— 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

09

Narrowing the Vulnerability Gap

"Just like the emperor's subjects, those in less powerful positions often hesitate to speak the truth."

Hans Christian Andersen's The Emperor's New Clothes29 is a timeless tale about vanity, deception, and the crippling effect of fear on truth. In the story, two weavers convince an emperor that they can make him the finest, most luxurious garments that only the wise can see. The emperor, eager to appear enlightened and competent, orders the clothes.

The twist? The clothes don't actually exist.

It was known that only the wise could see his clothes, and no one wanted to be the one to admit they couldn't see them, fearing they would be labeled foolish. Everyone could see the emperor was naked, but they didn't want to speak up. In the story, no one dares to tell him. Not his advisors and not his citizens. Even the emperor himself pretends he can see the clothes, parading naked through the streets to show them off. He doesn't want to look unwise, and the power of the people saying they can see his clothes makes him feel he could ruin his reputation if he admits he cannot.

Why? Because of a power disparity. In this story, the emperor is afraid of being labeled as foolish by the people, so he lies about what he sees. And because he holds all the authority, his position of power creates a pressure so strong that even when people know the truth, they hesitate to speak it. They fear being judged as foolish or are afraid of the consequences of challenging someone with more influence. This fear distorts reality, keeping people from voicing what they truly see.

The same dynamic plays out in our real-world systems, particularly when it comes to Vulnerable populations. Just like the emperor's subjects, those in less powerful positions often hesitate to provide honest feedback or speak up about their challenges, fearing judgment,

punishment, or dismissal. Which creates a vulnerability gap. We define the vulnerability gap as the difference between those who hold power and those who don't. And this gap grows wider when fear is present because fear silences truth.

Adam Grant's study on advice gives us a modern example of this power disparity in action. When beginners seek advice from experts, the experts might give bad advice. Not because they don't know what they are talking about, but because they have forgotten what it's like to be a beginner. Grant calls this the "curse of knowledge," where people who are highly skilled or experienced struggle to remember what it's like not to know something.[30] When beginners

seek advice from experts, but they don't get clear or relevant guidance, it creates a power disparity. Experts hold all the knowledge, while beginners feel unsure or hesitant to ask for clarification on something that doesn't make sense to them. They might not want to admit they're confused, so they accept the advice as is, even if it's unhelpful, because they don't feel comfortable challenging the expert.

When power disparities are significant, the gap between what people want to say and what they feel safe saying grows wider. Consider someone who visits a free health clinic for much-needed medical care but doesn't feel comfortable questioning a doctor's treatment plan or raising concerns about how they were treated. In this scenario, the clinic holds immense power as the provider of essential medical services the patient might not be able to afford elsewhere. Even if the individual feels they were rushed through their appointment or treated dismissively, they may hesitate to speak up, worried that their feedback could result in reduced access to care or future appointments. This imbalance often leaves critical issues unaddressed, as the patient prioritizes maintaining access to care over voicing their concerns.

Unfortunately, power disparities like these exist everywhere, and some of these disparities have led to irreparable damage.

The Cost of Silence

Engineers working on the Challenger project raised concerns about the safety of the rocket during the building and testing process. They pointed out specific problems that could potentially cause catastrophic failure.[31] However, people higher up in the organization were afraid to acknowledge these issues. They worried that admitting something was wrong might lead to losing their contract with NASA. So, instead of delaying the launch for safety, they moved forward, and the shuttle tragically exploded, leading to the loss of several lives.

What's even more troubling is that this scenario repeated itself with the Columbia space shuttle disaster[32]. In this case, NASA employees suspected that there were serious safety issues, but fear of raising those concerns up the chain kept engineers silent. Again, fear dictated decisions, leading to another preventable tragedy.

Even when the stakes are life and death, fear will stop people from speaking up. The question we must ask is: what kind of environment creates this level of fear? What happened inside these organizations that made people feel they

couldn't speak up?

Some argue these two issues had to do with the culture of innovation put in place, especially when that culture leans towards rewarding speed. But we would argue there was likely something more that added to the fear of the engineers. Instances of retaliation in the past, such as people being fired, could have been one. It's difficult to know what happens behind closed

doors in these scenarios. But something in the culture had caused fear to become so deeply ingrained that people felt it was safer to stay silent than to risk consequences by telling the truth.

In the Deepwater Horizon oil spill[33], workers on the oil rig had concerns about safety and maintenance issues prior to the disaster, but they were hesitant to escalate these concerns. This hesitation came from fear of losing jobs, fear of halting the work schedule, and fear of potential retaliation. Tragically, this reluctance to voice critical feedback led to a devastating explosion and one of the worst environmental disasters in history.

