— 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

08

Effects of Fear

"Fear, left unchecked, becomes a powerful barrier to effective decision-making."

Fear is one of the most powerful influences on human decision-making. When fear strikes, our bodies enter survival mode: adrenaline and cortisol flood our systems, our heart rates spike, muscles tense, our digestion slows, and our blood pressure rises. These physiological responses are designed to keep us safe in dangerous situations, but they also have unintended consequences, particularly when it comes to decision-making.

Think about the last time you walked into a room full of strangers, the way your heart raced when you gave an important presentation, or how you hesitated before speaking to someone much higher up than you in a company. That tight feeling, that inner voice telling you to hold back is fear, and it is likely distorting your choices. In these situations, fear makes us stumble over our words or say the wrong thing. But in more dire situations, it can make us freeze altogether or avoid taking action entirely. Fear can stop us from speaking up when it matters most, making it harder to advocate for ourselves or others. In critical moments, this hesitation can lead to missed opportunities, unresolved issues, or decisions that prioritize short-term comfort over long-term progress. Fear, left unchecked, can become a powerful barrier to effective decision-making.

Now, we want you to imagine how this plays out for someone experiencing homelessness or abuse. For them, fear is a constant presence that shapes every decision. Imagine someone in a shelter, afraid to report mistreatment because they worry it might jeopardize their place to stay. Or someone trapped in an abusive relationship, hesitating to seek help because the risk of retaliation feels more immediate and overwhelming than the hope of safety. In these moments, fear distorts their decision-making and narrows their options, making it nearly impossible to act in their own best interest.

Stress, which is closely tied to fear, has been shown to significantly alter how we evaluate risks and respond to challenges. For instance, research conducted on animals found that stressed subjects made riskier choices 7^0% of the time, compared to only 5^0% in non-stressed conditions.[24] This indicates a clear shift in decision-making patterns under stress, with fear and heightened stress prompting individuals to prioritize immediate gains over cautious, calculated decisions. Humans, too, are vulnerable to these shifts. Medical students under chronic stress were found to rely on habitual behaviors 4^0% more often, losing the ability to adapt and make goal-directed choices.[25] This

reliance on "autopilot" is a coping mechanism that sacrifices adaptability for perceived safety.

Interestingly, fear's influence evolves over time. In the short term, the initial stress response can make us cautious and risk-averse, helping us avoid danger. But additional research has shown that as stress lingers and cortisol levels rise, this cautiousness can flip into impulsiveness, leading to riskier decisions and poor outcomes.

Why do we bring this all up? Because a Vulnerable individual who is stressed and feels helpless will give feedback differently. They are consistently concerned that sharing honest feedback could be received negatively and stop the service they receive altogether. That hesitation, rooted in fear and overwhelming stress, is the same mechanism driving risk aversion in high-stakes situations. Their fear of retaliation, judgment, or being ignored creates a feedback vacuum, leaving organizations blind to the very insights they need to improve.

This is why understanding fear and its impacts is key when gathering feedback. If we don't account for the ways fear shapes the behavior of those we serve, we risk creating feedback systems that perpetuate silence instead of encouraging honest, actionable input. Organizations

that work with Vulnerable populations need to recognize the barriers fear creates and actively work to dismantle those barriers so they can open the door to the feedback they need.

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HOW FEAR INFLUENCES DECISIONS

There's a memorable line in Disney's Frozen from Kristoff's adoptive mother who sings, "People make bad choices if they're mad, or scared, or stressed." It's spot on. When we're under stress, whether it's from fear, anger, or pressure, our judgment becomes cloudy, and our brain starts prioritizing immediate emotional responses over logical thinking.

This is because stress activates the limbic system (the part of our brain that controls fight-or-flight responses) while pushing aside the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for reasoning and decision-making. This system evolved to keep us alive in threatening situations. However, in today's world, it often

works against us, especially in high-pressure environments like the workplace. Instead of a tiger threatening us, we perceive deadlines, responsibilities, and conflicts as immediate threats, and this leads to decisions made from stress and fear rather than careful thought.

We see this all the time in everyday life. Take Royce White, an NBA player who stepped away from a promising career because of his intense fear of flying. For most people, this would seem like a manageable hurdle, but for White, the fear was overwhelming. In the same way, fear can drive students to choose colleges closer to home, even if it's not their first choice, simply to avoid the discomfort of being far away from friends and family.

