— 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

# 11

# The Power of Fear-Free Feedback

*"Feedback with vision doesn't just say 'good job' — it paints a picture of who someone could become."*

John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach at UCLA knew how to use feedback to improve his players' performance and help them become better people. He never used fear tactics or belittling comments. Instead, the feedback he offered was always aimed to help his players become more than they were when they first started working with him.

Bill Walton, one of Wooden's star players, was known for his impressive scoring record. After a particularly intense practice session, Walton might've expected a simple "Nice job!" or maybe some quick tips to polish his skills from his coach. But instead, John Wooden acknowledged Walton's success, then told him to stop looking at himself as the top scorer on the team and to instead think of himself as someone who could lift the entire team. He further suggested that Walton should focus on passing more, involving teammates, and using his unique talent to set others up for success.

That is feedback with vision. Instead of just saying "good job," Wooden painted a picture of a Walton who was more. Walton took that insight to heart, and the game evolved. He became a player who scored high and set up his team for success.

This was a moment where the person giving feedback was honest and open, and the person receiving feedback was willing to listen. These are two sides of the coin that make up fear-free feedback. But sadly, feedback doesn't always work this way. Too often, only one side of the coin exists—meaning someone is willing to listen, but the feedback is guarded, or the feedback is detailed, but someone isn't willing to listen.

In fact, the whistleblower laws we mentioned earlier are in place to protect us when someone in power over us has done something wrong and we need to speak up about it. They came into place after the Revolutionary War, when two American soldiers reported their

commander, who they had seen torturing British prisoners. But instead of being heard and supported, they were punished and thrown into prison by said commander.

This story could've ended there. But the soldiers appealed, and Congress listened. Their bravery and willingness to take that risk led to the first whistleblower protection laws in America, designed to protect people who risk everything to bring the truth to light. Those laws are an attempt to provide an opportunity for fear-free feedback. Fear-driven environments stifle creativity.

They can shield wrongdoing from being challenged, stop innovation from happening, and halt growth. When people are too scared to give honest feedback, problems stay buried. Feedback becomes something people dread, rather than something they seek out and value.

We know from our experience of helping dozens of nonprofits like you create trust within their community, that fear-free feedback can give you the information needed to make an actual difference. It's why we are so passionate about this topic. Why the very book in your hands has become a reality. If you follow the steps we have outlined in the previous chapters, you'll uncover precisely what your community values, their honest feedback on your services, and the clear steps you can take to refine your programs.

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## BENEFITS OF FEAR-FREE FEEDBACK

When people feel secure sharing their honest thoughts and experiences, organizations gain the agility to adapt, the stability of trust, and the engagement of a unified team. In fact, teams with high psychological safety are up to 2$^{0}$% more productive, according to Gallup's State

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## OF THE AMERICAN WORKPLACE REPORT.42

Fear-free feedback creates a space where employees and stakeholders are empowered to collaborate and innovate. As Niagara Institute points out, psychological safety is key to unlocking collaboration and feedback, which enables employees to engage in helping behaviors and openly share ideas[43] so the organization can become more agile. Moreover, organizations with agile workforces can respond to changing conditions 7$^{1}$% faster, as noted by Project Management Institute in their Organizational Agility study[44]. This means the organization can pivot effectively to meet the needs of the people they serve, creating tangible, lasting impacts.

The benefits don't stop there. Workplaces that prioritize psychological safety report 2$^{7}$% lower employee turnover and 7$^{6}$% higher engagement levels.[45] It's this culture that reveals potential improvements and brings a renewed sense

of purpose to those of us who work in the nonprofit space. Moreover, here are a few more benefits to keep in mind.

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## ENHANCED EFFECTIVENESS AS A NONPROFIT

In an talk given at the 20[05] conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints titled, "Wrong Roads and Revelation,"[46] a story was shared about a father and son who were driving near a Grand Canyon overlook in the late afternoon. They came to a fork in the road and weren't sure which way they had come from. They both felt they should try the left road first, but that road quickly turned into a dead end. However, instead of being frustrated, the father explained this was actually a good thing. Taking the wrong road first helped them confirm which one was right, giving them the confidence to navigate unfamiliar territory and make it back safely before dark.

The lesson? Sometimes we need to make a detour to get clarity and avoid second-guessing ourselves later. Feedback, especially for nonprofits, is a good way to hit dead ends fast, cheap, and painlessly. Without it, organizations could end up pouring time, energy, and funds into initiatives that might look promising but ultimately fail to make a true impact. Feedback saves resources. Which we all know are already limited in the nonprofit world.

Sadly, many nonprofits who aren't prioritizing feedback often use up valuable resources with minimal results. They are practically sprinting in the wrong direction, hoping what they do is helpful in some way but having no proof that it is, all while resources drain and burnout creeps in. It doesn't have to be this way. By making fear-free feedback central to your work, you can move forward with purpose and direction, adjusting as you go, and work your way to truly meaningful outcomes.