The same pattern emerged with the collapse of Lehman Brothers during the 20[08] financial crisis[34]. Within the company, many people knew they were overleveraged and had taken on far too much risk. However, those in the organization were unwilling to speak out because they didn't want to be the ones to "stop the gravy train." Fear of repercussions or of being ostracized prevented employees from voicing their concerns. The vulnerability gap grew, and the eventual collapse had a domino effect on the entire financial system, leading to widespread economic turmoil.

The lesson we can take away from these heartbreaking scenarios? The consequences of fear come with a steep price. Whether we're talking about NASA's shuttle tragedies, the Deepwater Horizon spill, or the downfall of Lehman Brothers, fear shut people down. It kept crucial feedback from getting to those who could do something about the problems at hand.

In every case, the gap between what people knew and what they felt safe sharing was huge. And that gap doesn't just exist in life-or-death situations; it's everywhere. When people think their job, reputation, or relationships are at risk, they stay quiet.

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POWER DISPARITIES HAPPEN CLOSE TO HOME AS WELL

For those of you who have tried to navigate the American healthcare system, you have experienced a power disparity.

Do you remember Marc's daughter Penny, who was diagnosed with Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA)? It took them years to get her diagnosed, even though Marc and his wife knew something was wrong. And unfortunately, more of Penny's muscle could have been saved if it had been caught sooner.

Many with chronic illnesses have had the exact same experience as Marc and his family. They have gone to several doctors, navigating the maze that is the American healthcare system, only to be told they are fine even though they know something is wrong. This is where the power disparity comes in. The person seeking help is Vulnerable and at the mercy of the doctor's knowledge and potential biases.

Vulnerability is not just about what you can't do, it's about the space between knowing something is wrong and having the ability to fix it. As parents, Marc and his wife were Vulnerable because they weren't medical experts, and they relied on the professionals around them. But those professionals either missed or ignored the signs, leaving the family in a state of uncertainty and missed opportunities for early intervention.

Had that gap been smaller, Penny might have been diagnosed sooner. She could have received treatment earlier, potentially preserving more of her physical functionality. Unfortunately, by the time they found out about the SMA, much of the critical window for genetic testing had closed, and Penny had lost vital muscle function that might have been saved with early intervention.

When power disparities are present, as they often are in healthcare and other services, this gap can widen. In Marc's case, as parents, he and his wife were at the mercy of healthcare providers who held both the power and the expertise. This dynamic is not uncommon and often stops us from voicing our true feelings.

All this to say, vulnerability gaps exist all around us, and we have found several solutions within our legal system to close them. Everything ranging from witness protection to whistleblowing laws to police tip lines. All with the goal to stop fear and retaliation that might come from speaking up. Yet, there are many more vulnerability gaps our legal system can't address. So, the answer should be to simply close the gap . . . right? If Only It Were That Simple

> *Anonymity isn't a luxury for vulnerable populations — it's the bridge that makes feedback possible.*

Closing the vulnerability gap doesn't solve power disparities. That would require us to eliminate power disparities entirely. But eliminating power disparities is often not possible, so the best we can do is make a continual effort to close the vulnerability gap so we can mitigate disparities when receiving and giving feedback.

In theory, reducing or eliminating power disparities between people creates a more level playing field, where feedback can flow freely and openly. Peer discussions, for example, often work well because there's no inherent power imbalance. Everyone's opinion is considered equally, and that makes it easier to give and receive honest feedback.

However, power is often unspoken or even implicit in organizations. People in leadership or authority roles don't typically announce, "I have the power to affect your life," but those who are Vulnerable can sense it. Especially in organizations that serve at-risk populations, individuals are hyper-aware of the control their service providers have over their well-being.

Giving up power is an idealist approach to closing the vulnerability gap, and it's not always practical. While leveling the playing field sounds appealing, real-world dynamics are often much more complicated. An interesting example of this dynamic came from a conference Blake attended, where Ellen DeGeneres was interviewed by a CEO[35]. The CEO asked her what he could do to make LGBTQIA+ employees feel more comfortable in his company, especially women in her situation. Her response was, "Make them the CEO." While it may have been a direct and sincere answer, it also showed the reality that as long as there's a power disparity, it will not completely close the vulnerability gap.

Even though his question was well-meaning, the reality is that structural power isn't easy to change. CEOs can't always hand over power to make people feel more comfortable, and Ellen was pointing out a fundamental truth: when power is uneven, it's hard to create an environment of complete safety and

openness. While it's a noble goal to try and close the power gap, it's often unrealistic. Instead, the goal should be to find practical ways to reduce the gap.

