— A BOOK FOR NONPROFITS —

Candid

The Power of Psychologically Safe Feedback

— BY —

Remington Rainey · Blake Kohler · Marc Weaver

PULSE FOR GOOD

Candid: The Power of Psychologically Safe Feedback
Copyright © 2025 by Remington Rainey, Blake Kohler, and Marc Weaver.
All rights reserved.

Published by Pulse For Good.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the publisher, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

First edition.

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

CHAPTER

07

The Difference Between vulnerable and Vulnerable

"Being vulnerable is a state of life. Being vulnerable is a choice."

Vulnerable

In the first half of this book, we've outlined why feedback is important, how to overcome defaults that might affect your feedback gathering, the five stages of the feedback loop you should include, and how to jumpstart then close that loop effectively. This is all focused on your organization's processes and what you need to know to gather more feedback effectively.

Now, let's shift our focus. The next half of this book will analyze what it means to be part of a vulnerable population and how fear that comes with living vulnerably might affect the way you give feedback. We believe understanding this, and having strategies to counteract it, will also help you better gather the feedback you need so your organization can improve lives.

Let's start by looking at default power distributions. For example, a resident at a homeless shelter who is asked to provide feedback on the services they're receiving might hold back from providing truly honest feedback. While they might have legitimate concerns (perhaps about the cleanliness of the facilities or the quality of meals), they rely on this shelter for food, warmth, and safety. Voicing dissatisfaction feels risky. What if their comments make them seem ungrateful or lead to unspoken repercussions? The power imbalance creates a fear of retaliation, even if the organization's intentions are entirely positive.

The same types of issues have been found when students are asked to give feedback about their academic professors. Research has shown that one of the main factors contributing to discomfort in providing feedback is the fear of potential consequences. In a study published in the Journal of Graduate Medical Education[18], learners expressed concerns about how their written feedback might impact their future career opportunities.

Power distributions change what people are willing to share. When an organization has all the control, like an airline, school, or even an employer, you're less likely to voice honest, critical feedback, especially if you still need to rely on those who asked for the feedback in the first place. You might hold back on sharing discomforts, frustrations, or even serious issues, because you are unsure if there might be consequences.

This becomes even more difficult when someone's livelihood, home, or legal status is at stake; that person's "bacon" is literally on the line. When

individuals face eviction, parole reviews, or immigration hearings, the stakes become much higher, and providing honest feedback can be incredibly difficult. The larger the power disparity, the less someone will share. The fear of retribution or that their situation might become worse due to their feedback becomes the main reason to withhold information.

But, in non-vulnerable circumstances, people can give feedback with less hesitation because they have little to lose. For example, when dining at a restaurant, a customer can leave a negative review on a receipt or an online platform without fearing direct consequences to their meal quality or future dining experience. Similarly, when someone shops online and fills out a survey about shipping times or product quality, they can be brutally honest because the feedback is disconnected from their ongoing relationship with the company. These are low-stakes environments where the feedback, whether positive or critical, doesn't impact the giver's access to essential services or their sense of security.

In these situations, feedback is more likely to flow freely because the power dynamic is balanced or even skewed toward the customer. The business competes for loyalty and knows that negative feedback might highlight areas for improvement but is unlikely to threaten the customer relationship. Compare this to vulnerable populations, where even the smallest critique can feel

like a risk to their well-being. When someone relies on an organization for shelter, food, or medical care, the stakes are entirely different.

Our goal should be to minimize this power disparity, because when power dynamics come into play, the stakes of providing feedback change dramatically. It can be difficult to spot these power disparities if you aren't the vulnerable individual, and it can be even harder to close if you don't understand why these individuals might be withholding information. To help us spot this distinction, let's consider two different types of vulnerability.

§

VULNERABLE VS. VULNERABLE

There are a few different types of vulnerability. The first is being "Vulnerable" due to circumstances beyond your control. The second is "vulnerable" by choice. We like to make the distinction between the two with a capital "V."

When we talk about vulnerability by choice, we're referring to situations where you consciously decide to expose yourself emotionally or take on some risk, knowing that you have the power to withdraw or shield yourself if things get too uncomfortable. You control how much you open up, and you can always retreat when necessary. It is a vulnerability on your own terms.

