— A BOOK FOR NONPROFITS —

Candid

The Power of Psychologically Safe Feedback

— BY —

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PULSE FOR GOOD

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First edition.

Cover and interior design set in EB Garamond, Playfair Display, and Lato.
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CHAPTER

06

Five Factors of Feedback Systems & How to Jumpstart Them

"Feedback is like water. It will always find a way down."

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JUMPSTART THEM

Think of a feedback system as the bigger chain that consists of several smaller, interconnected feedback loops. As we mentioned in chapter four, a feedback loop is a cycle of asking, collecting, analyzing, implementing, and notifying—one individual process. The feedback system, on the other hand, brings multiple loops together. It gathers input from employees, customers, and communities and uses that information to guide decisions and actions. The system ensures that feedback from different loops gets processed in a coordinated, meaningful way.

By creating multiple feedback loops that work together, you build a feedback system that's comprehensive and scalable. It takes data from different places, processes it, and turns it into actionable insights. So, while a loop is one cycle, the system combines all the loops, forming an ongoing, continuous feedback mechanism. A strong feedback system means you have built a structure that constantly pulls in valuable information, allowing you to make smarter, proactive decisions.

Remember, feedback is like water: it will always find a way down. When you don't create proper channels for it to flow within by formalizing the feedback, it can spill into areas you can't control. For example, Southwest Airlines had a booking app where users could book flights, but the feedback left on the app often targeted Southwest itself, not the app performance. There wasn't an easy way for people to share their feedback with Southwest. So, when they had a bad experience, they left their comments in a section that was supposed to be only for feedback on the app's performance. Southwest likely wasn't even seeing most of this feedback because it

was in the app store! As a result, Southwest's issues spilled over into the wrong space, affecting the app's reviews instead.

Feedback flows wherever it finds space, usually landing somewhere unhelpful if you haven't created a formalized system for it. Building a proper feedback system is like installing gutters and flood channels, it allows you to ensure that, whether it's a small stream or a flood of feedback, the information is directed to the right place where it can be addressed.

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5 FACTORS TO JUMPSTART THE FEEDBACK SYSTEM

Over the years of working with organizations to build and formalize their feedback systems, we have identified a handful of key factors that consistently lead to success. Whether you are starting out, or trying to refine an existing process, these five areas can help you jumpstart your feedback system and make it more effective.

1. Purposefully Happening

This means having feedback loops that gather the right information, not just any information. Think about the frustration of trying to leave a review only to find a broken page or an unused comment box gathering dust. Your feedback system needs to be deliberate, so it is clear that feedback is being actively collected and used.

Many organizations don't do this because there is often an unconscious desire not to seek feedback. Or they tend to think no news is good news. But that's a trap. If you don't get feedback, it's likely that problems are simmering beneath the surface, waiting to bubble up in ways you can't control. On the other hand, purposeful feedback systems help highlight areas for improvement and often reveal positive feedback you might not expect. Many organizations are

surprised by how much good feedback they receive when they finally open proper feedback channels. They discover they have been providing great experiences all along but weren't aware of what people liked.

A purposeful feedback system prevents information, both positive and negative, from slipping through the cracks. People want to share what's going well, and if they trust you, what will make their experience better. But if there is no purposeful place to provide feedback, that valuable information will be lost, or worse, be shared in situations and conditions that are damaging to your organization's reputation.

2. Immediate

This might feel obvious, but the faster you can collect feedback after an experience, the more accurate and useful it will be. People's memories fade,

emotions dull, and details get lost over time. If someone is asked to provide feedback months after an event, they are unlikely to remember the nuances of their experience. You'll end up with vague extremes like: "It was great!" or "It was terrible!" without the actionable details.

If you were asked to review an oil change six months ago, you probably wouldn't remember specific things like how the technician interacted with you or whether you appreciated how quickly the service was handled. All you might recall is whether it was generally good or bad. But if feedback is requested immediately after the experience, those finer points are fresh. Maybe the tech was particularly helpful, or maybe something about the process could have been improved. Either way, that specific information is more useful to the organization than generalizations about the service.

