— A BOOK FOR NONPROFITS —

Candid

The Power of Psychologically Safe Feedback

— BY —

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PULSE FOR GOOD

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CHAPTER

05

Closing the Feedback Loop Effectively

"You give feedback, but then ... crickets. No follow-up. No changes. Just silence."

We've established that feedback loops happen all the time, whether we plan for them or not. They're part of every process, every decision, and every service we provide. But closing the feedback loop (the last three of the five steps) is a deliberate act. It is not, and never will be, a passive process.

Yet, many nonprofits find it difficult to close the feedback loop because they are overwhelmed by a mix of operational constraints, limited resources, and complex reporting structures. Nonprofits juggle a heavy load: fundraising, service delivery, compliance, donor relations, and much more, often with volunteer workers. Amidst all these responsibilities, collecting feedback can feel like one more box to check. Nonprofits still gather feedback because they know it's important, but taking that next step—analyzing it, responding to it, and communicating back to the people who provided it—often falls through the cracks.

You may end up with a disconnected process that leaves vulnerable populations feeling unheard, unimportant, and skeptical of your intentions.

It's a position we've all experienced at least once in our lives. You give feedback, but then . . . crickets. No follow-up. No changes. Just silence. And after that happens a few times, you stop giving feedback altogether because why bother? Clearly, nothing is going to change, so why waste your time trying to shout into the void? This disconnect is what makes the difference between accidental feedback loops and those designed with intention and trust.

Feedback loops can be purposeful or accidental. Things might go your way even if you don't have a set process to close the feedback loop. But accidental loops are a gamble—you might hit the jackpot, or you might lose trust altogether. Instead, we need to close feedback loops with purpose by using time and trust.

Time

Time is one of the biggest factors when closing a feedback loop, but it is not a one-size-fits-all strategy. Depending on the size and nature of the actions you're taking, the time needed to gather meaningful feedback can vary widely. If you're a graphic designer, for instance, you can share a design with someone and get feedback in minutes. But when you're working with large groups of vulnerable individuals, gathering the right feedback can take weeks, months, or even years to understand the full picture and make changes that improve lives.

The timeline for your feedback loop needs to be practical. Sometimes, you can make changes within a week. Other times, feedback comes slowly, and the changes take longer, maybe even years. Your process should account for these differences. The last thing you want is to implement a plan, then let months or even years go by without gathering new feedback. What happens then? You might make a change based on outdated input, wait to see if it helps, and then realize you're still missing the mark.

This happens a lot in government agencies. Long cycles of planning, implementation, and waiting for feedback, only to find out the changes didn't quite land. Then, more time is spent analyzing and adjusting. It's an endless cycle that drags on because the feedback loop is too slow.

The goal is to have the minimum amount of time necessary to gather valuable input. If you implement a change today and people can start seeing the effects tomorrow, your feedback system should start gathering information on the updates tomorrow. Yes, feedback takes time, but your job is to minimize that time without sacrificing the quality of the input.

Take, for example, one of the longest-running studies in human development, the British Birth Cohort Study[17]. It started tracking babies born in 19[58] and is still ongoing. The goal of this

study was to observe and understand how social and economic circumstances influence life outcomes over time. Throughout its seven-decade span, researchers collected a range of data at different points in participants' lives—from childhood to adulthood. Some feedback loops in this study were immediate, like childhood health and development markers, while others were much longer, such as adult employment outcomes, health in midlife, and aging patterns.

Whether your feedback loop is weeks long (like responding to feedback on a specific program tweak) or years long (like tracking the long-term outcomes of a housing initiative), the keys are knowing when and how often to collect feedback and making sure that process is as responsive as possible. Some feedback loops will need to be immediate, while others might require more patience and reflection. By planning for both, you ensure that you're gathering the right data at the right time. Trust

More than time, closing the feedback loop requires trust. Trust is the currency that fuels the entire process. When you ask people to share feedback,

you're essentially asking for an investment of their trust. When you close the feedback loop properly, they earn interest on that trust. The result allows you to set the stage for deeper and stronger relationships down the line.

We tend to assume a trust deficit exists on the side of the people we serve, that they don't trust us enough to offer feedback. However, it's often the organizations or service providers who struggle with trust. They may doubt that individuals will give feedback at all, that the feedback will be useful, or that the people providing it truly understand what's needed. There's a lack of trust that the feedback will be valuable and actionable at all.