Brene Brown often describes this vulnerability as the courage to be imperfect, to share our uncertainties, knowing that we hold the power to decide how much we reveal. It's a temporary exposure, like confiding in a trusted friend, but we are still in control. In this kind of vulnerability, we can step in or out as needed, managing how much we reveal and when to pull back. It is often found in specific, short-term situations, like preparing for a job interview. If you have other opportunities or financial stability, you might feel vulnerable, but you aren't desperate. You still have some agency.

The difference between the upper case "V" and lowercase "v" is the choice. Vulnerability due to circumstances beyond your control refers to situations that people are trapped in, without the power or resources to escape. This type of Vulnerability is not chosen; it's forced upon someone by broader systemic issues like poverty, hunger, or trauma. People facing these challenges don't have the luxury of choosing when or how they're exposed to risk. Instead, their entire existence is shaped by these forces, leaving them with little agency. Their survival, dignity, and basic needs are always on the line, and this constant state of Vulnerability deeply impacts how they engage with the world.

If you're facing eviction or are subject to systemic discrimination, your options are drastically limited. This Vulnerability happens when people face chronic or systemic challenges, like long-term unemployment or homelessness. A 20[07] study conducted by the University of Connecticut's Center on Aging found that worry over retaliation was common in supportive housing and long-term care settings. Roughly one-fourth of the residents reported fearing retaliation for raising concerns, with some even stating, "That's why nobody makes a complaint"—fear of retribution. The study further concludes that, "Retaliation and the fear of retaliation is a reality in any supportive housing situation."[19]

In these cases, the stakes are incredibly high, and the choices aren't about personal preference anymore—they are about survival.

Recognizing these two forms of vulnerability helps us understand how people navigate risk, choice, and agency in their lives. While someone who is vulnerable by choice can retreat from risk, those who are systemically Vulnerable are often trapped in their circumstances. To better help those we serve, we need to understand how people experience risk differently based

on their situation. Which leads us to examine contextual risk vs. cumulative risk because it sheds light on how vulnerabilities evolve and compound over time.

§

CONTEXTUAL RISK VS. CUMULATIVE RISK

When we willingly open ourselves up to vulnerability in controlled settings, we face what's known as contextual risk. You may risk emotional discomfort or personal rejection, but these are risks you can bounce back from relatively quickly. For those who have access to resources, support, or other safety nets, contextual risks tend to be manageable. These risks are part of everyday life, and the consequences of failure are usually recoverable. A failed job interview may sting, but if you have financial stability or another job lined up, the fallout is contained. You can move forward without too much disruption to your life.

Cumulative risk, however, occurs in situations of systemic Vulnerability. In these cases, the risks add up over time, compounding the person's exposure to harm. Someone in an abusive housing situation, for instance, may face ongoing threats of violence, eviction, or financial instability. Each new risk they encounter builds upon previous harms, increasing their overall Vulnerability. The cumulative nature of this risk creates a constant, heavy burden, making it much harder to recover or gain stability.

For example, the mayor of Boulder, Colorado once decided to experience what homelessness was like by spending four days sleeping on the street.[20] While their effort could be commended for fostering empathy, it's important to recognize that they were "vulnerable" not "Vulnerable." They always had a choice to go home. They bought equipment, spent a few days on the streets, and then retreated to their soft bed. At any point, they could have chosen to end

the experience. This type of situational vulnerability is a far cry from the systemic Vulnerability faced by those who are chronically homeless and do not

have the option to "opt out."

> *Power imbalance creates a fear of retaliation, even when intentions are entirely positive.*

Recognizing the difference between contextual and cumulative risk helps us understand the challenges Vulnerable people face. But it's not just the risks that weigh them down; there is also the issue of power. The less power someone has, the more it affects the decisions they make, including whether they feel safe speaking up. This power imbalance plays a huge role in how people give feedback, or if they even feel comfortable offering it, and that's where things can get tricky.

§

HOW POWER DYNAMICS AFFECT FEEDBACK

Even if an authority figure has no intention of exploiting their power, the perception of the imbalance will influence how Vulnerable individuals make decisions. When two people have equal power, they're on the same level. But when someone's in a Vulnerable position—like needing a home—that power gap becomes much wider. The more vulnerable you are, the more the other side holds power, and that affects everything from what you say to how you act.

