we do without even thinking because we understand its value. The key here is to be intentional about what we want to know more about. It all starts with the right questions and considering any accidental defaults we might have about those we serve.

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## STEP 2: COLLECT

Once you ask the question, the next step is to collect the information. This can be as simple as listening to someone's response or as structured as gathering data through a survey or a listening session. The best part about collecting

information is this step can often happen automatically and in the background if you have set up the right processes.

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## STEP 3: ANALYZE

After collecting the information, the next step is to analyze it. While this step might seem automatic, it usually requires more human effort and expertise. This is where data analysis, consultants, or experts come into play. Many people don't feel confident analyzing data on their own, so they bring in someone with the right knowledge to interpret it.

For example, a doctor knows how to interpret blood pressure readings based on their expertise, but for many of us, those numbers don't mean much. This step translates raw data into actionable insights that matter to your organization. However, this is also where many feedback loops stall. It's easy to get stuck here, especially in organizations where implementing change can be difficult. Knowing what needs to change is one thing, but making those changes is a whole other challenge. To close the feedback loop effectively, we must overcome this stagnation.

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## STEP 4: IMPLEMENT

Implementing change is tough because humans, by nature, often resist change. Even when we know what needs to be done, the effort required to make it happen can be overwhelming.

> *Feedback loops are everywhere — the only question is whether yours is designed or accidental.*

For example, everyone understands that the national debt is a problem, but the steps to address it are so complex and daunting that change seems impossible. Or when it comes to personal health, many of us know we need to eat healthier, but following through is the hard part. Cravings, habits, and resistance to change get in the way.

To overcome this in your organization, start small. Building new habits takes time. We believe that James Clear had it right when he mentioned in Atomic Habits[14] that change should begin small. Manageable actions can make the process less daunting. Focus on making tiny, consistent changes that build on each other over time.

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## STEP 5: NOTIFY

The final step in the feedback loop is to notify. This step closes the feedback loop by letting people know their feedback was heard and what you are going to do about it. According to the book CEO Excellence by Carolyn Dewar, Scott Keller, and Vikram Malhotra, "Following up on surveys is the most important part of a survey."[15]

When you notify people that you have listened and are taking action, they are more likely to give you even more feedback, and the quality of that feedback will improve because they know you have truly listened. Often when people first give feedback, they are only sharing the surface level of a problem. But if they see you taking that feedback to heart and making a change, you will get deeper, even more actionable feedback from them. Much like when you have a conversation with someone: if they are engaged and nodding along, you naturally want to share more with them. But if they are distracted, you are less likely to continue.

Most of us are really good at notifying people of our feedback in conversation, but not as good at notifying people in other places. Notifying also acts as a reward in the feedback loop. Just like in The Power of Habit[16] by Charles Duhigg, where the final step in habit formation is a reward, notifying is the acknowledgment that encourages more participation. Even something as small as a "thank you" can motivate someone to provide feedback again.

In building your feedback loops, it's important to create these notifications, even if they are small. Just like setting goals and rewarding yourself after reaching them, these notifications create positive reinforcement, encouraging continued engagement and helping to build a more effective feedback loop.

When building out a feedback loop, keep these five steps top of mind and use them as a guide for where to automate and where to focus your resources. If you include each of these steps in your processes, you will start to see immediate improvement in the feedback you receive. In the next chapter, we will discuss how to close the feedback loop effectively (the last three steps of this loop), and in chapter six, we will offer you a few ways to jumpstart these feedback loops. But first, let's analyze one of the issues that plays into the feedback problem.

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## FEEDBACK LOOPS NEED TUNING

Keep in mind, feedback loops are always at work, whether we notice them or not. One of the most basic examples is pain—like when you touch a hot stove. Your body immediately tells you to pull away. But what happens when that loop breaks down and stops working?

When Blake's son was three, he had dental work done. After getting his mouth numbed, he didn't realize he was chewing on his own lip because he couldn't feel it. As a result, his lips

almost quadrupled in size, and he had sores for weeks! The feedback loop was broken, and he ended up hurting himself without even knowing it. If the feedback is wrong or missing, we make decisions based on faulty data, leading to unintended consequences.

When your feedback loops aren't tuned correctly, it could lead to significant problems because the information it provides is skewed. What's worse is, at the moment, these decisions might seem right. But because they are based on inaccurate or incomplete data, they are the wrong decisions. Just like driving a GPS that's out of sync might lead you somewhere you don't want to go.

Misaligned feedback loops often create a false sense of security. You might feel you are making progress, only to find you are just reinforcing mistakes. For example, if you're running a nonprofit and only hearing positive feedback from

a select group, you might assume everything's going great. But if you miss out on critical voices (those who might be unhappy or disengaged), you aren't seeing the full picture, which means you are not as effective as you think.

Worse still, when these broken loops persist, they can create a feedback cycle that's hard to break. The wrong decisions lead to more flawed feedback, which in turn leads to more misguided actions. Over time, this can steer your organization further away from its goals, making it increasingly difficult to course correct.

So, the question becomes, what is the best way to fine tune our feedback process so it keeps us on track? While automating the first few steps (asking and collecting) of the feedback loop can help manage this, analyzing, implementing, and notifying usually require more direct involvement.

It's a lot like starting a fitness journey. At first, you might think lifting weights is the key, but then you discover that diet, sleep, and consistency are just as important. The same goes for

feedback. There is more to it than just collecting responses. To truly benefit from feedback, you must be ready to adapt your approach as you go. After gathering feedback, you might realize that your initial questions were too broad or not resonating with your audience. In this case, you should refine those questions to dig deeper into the issues that matter most. If feedback indicates that certain programs aren't meeting needs, you should implement targeted changes, then follow up to see if those adjustments are making a difference.

By continually refining your process based on the feedback, you are proactively improving your organization in a way that's responsive to the real, evolving needs of those you serve. This fine-tuning turns feedback into a dynamic tool that shapes your organization's direction.

The bottom line? If you don't set up a feedback loop, one will be set up for you—usually in ways you'd rather avoid. It's better to be proactive in establishing and tuning these loops, so you always get the right data and can make informed decisions that truly benefit those you serve. Homework Now that you've explored feedback loops, it's time to apply this knowledge to your organization. Start by identifying the existing feedback loops within your organization and analyzing if they include the five steps outlined in this chapter. Here are some questions to guide you:

- What feedback loops currently exist in your organization?

- Do each of these five steps exist within your feedback loops? If not, what steps are

  missing or could use improvement?
- Do you have any broken feedback loops that aren't delivering the insights you need?
- Are there ways you can fine-tune your feedback loops to become a more powerful tool to

help steer your organization? Remember: you must take charge of implementing feedback. It won't happen without you. If you want to gather candid feedback, this is where you should start. Then, you need to master the art of closing the feedback loop.

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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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