For a feedback loop to work effectively, trust must flow both ways. The people giving feedback need to trust that their voices matter, and the organization needs to trust that those

voices will have ideas that could guide them towards creating meaningful change. Fortunately, because the trust deficit is often on the organization's side, there are steps you can take to address it. You can train your staff to embrace feedback, create systems to handle it seriously, and show—through your actions—that you're committed to using feedback to improve services.

Building trust starts with small wins. When you close a feedback loop by showing people their input led to real change, it creates a self-sustaining cycle. Over time, it becomes a trust-building machine. The more feedback you receive and act on, the more trust you gain from the people you serve.

For nonprofits, especially those working with vulnerable communities, the stakes are even higher. When trust is broken, it's not just the feedback loop that fails, it's the relationship with the community. Rebuilding that trust is a much harder task. This is why we need to honor feedback, close the loop, and show that we are committed to making the necessary changes. Trust starts here, and it grows the more we show that we truly do hear those we seek to serve.

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STRATEGIES TO FUEL TRUST

1. Use Anonymity to Strengthen Feedback Loops

Trust is one of the two main keys to closing feedback loops, but sometimes, building that trust requires an extra layer of protection—anonymity. We have found that allowing anonymity is much like offering an emotional safety net

because it acts as a protective bubble that allows people to express their thoughts without fear of personal repercussions.

However, the more specific the feedback is, the easier it is to identify who provided it. If you ask someone how their 1[0] a.m. Wednesday appointment went, it's obvious who's

responding. That's why creating anonymous channels, such as feedback forms, kiosks, or online surveys, gives people the security they need to be completely transparent.

Take the lottery, for example. Winning should be the ultimate form of good news, right? But publicizing a win can bring unwanted attention, pressure, and even safety concerns. That's why many lotteries allow winners to remain anonymous, protecting them from the social consequences of being identified. In a similar way, providing anonymity in feedback processes protects individuals from the potential negative fallout of their honesty.

Witness protection programs and whistleblower protections operate on the same principle: anonymity shields individuals from harm, whether it's physical threats, ostracism, or backlash. This level of protection allows people to share vital information, even in high-stakes situations, without fear of retribution. The protection of anonymity encourages openness where there might otherwise be silence.

2. Allow Peer-to-Peer Feedback

One of the most effective ways to build trust in your feedback process is by introducing peer-to-peer feedback. When feedback is given to someone who shares similar experiences or challenges, there is an immediate connection between the two of them that builds a deeper sense of trust. It's like having someone who's faced the same health issue as you explain what's going on in language that you understand, as opposed to hearing it from a doctor who uses technical jargon to explain what's happening in your body.

In a feedback loop, having a peer advocate or feedback champion can make all the difference. It allows the person giving feedback to feel more comfortable, knowing they're speaking with someone who gets it on a deeper level. They share a common language, not just in

terms of words, but in lived experience. This sense of empathy makes the feedback process feel more genuine and less intimidating, which encourages more honest and open conversations.

For nonprofits, this approach can be particularly powerful when serving vulnerable or underprivileged communities. Having a peer who understands their specific struggles and challenges serve as a feedback advocate can help bridge the gap between service providers and the individuals they serve.

3. Create a Safe and Comfortable Environment

Giving feedback can be intimidating, especially if the situation feels tense. Imagine trying to offer constructive feedback to a police officer while getting a ticket. Not exactly the most comfortable setting, right? In that authoritative interaction, people will hold back sharing their honest thoughts to protect themselves.

When people feel at ease, they're much more likely to provide genuine and useful feedback. The feedback process shouldn't feel like it's happening under a spotlight. In fact, the best environments often remove the pressure and allow people to share their thoughts in ways that feel natural and low stakes. But what feels natural and low stakes to some, might not feel that way to others.

To combat this, provide multiple avenues for feedback. Some people may prefer an anonymous survey, while others might be more comfortable with calling a helpline. Offering multiple options shows you're serious about gathering feedback and you respect the comfort of the individuals providing it.

4. Offer Strength in Numbers

When people band together to give feedback, it empowers them in ways that might not be possible individually. Just like the "they can't arrest everybody" mindset that comes with protests, there is strength in numbers. When many voices unite to amplify a message, it becomes much harder to ignore. We were lucky enough to see this in action.