Immediacy equals accuracy. When providing feedback to a hotel, it's the difference between someone saying, "I hated my stay," versus, "The towels in my room were rough." One is hard to address; the other is an easy fix.

This also applies to how you ask the question. We have found when you get specific with the question, you get better answers. If you ask people about their overall experience at an event, you'll likely get decent but vague answers. However, when you ask how the food was at the event, you get a lot more feedback on what was good and what wasn't. Especially if you ask on the day that food was served.

To capture feedback quickly, many businesses use surveys on receipts or offer kiosks with simple questions. These often come in the form of quick prompts at self-checkouts or the survey at the end of Zoom meetings. These small, immediate questions give people a chance to reflect on their experience while it's still fresh in their minds.

One final note here: immediate feedback can act as a release valve. People tend to give instant feedback when they are upset, and if you don't offer a simple and quick way for them to share it with you, they will find other outlets. Often, front-line staff bear the brunt of this feedback, which can be stressful. But when you provide a dedicated space for feedback (like a kiosk or comment box), you can redirect that energy away from your employees and capture the insights in a way that's more useful for your organization.

3. Convenient

When it comes to feedback systems, convenience is a game-changer. If it's easy for people to give you feedback, they will. If it's a hassle, they won't bother.

Let's look at Southwest Airlines again. If you asked them, they would likely say they have a feedback system in place. You can go to their webpage anytime and leave feedback. But this is only convenient for Southwest, not necessarily for their customers. People don't want to hunt down a webpage and fill out a form when they are already frustrated or tired. Sure, Southwest has taken a step in the right direction, but without thinking about what is more convenient for the customer, they miss out on important insights.

Another great example of an inconvenient feedback system is the surveys you get on receipts. Have you ever actually filled one out? If the answer is no, most of the population is the same. Visiting a website to enter a code and maybe get a free entree sounds easy, right? But most people won't bother because the effort to complete the survey feels like more work than the reward is worth. Dangling a prize in front of people doesn't guarantee you will get feedback, but convenience will greatly increase how much feedback you receive.

You have probably seen this firsthand. At Walmart, for example, at the self-checkout, a survey pops up on the screen right after your purchase. You are already in the flow, and your hands are on the screen, so you're more likely to fill out the survey. It's quick, easy, and convenient. That's what we are looking to create when it comes to convenience in your feedback systems.

Now, think about a redeye flight where the airline hands you a paper survey as you're walking off the plane. You're tired, cranky, and just want to get to your hotel. Filling out a physical survey at that moment is the last thing on your mind. It might be convenient for the airline, but it's definitely not for you. That's why a lot of feedback systems fail—they prioritize the organization's convenience over the customer's.

How do you know if your feedback system is truly convenient? You need to ask yourself: are you letting people give feedback when it's best for them, not just for you? Sure, immediacy is important, but not if it's inconvenient for the person giving feedback.

Employee reviews are another great example of this. For the employer, it is convenient to gather feedback during the scheduled review. But for the employee, they might not have anything specific to say at that moment. Maybe a month later they'll have valuable feedback, but by then, the opportunity has

passed, and the organization hasn't created a place employees can continually submit their feedback, so the insight gets lost.

Convenience, like immediacy, is required for gathering accurate and meaningful feedback. If you make it hard for people to give their opinions, they'll either skip it or share it somewhere you don't control. But if you make it easy and convenient, you will get better feedback every time.

4. Scalable

One of the biggest hurdles organizations face when setting up feedback systems is scalability. Getting feedback in small doses is one thing, but how do you handle mass amounts of input without letting people down? Without a plan to manage and respond to that input, even the best intentions can lead to frustration and lost trust.