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HOW TO REDUCE THE VULNERABILITY GAP

We wanted to title this section "how to close the vulnerability gap," but unfortunately, the gap can't always be closed. However, based on our experience helping several nonprofit organizations across the country, we know the vulnerability gap can almost always be reduced.

Here are a few strategies we've used to help you get started:

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1. FEEDBACK LOOPS AND THE VALUE OF IMPROVEMENT

In chapter four, we introduced the five steps of a feedback loop, and in chapter five, we discussed in-depth strategies to close this loop. The best way you can provide incentive to give feedback in less extreme scenarios is by closing the feedback loop.

When people see that their feedback leads to real, positive change, they feel more motivated to speak up. Improvement becomes its own reward. If any one of us knows that our input will make a difference (whether in the workplace, a relationship, or any other context), we will be far more likely to share our opinions. The vulnerability gap shrinks naturally when people feel their feedback has value.

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2. THE POWER OF ANONYMITY

Anonymity is perhaps the most effective, scalable, and cost-efficient method for reducing the vulnerability gap.

When people can give feedback without attaching their name or identity, they feel safer and less exposed. This is particularly important in hierarchical organizations where power dynamics are strong or situations where the power disparity is significant. Employees and Vulnerable populations are often

reluctant to give honest feedback to their bosses out of fear of retaliation or being seen as a troublemaker. But if feedback is (truly) anonymous and perceived as such, it removes that fear and allows people to speak freely. A study published in American Psychologist studied this idea and found that among respondents who had engaged in negative behavior, such as cheating, only 2[5]% admitted to it under confidentiality, but a striking 7[4]%

confessed under anonymity.[36] This demonstrates the significant impact of anonymity in creating a safe space for people to share the truth without fear of judgment or consequences.

However, anonymity isn't a perfect solution. While it works well for gathering data, it doesn't build relationships or trust, both of which are crucial for long-term success in reducing the gap. It's also important to distinguish between anonymity and confidentiality, as these terms are often confused. Anonymity means that the person giving feedback cannot be identified at all. Their name, age, race, gender, email, or any traceable information is completely removed. Confidentiality, on the other hand, means that the feedback is tied to an individual but kept private, shared with only those who need to know.

While both approaches can encourage openness, anonymity removes the fear of exposure entirely, whereas confidentiality still requires a degree of trust in the organization's ability to protect sensitive information. If you want to shrink the vulnerability gap, focus on making your feedback systems fully anonymous, not just confidential. 3. Building Trust through Relationships

The most effective way to reduce the vulnerability gap is with trust, which is built over time through strong relationships. When people trust one another, the fear of giving feedback diminishes. In a 1:1 relationship, like a close friendship or a mentor-mentee dynamic, people feel more comfortable being open and honest.

However, this approach doesn't scale easily. Building trust takes time and effort, and it's not always practical to foster deep, personal relationships with everyone in an organization or in a Vulnerable population. While trust is the best way to close the vulnerability gap, it's a slow

process, and many organizations need quicker solutions. That's where other strategies, like feedback loops, come into play. Remember . . .

Reducing the vulnerability gap is an ongoing process that requires a combination of strategies. Anonymity, incentives, trust, and feedback loops all

play a role in shrinking the gap between what people want to say and what they're willing to say. However, without consistent effort, the gap can actually grow over time, just like how muscles weaken without regular exercise. Building trust and maintaining safe feedback systems isn't a one-time effort. While the gap may never disappear completely, the goal is to make it small enough that people feel safe and empowered to give honest, constructive feedback. Homework

This chapter explored the ways we can work toward reducing the vulnerability gap in organizations and everyday life. Now it's time to put those lessons into practice with some thoughtful exercises:

- Identify power imbalances in your workplace or community. Where does this affect the

  feedback being shared? List two areas where the gap might exist.

- Ask what motivates people to provide feedback. How can you create stronger incentives

  for more honest and open communication?

- Analyze what three actions you can take to build trust this week. Focus on consistency,

  follow-through, and transparency.

- Ask yourself: What questions would people feel comfortable asking, and what would

  they avoid? Analyze why, and think about how to address this gap.

- Study your current feedback loops both internally and externally. How effective is your

current feedback system? What one step could you take to ensure feedback is followed up

on and acted upon so you can build trust?

When you work through these questions, you'll start seeing the cracks where the vulnerability gap exists and how to patch them. Keep psychological safety at the heart of this process because when people feel safe, they're far more likely to share what you need to hear.



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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