Marc is a co-founder, and the COO and CFO for Pulse For Good. His daughter Penny struggled with physical development, but doctors kept reassuring him and his wife that Penny would grow out of it. For years, they sought the help of various professionals (chiropractors, therapists, and pediatricians), yet no one could pinpoint the real issue. Then, Penny broke her leg in a trampoline accident. After the initial relief of knowing the break had healed, it became clear that Penny wasn't returning to her former level of mobility. The injury had exposed something deeper. That's when they were referred to a neurologist who, within minutes, diagnosed Penny with Spinal

Muscular Atrophy (SMA), a genetic condition that causes muscle weakness and wasting.

The diagnosis was a mix of relief and heartbreak, and they quickly started Penny on treatments for her condition. However, while his family was struggling through treatments for this rare disease, Marc's insurance company told him they were no longer covering the medication his daughter needed—a medication that costs around $3^{40},0^{00}$ a year. Marc did everything he could to appeal this decision, but his efforts were denied at every turn. Frustrated and running out of options, Marc turned to LinkedIn, sharing his situation and asking if anyone had connections that could help.

At first, it was a shot in the dark, but within days, his post went viral, garnering over half a million views. As more people saw and shared the post, Marc found himself surrounded by an

> *"Accidental loops are a gamble. You might hit the jackpot, or you might lose trust altogether.*

outpouring of support, giving him the confidence to keep pushing back. The weight of the collective voice was undeniable. The sheer number of people rallying behind him shifted the power dynamics. Marc wasn't just a single, frustrated parent anymore; he had an army of advocates amplifying his message.

Soon, big organizations listened. His insurance provider reached out, acknowledging the post and reversing their decision. They even admitted the drug should have never been denied in the first place!

Marc's story is a powerful reminder that sometimes it takes a crowd to close the feedback loop. What started as a seemingly hopeless situation for one person became a movement. Social media, in this case, was the perfect platform for Marc to share his story, and the collective support from the online community closed the gap and evened the playing field.

Sometimes, an organization might not want the feedback loop to be closed. But when enough people rally behind an issue, they force it closed. Nonprofit

organizations can offer that strength up front by creating environments like town hall meetings to provide feedback. That way, individuals aren't alone when they speak up—there is a group of others in their same situation, rallying behind them.

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RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY

As you add more of these trust-building strategies into your feedback loops to better close them, we also want to highlight that relationships are key in this process. Relationships are the most natural way to fuel trust. When you trust someone, you're more likely to open up to them.

On an individual level, fostering these one-on-one relationships allows for deeper feedback, where people feel comfortable sharing even the tough stuff. This is often seen in

religious settings, where clergy members may have known individuals for decades and have built a strong level of trust. In these scenarios, people are more likely to open up because they don't fear retribution for what they share. It's the same dynamic in close personal relationships with spouses, children, or friends. Trust removes the barriers to honest communication.

But as effective as this approach is, it's also the hardest to maintain at scale. Building deep, trusting relationships takes time, and in a society that has become increasingly transactional, it's difficult to replicate. The more people you need to engage with, the more challenging it becomes to cultivate that kind of one-on-one connection. Time becomes a limited resource, and creating meaningful relationships with hundreds or thousands of people is nearly impossible.

We need to find balance. While you may want to build personal relationships to gather feedback, it takes years—sometimes decades—to reach the point where people feel safe sharing openly. Until then, it's important to offer other ways for people to provide feedback, especially if they're not ready to share directly with you yet.

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KEEP TECHNOLOGY IN MIND

Social media has proven to us repeatedly that relationships and technology go hand in hand. When organizations rely solely on manual feedback collection methods, they can easily become overwhelmed, and valuable feedback gets lost in the shuffle. Technology can help you keep relationships while you scale.

For smaller organizations, direct relationships and manual feedback methods may work well, but as soon as you scale into the hundreds or thousands, gathering and processing feedback becomes far more cumbersome. That's where technology steps in as the scalable solution. By

integrating tech solutions, organizations can keep up with the volume of responses, ensuring every voice is heard, every opinion analyzed, and every opportunity for improvement acted on.

Technology turns an overwhelming flood of data into actionable insights. It ensures that even at scale, feedback loops stay purposeful. We need to invest in technology that helps us scale. Otherwise, we will lose the trust of the communities we serve simply because we don't have the capacity to review, respond, and close the feedback loop. This makes technology a key resource to building stronger relationships with the community.