Similarly, many employees stay in jobs they hate because they fear the uncertainty of making less money elsewhere. This concept of "golden handcuffs" traps people in situations that don't serve their long-term happiness or growth. In fact, fear of negative consequences in the

workplace can prevent individuals from even discussing their stress. A 20[14] study found that 8[0]% of workers didn't feel comfortable discussing stress with their employers, largely out of fear of being stigmatized or losing opportunities for promotion.[26] Fear keeps us rooted in place, convincing us that staying safe is better than taking risks, even when those risks could lead to growth or greater satisfaction. This can be seen time and time again in our professional and personal lives.

For instance, Blake met a VP at a conference who confided that despite her success and position as a keynote speaker, she had been homeless on and off for over a decade, often living out of her car. She feared that revealing her situation might jeopardize her professional standing. This fear of judgment kept her from accessing housing support, even though she was gainfully employed and an ideal candidate for assistance.

Fear isn't just an emotional response; it is often a roadblock to the decisions we make. For Vulnerable populations, fear manifests as a barrier to seeking help, giving feedback, or making choices that would improve their circumstances. The longer fear holds sway over decision-making, the more it limits our ability to act in our own best interests.

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IRRATIONAL FEARS VS. RATIONAL FEARS

Blake has a well-known fear of bees. It's an irrational fear, but it still drives his decisions. He's not allergic, and logically, he knows a bee won't harm him. Yet, his gut reaction is to avoid bees at all costs. In fact, if he sees a bee in the same room, he will leave the room quickly and without a second thought.

Once, while giving a presentation, he included a slide of an Asian giant hornet to illustrate a point, but he couldn't bring himself to look at the image. Despite knowing his fear is irrational, he still tends to let it override his actions. It impacts his decision-making just as much as a rational fear would.

When it comes to fear, it doesn't matter if the threat we perceive is real or not—what does matter is the emotional response it triggers.

Providers often tell us, "We would never use our power to hurt people," but that doesn't necessarily matter in the minds of those giving feedback. Even if a fear seems unfounded, the perception alone can be powerful enough to limit open communication. This is especially true when people hear stories of others facing negative consequences for giving feedback, even if those instances are rare or exaggerated. Those stories stick. And they shape how feedback is given or withheld.

A great example of irrational fear is the way people often react to police. Even if someone hasn't had a negative interaction with law enforcement, just seeing the flashing lights in the rearview mirror can cause panic. This is a power disparity that triggers irrational fear. In fact, if a police officer is driving behind them without their lights on, many people will turn off the road to avoid them even if they haven't done anything wrong! This fear may not be based on any real threat, especially if the person has no reason to be concerned, but the power dynamic between the individual and the officer triggers anxiety. It's the perception of authority, combined with the unknown, that sparks this irrational response.

This dynamic is similar to what happens when employees are asked to provide feedback to organizational leaders. Even if the leaders of the organization say they are open to criticism

and would never retaliate, the fear of what could happen is enough to make people hold back. Irrational fears guide behavior just as much as rational ones.

> *For someone experiencing homelessness or abuse, fear is a constant presence that shapes every decision.*

Even rational fears, when amplified, influence decision-making in subtle yet significant ways. Remington is a co-founder and CRO at Pulse For Good, his wife meticulously chooses a hoodie for plane rides to prevent her hair from touching the germ-covered seat. And when sitting in any waiting area, she prefers metal, plastic, or leather chairs over fabric chairs, knowing germs thrive in softer materials. Though a fear of germs is somewhat rational, the actual risk is low for most people.

This same cautious behavior shows up in unexpected areas, like technology. Logically, it is way more effective to send out a survey link. We can swear up and down that it's anonymous. But email and text survey links get less responses than paper surveys because it doesn't feel as anonymous. People often fear tracking through embedded pixels or QR codes. These fears, though exaggerated, still cause them to avoid filling out forms, opting for more anonymous methods like paper surveys or hardware with no identifying data.

In fact, hardware systems we use with no tracking or data attached get 6-7 times the response rate compared to digital surveys! This is despite the fact that a digital survey is far more convenient for businesses. Fear of tracking drives people to seek out more secure, private options, even when it's not truly necessary. Webcam covers exploded in popularity for similar reasons. People are afraid of being watched through their devices, prompting tech companies to build in physical shutters for peace of mind. While the actual chances of being spied on are minimal, the market responded to the irrational fear, and now it's a standard feature on most laptops.