In Australia, floodplains act as natural buffers, redirecting excess water to prevent damage to nearby cities. Just like floodplains manage overwhelming amounts of water, your feedback system needs a plan for handling large volumes of input. If you aren't ready for the flow, and can't effectively close the feedback loop, you'll lose trust from those submitting

feedback. A well-built feedback system must be able to redirect and process large volumes of feedback to avoid overwhelming your organization.

> *When you don't create channels for feedback to flow, it spills into places you can't control.*

Let's circle back to Southwest Airlines and the paper survey people received as they deboarded their flights. We've already pointed out how that method isn't convenient, but it's also not scalable. It costs a lot to employ someone to stand at the end of a jetway all day long, handing out and collecting surveys, then (supposedly) reviewing each physical piece of paper for valuable insights. Over time, this approach just doesn't work. You can't have people stationed everywhere to gather feedback. It's not efficient.

So, what do organizations often do instead? They opt for something like a feedback link at the bottom of an email. But while this solves the scalability issue, it often fails at being convenient or immediate. People don't feel compelled to click, and the feedback that does come in may not meet the needs of the organization in any meaningful way.

A scalable feedback system should strike a balance between immediacy, convenience, and efficiency. It should be automated enough that you don't need to hire an army of people to gather feedback, but still personal enough that people feel like their voices are being heard.

A good example of a scalable feedback system is one that integrates technology, like automated surveys or kiosks, while also allowing for human interaction when necessary. For instance, an organization could use feedback kiosks at key locations where customers can quickly rate their experience, combined with online surveys triggered by specific interactions. These systems can gather large amounts of data automatically, yet still provide personal touches, such as follow-up emails or meetings for more detailed feedback, so the voices of those giving input are acknowledged and acted upon.

However, scalability doesn't just apply to gathering feedback; it also applies to closing the feedback loop. You can't follow up one on one with every single person who gives feedback, especially as the volume increases. But you can make your actions visible and accessible to many people at once. You could display the results or changes made based on feedback in a public space or online forum. This approach closes the loop with the people who gave feedback and encourages more people to engage because you have shown their input will be taken seriously.

Scalability is about building systems that grow with you, allowing for large-scale input without compromising the quality of the feedback process. If done right, it creates a positive cycle where people are more willing to provide feedback because they see tangible results.

5. Psychologically Safe

To gather honest, actionable responses, our feedback systems need to be psychologically safe. How many times have you had to fill out an annual review survey, with space for providing feedback, knowing that raises come on the next paycheck? You might have genuine feedback to share, but the fear of repercussions often leads you to hold back. This is a failure of a psychologically

safe feedback system. It's incredible how happy everyone is with their boss and company when raises are around the corner, they're new, or the economy isn't going well. If you give them some time, some space, and some confidence that they can get another job, you'll find people have a lot more to say.

Some companies try to fix this by making surveys anonymous, but too many of us know anonymity usually isn't the case. Blake's wife once took an anonymous survey at her organization and shared some negative feedback only to have her boss call her almost

immediately after to talk about her "anonymous" comment. Sadly, this is not an unusual situation.

Today, people are savvier than ever about digital privacy. Even if a survey claims to be anonymous, there's often a lingering suspicion that the company knows who filled it out. Device tracking, IP addresses, and follow-up "thank you" messages in your email after completing the survey all add to the belief that the feedback isn't truly anonymous. Handwritten surveys are even worse for psychological safety. You literally hand the survey back to the person who asked for the feedback! It feels like there is no real barrier between you and the individual reviewing your responses.

If you want to create a truly psychologically safe feedback system, you need to design it in a way that eliminates these fears. One way to do this is by providing feedback options that don't involve personal devices. This is why we like public kiosks or a shared computer. Additionally, in your surveys, ask broad non-identifying questions that don't single people out. For example, instead of asking, "Who's the best person you work with?" ask for feedback on general team dynamics or processes.

Anonymity is another way to create psychological safety, but it can be tricky to truly achieve. Creating real anonymity starts with not asking questions that give away personal details and providing a way to complete the survey that doesn't link back to a personal device. This will build confidence that the feedback truly won't be traced—otherwise, people will naturally hold back.