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FEEDBACK LOOPS IN PRACTICE

We can discuss the theory behind feedback loops all day, but nothing compares to seeing them in action. Here are a few excellent examples of how other nonprofit organizations have closed them.

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CATHOLIC COMMUNITY SERVICES (CCS) TOWN HALLS

Using our system to gather feedback with surveys, Catholic Community Services (CCS) has developed an effective way to use feedback loops to engage their community and drive change. They start by gathering feedback through surveys and then periodically hold town halls where they bring everyone together to discuss the feedback. During these town halls, they go over all the feedback they received and discuss how they will implement the feedback. This approach is where CCS really shines, especially when it comes to the crucial step

of notifying.

Blake had the chance to observe one of these town halls at a homeless drop-in center. The process was simple yet powerful. After reviewing the feedback, the facilitators clearly explained how they were using it to make real changes. But they didn't stop there. At the end of the

session, they pointed out kiosks at the back of the room where attendees could leave more feedback.

What happened next was a clear sign of the success of their approach. As soon as the meeting ended, a line of people formed at the kiosks, eager to provide more input. Why? Because they had just seen that their voices were heard, and that their feedback led to tangible improvements. Through this simple action, CCS built significant trust within the community, and those offering their feedback knew their words would be taken seriously.

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VALLEY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH WHITEBOARDS

Valley Behavioral Health had been using kiosks to gather feedback for a while, but they needed a better way to notify people about what was being done with that feedback. Their solution was brilliantly simple: they placed whiteboards above each kiosk with the messages, "This is what we've heard" and "This is what we're doing."

This small change had a big impact. It immediately let people know that their feedback was being taken seriously and acted upon. The whiteboards showed that the feedback loop was complete, and as a result, responses to the kiosks increased. People could see that their input wasn't just vanishing into a void, but was leading to real changes, sometimes even addressing specific concerns they had raised. What's more, it was a cost-effective solution!

Too often, organizations think they need an elaborate or expensive system to notify people, but this example shows that even something as simple as a whiteboard can make a huge difference. Many of our customers use this tactic now due to its popularity.

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MONTGOMERY COUNTY LIVED EXPERIENCE BOARDS

Montgomery County took a unique approach to their feedback loop by creating a Lived Experience Board, composed mostly of individuals who had experienced homelessness. Initially, they struggled to notify everyone in the broader community of the changes they had made, but they found that this board was an effective way to share updates.

What made this particularly valuable was its dual role. Not only did they receive updates on the lived experience of those they served, but these updates also helped shape the questions being asked in the feedback loop. As the organization worked through the loop, they realized that their questions needed to evolve. If they kept getting the same positive feedback, it was a sign to dig deeper or shift focus to other areas that needed attention.

By engaging with this smaller, more focused group, Montgomery County could refine their feedback process, leading to more targeted and meaningful conversations. This collaboration ensured that the feedback loop was dynamic and adapted to the needs and insights of those with real-life experience. Homework Because we know we can't rely on accidentally closing the feedback loop, let's focus on a few ways to make this close purposeful:

- Take some time to outline the feedback process you currently have in place, whether it's

intentional or accidental. Write down each stage, from how you gather feedback to how

you communicate changes back to your community or team.

- Once you've mapped your process, identify where the loop isn't closed. Ask yourself:

Are we getting back to the people who gave the feedback? Is the feedback being

implemented in a way that's visible to those who gave it?

- Based on what you've learned about time in this chapter, establish a realistic timeline for

your feedback loops. Consider how long it typically takes to gather enough feedback,

analyze it, and make small changes.

- Think of at least three ways you can improve trust building within your feedback process.
- Choose one specific piece of feedback you've received and plan a small, concrete change

to address it. Document the process, from gathering feedback to making the change and

communicating it back to your community. Did the feedback loop feel complete? If not,

what was missing?

Closing the feedback loop is about making changes that people can see and experience. When you take action, even in small ways, you signal to the people you serve that their feedback is valuable and that they are part of the process. That's where real trust is built, and that's what keeps the feedback loop running strong.

Now you know how to effectively close the feedback loop and have some clear examples of how others have done this. Next, we will share a few tips on how to jumpstart your feedback systems into action so you can get started on the right foot from day one.

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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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