This power imbalance extends beyond personal interactions to data collection itself. Vulnerable individuals are often structurally excluded from data collection processes because they lack access to the necessary technologies, such as smartphones or consistent internet access[21]. It's hard to make the decision to respond to feedback if you don't have the means to give it. This exclusion reinforces their marginalization, preventing their voices from being heard in important decisions. But even if a Vulnerable person does have the ability to give feedback, they won't unless they trust you.

Sadly, people and organizations in positions of power often operate without fully grasping the dynamics that prevent Vulnerable individuals from providing honest feedback. They may genuinely believe their feedback systems are open and effective, assuming that because they've created opportunities for input, people will naturally share their thoughts. What they fail to recognize are the layers of fear, mistrust, and perceived risks that can silence those who rely on their services. The result is a disconnect between what organizations think they are doing, and how their services are actually experienced. When those in positions of power fail to acknowledge the barriers to honest feedback, they miss out on crucial insights that could refine their services.

§

IDENTIFYING VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

One of the clearest ways to determine if someone is Vulnerable is by asking whether they have a choice. Vulnerability often stems from a lack of power or agency in a situation. If someone has no ability to leave or change their circumstances, then they are likely in a Vulnerable situation. The more limited a person's choices, the more Vulnerable they become.

A common example is people mistaking homelessness as a choice. For most, it's anything but. While the individual may have made certain decisions that led to their current situation, those choices were often constrained by forces outside of their control, like job loss, medical bills, or a lack of affordable housing. This is one of the large problems many nonprofits hope to solve.

As reported in the State of Homelessness Report: 20[24] Edition from the National Alliance to End Homelessness[22], over 6[53],0[00] people experienced homelessness in January

20[23], a 1[2].1% increase from the previous year, the largest jump since data collection began in 20[07]. Despite efforts to house more people, the system remains overwhelmed, and more families fall into homelessness every day. In fact, according to Family Gateway, "1 in 3[0] American children experience homelessness. They live with or without their families, in shelters, cars, and abandoned buildings."[23]

These individuals are in a state of systemic Vulnerability, with little to no agency to change their situation. In such situations, choices are severely limited,

making it harder to speak up or take meaningful action. It's similar to falling into a swimming pool with no water. Once you're down there, it's incredibly difficult to climb out, and the choices available to you drastically change. Without access to stable housing, they face constant, cumulative risks that compound over time, and many power dynamics are in play which will affect the feedback they are willing to give.

But homelessness isn't the only place a person can be Vulnerable. Vulnerability shows up in many different power dynamics, such as in the workplace when staff members give feedback to their boss. The fear of repercussions can make honest feedback difficult. A citizen providing feedback to a police officer or a refugee speaking to an immigration officer face similar challenges. Even in a classroom, a student giving feedback to their teacher experiences the pressure of power disparity. In each case, the power balance shapes how much truth people feel safe sharing.

In such power disparities, this unspoken feedback often builds up like a soda being shaken. The longer the pressure builds without a release, the more explosive the reaction will be. That's why you often see people reaching a breaking point where they can no longer hold back, leading to dramatic outbursts of feedback.

So, the question becomes: how can we identify and reach these Vulnerable populations and close the power gap to better serve them? The answer lies in addressing the powerful role that fear plays in silencing Vulnerable populations, which we will dig into in the next chapter. Homework

Here are a few practical ways to analyze how Vulnerability might be affecting your feedback systems:

- Reflect on your organization or community. Who are the people most impacted by power

imbalances? Identify power gaps by asking yourself if they have choices in their

situation, and if not, they are likely in a Vulnerable position.

- Consider areas where power dynamics may be influencing feedback. Are there people

within your organization or community who hold more power, and how does that affect

the feedback you receive? This could be between staff and management, citizens and

officials, or clients and service providers.

- Develop or improve feedback systems that allow Vulnerable populations to safely and

anonymously share their experiences. How can you create spaces where they feel safe to

speak openly without fear of repercussions?

- Think about the contextual and cumulative risks that people in your feedback loop might

be experiencing. What small changes can you make to reduce those risks and make

feedback a safer process for everyone involved?

- Consider what steps you can take to close the power gap for those in Vulnerable

situations. How can you increase their choices, agency, or support systems to help them

feel more empowered?

• • •

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.

PULSE FOR GOOD · pulseforgood.com