All this to say, whether fear is rational or irrational, it still impacts our decision-making abilities. But if we understand the root cause of that fear, and how it emotionally triggers the populations we serve, we can account for it when creating our feedback loops. Now, let's take a closer look at how fear influences what we say when we do give feedback. Vague or Exaggerated

Feedback

Let's say this is an ideal world where you have already helped the populations you serve overcome the fear of giving you feedback in the first place. This is only the first hurdle. The second comes with the feedback.

Even when we make the decision to give feedback, fear affects what we say, and the language we use. In fight-or-flight mode, our language goes into one of two directions: it gets more vague and less explicit because you are afraid to call something out, or it becomes exaggerated due to pent-up emotions.

When feedback is vague, it might sound like saying, "There are things to improve," instead of saying, "You're bad at your job." We tone it down, afraid to speak too loudly or directly. Feedback is exaggerated when people turn up the volume on their emotions to be heard. Think of someone who cries when they get a speeding ticket, or someone who yells at the customer service counter. Yes, these are overreactions, but they are driven by fear and pent-up emotions. This emotional amplification is a defense mechanism, a way to shield against the perceived threat of not being taken seriously.

We often hear organizations say, "We want people to feel comfortable not giving us five stars." They know that 97% of five-star reviews aren't reflective of reality and that completely positive feedback doesn't help an organization improve. But when they ask for feedback, they

only get one of the two responses above (vague or exaggerated). To solve this, when we consult with organizations, one of the first things we suggest is to change the way they ask questions.

If you're consistently getting perfect scores, it's time to dig deeper. A question like, "What is one thing you would change about the service you're receiving?" can open the door to more honest, nuanced feedback.

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FEEDBACK CUTS BOTH WAYS

Feedback is often a two-way street, and fear exists on both sides. Clients may be afraid to give honest feedback, worrying about repercussions, but staff also experience fear when it comes to receiving feedback.

Many times, organizations fear feedback because they worry that they won't have the resources to address it, or that it will expose deeper issues they are

unprepared to handle. This concern can stem from resource constraints, as noted in various nonprofit settings where staff fear that feedback will uncover failures in service delivery that are beyond their control to fix.[27]

This fear from staff sometimes leads to subtle sabotage of the feedback process. They might worry that receiving critical feedback will jeopardize job security or lead to unmanageable expectations, causing staff to either hide feedback mechanisms or resist promoting them.[28] For example, staff may downplay the importance of a survey or frame it in a way that manipulates responses, like saying, "I'm graded on anything less than a 5 being a failure." This guilty plea makes clients hesitant to provide negative feedback, even when it's warranted. As a result, clients give 1[0]s out of guilt, or they avoid giving feedback altogether.

This fear is also reflected in organizations' hesitancy to ask for meaningful feedback. One common example is the fear of asking, "What's one thing you'd change about our services?" They're afraid of the answer, worried it will uncover problems they're not equipped to handle.

But avoiding the question doesn't solve the problem, it just perpetuates it. This all comes down to what we call "FoFo" or "fear of finding out." They suspect there are issues, but they avoid seeking feedback that might confirm their suspicions, as this would require taking action to address them. It's a counterproductive cycle, and it's up to us to break it. Homework

When fear influences the feedback we give or receive, it prevents growth and understanding. The key to breaking through this barrier is trust. Here are a few actions you can take today to address fear within your organization's feedback loop:

- Identify areas where fear is influencing feedback, whether from clients or staff. Ask

  yourself: Where does fear hold people back from being honest?

- Implement one strategy to reduce fear in giving feedback, such as emphasizing

  anonymity or listening and showing the change once feedback arrives.

- Review your feedback questions. Add at least one question that encourages honest,

nuanced feedback, like "What's one thing you would change about the service you're

receiving?"

- Engage in conversations with your team about fear (both of giving and receiving

feedback), and work on building trust through consistent, transparent communication.

Recognizing fear is the first step to unlocking meaningful, productive feedback. But we need to do more than just recognize it—we need to address it. Which starts by narrowing the vulnerability gap.

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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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