But anonymity is not the only way to foster psychological safety. Building trust between groups with power disparities is another effective approach. Psychological safety means people feel secure enough to share honest feedback, even when there is a clear power imbalance. If you

have built a strong relationship with someone, they are more likely to provide candid feedback because of the trust between you. But keep in mind that those on the high end of the power disparity often overestimate how comfortable someone is sharing feedback. Executives will often say that their teams feel they can share anything, but the staff is withholding feedback out of fear.

The person providing feedback needs to believe that their ideas will be used constructively, and without negative consequences. Which will then make them feel secure enough to be honest because their input will be valued rather than weaponized. If someone believes their feedback could harm their standing, job, or relationships, they will either avoid giving it or water it down. The more trust you build, the more candid and useful the feedback will become.

This is one of the reasons (among many) we named this book Candid. We want you to move past the idea of simply gathering feedback and assuming what you see is the truth of the situation. Instead, we want to help you create feedback loops that actually reveal the needs of those you serve so you can get to the heart of a situation and make a true difference. These five factors we've listed to jumpstart your feedback systems will help you level up your feedback gathering and the effectiveness of that feedback.

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TIPS TO OVERCOME STAGNATION

Now that we understand how to jumpstart our feedback systems, we would also like to address stagnation. This tends to happen when a system that once held promise is now stuck in neutral, either because the organization did not have the processes in place to manage the feedback, or it's clear that the feedback being provided isn't actually heard.

Unfortunately, we have seen stagnation occur many times. A nonprofit makes a concerted effort to collect input from everyone involved: they have sent out surveys, held town hall meetings, and even set up feedback boxes. But months go by, and nothing happens with the feedback. This is often because the organization spends all their time and energy on the collection and analysis of the feedback, then don't have any time remaining to implement changes and close the feedback loop. The organization is too overwhelmed by day-to-day

operations to analyze the data, let alone implement changes. And soon, clients start to notice their suggestions are ignored. Feedback boxes gather dust, town halls become empty, and engagement dwindles, causing frustration on all sides, all because nothing is done with the feedback provided.

That is where automation comes in and can help with creating simplicity in your feedback system. Automating feedback collection ensures a steady flow of real-time information without extra manual work. This keeps the feedback loop active and gives you the time you need to then analyze and act on that data. It also reduces the risk of data being overlooked or delayed, and allows for feedback to be gathered continuously, making the system more scalable and convenient.

When feedback becomes part of a seamless and ongoing cycle, it keeps the loop flowing and allows the organization to stay responsive to the needs of those they serve. The more simplistic and automated your system, the more likely it is to lead to impactful change because you can focus on making those changes a reality and not spending your energy elsewhere!

Remember that building a solid feedback system is about more than just gathering opinions—it's about creating a sustainable cycle that continuously provides you with valuable insights and causes lasting change. By focusing on purposeful collection, immediacy,

convenience, scalability, and psychological safety, you ensure that your organization is always in touch with the needs of those you serve. If you keep your system simple, and look for places to automate it, you'll avoid stagnation, which will help you increase trust. Homework Here are a few practical steps to help apply the concepts within this chapter:

- Audit your current feedback loops and ask yourself what formal or informal systems you

already have in place. Are they working? Are they capturing the right information?

- Pick one feedback loop to improve or implement. Start small to ensure you can manage

it, whether it's for employees, clients, or the community.

- Focus on immediacy and convenience in your feedback loops. How can you make it

easier for people to give feedback right after their experience?

- Evaluate whether your feedback methods are psychology safe. Do people feel

  comfortable giving honest responses?

- Make sure your feedback system can handle growth and won't stagnate as it gets bigger.

  Are your processes built to handle more input without overwhelming you?

Keep in mind that when you formalize the feedback loops you want, you will ensure your organization remains adaptable and aligned with the voices that matter most.

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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