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## INCREASED DONOR TRUST

Trust from donors, especially major donors, is one of the most crucial forms of capital a nonprofit can hold. Yet nonprofits can feel uniquely vulnerable to those very donors they rely on for substantial funding. The difference between a

$2^5$ donation and a $2^5$ million donation is a higher level of expectation for accountability. Big donors often want to feel that their money is making a significant difference, and they look for organizations that are open about both successes and challenges.

The temptation for nonprofits, though, is to present a polished image—a vision of themselves as effective and always successful. It feels natural to showcase the highlights, to focus on wins, to demonstrate that donor dollars are being put to perfect use. But when organizations present themselves as flawless and then fall short, it creates a gap between

expectation and reality. When donors see this gap, it erodes trust, and once that trust is lost, it's hard to regain.

Sharing feedback with donors (both good and bad) shows a commitment to transparency. When donors see that an organization is willing to be honest, they're often more willing to dig deeper and support solutions. In fact, nonprofits that openly discuss their challenges with their donors often find they receive increased support for overcoming those very hurdles. When a donor is well aware of what you're up against, they're less likely to feel blindsided when things don't go perfectly. They're also more likely to feel like true partners in the mission, helping fund the critical work needed to overcome setbacks.

Finally, as a pro tip, remember to use a feedback system to get feedback from your donors as well! Never be in the dark about what matters to them. Funding will come a lot easier when you understand their hopes for the future.

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## INCREASED COMMUNITY TRUST

When it comes to building trust, action speaks louder than anything else, especially in feedback. Do you remember Catholic Community Services (CCS) and the town halls they held to address the feedback they received? Because they went through each piece thoughtfully, acknowledging what they could work on and explaining what might take longer, a line of people waited to give more feedback at the end of the session.

We said this before, but it's worth repeating now: When people see that you're truly listening, they feel comfortable opening up even more. We need to keep in mind that responding to feedback isn't about fixing every single thing.

Most people understand that change takes time

and that not everything can be solved immediately. What matters is the acknowledgment. Saying, "Yes, we hear you."

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## FOSTER A RESILIENT AND AGILE ORGANIZATION

Have you ever driven a speedboat? It can twist and turn in the water easily. But driving a large cargo ship is completely different. Even the slightest course correction can be slow and difficult. You need to build your organization like a speedboat, not a cargo ship. You should be able to pivot when feedback reveals dead ends or new challenges. An agile nonprofit can take feedback, adapt quickly, and avoid the risks of rigid "this is how we've always done it" thinking.

But agility alone isn't enough; you also need resilience. Not every shift or new approach will succeed, and sometimes feedback leads you straight into a dead end. For some organizations, this can feel like a huge setback. Resilient nonprofits, though, know that they'll hit bumps along the way. They expect them, and they're built to recover.

One company who is highly agile is Netflix. At one point, they turned down a large offer to be bought by Blockbuster. It wasn't until someone working on a side project started building the streaming service that they realized sending DVDs by mail was just a long run to a dead end. They had already solved for one dead end—the late fees many other movie rental stores charged by removing due dates. If customers wanted another movie, they would first have to return the last one they had. But this was a new dead end that demanded they, once again, shift their perspective. Which is why they quickly began putting their resources towards streaming.

Netflix failed fast at many things so they could grow into the company they are today. Their goal was to get movies into the hands of people. That never changed. But how they would reach that goal was flexible. Their strategy was never set in stone, and it could always be shifted

> *Fear-free feedback is honest on one side, willing to listen on the other. Both sides of the coin.*

when a new dead end cropped up. Too often, nonprofits are set on how they are doing things. They feel a rigid need to keep on the same path—even if it isn't working—because they might not have the resources or the time to explore a different way. But then they lose sight of why they started. We recommend taking a similar approach to Netflix instead. Keep your "why" close to heart, but let the actions you take to get there adapt as you hit dead ends along the way.

In the tech world, there's a phrase for this: "fail fast." The idea is to try new things, make mistakes quickly, and learn from them even faster. Don't get stuck failing over months or years. Adjust early and often. This way, every misstep is just a step closer to success.

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## THINGS TO AVOID (IF YOU WANT FEAR-FREE FEEDBACK)

Creating a feedback culture sounds straightforward, but there are common pitfalls that can derail even the best intentions. Here are some key "don'ts" when it comes to gathering and acting on feedback:

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### 1. INCENTIVIZE FEEDBACK

The idea of incentivizing feedback sounds good at first. You might think, "Let's offer rewards for 5-star reviews," or "Let's only ask people who've had great experiences to fill out surveys." But incentives like these can quickly backfire. When you focus too much on getting high scores or positive feedback, you end up curating only the "good" responses, and you lose sight of real, honest input.

Feedback should be about understanding where improvements are needed, not just collecting high ratings.

Instead, try setting an incentive for action, like choosing three specific improvements based on feedback each month. That way, you're prioritizing genuine insights rather than

superficial scores, and you're showing the people who engage with you that their feedback has an impact on your organization.

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## 2. RETALIATION

It seems obvious, but retaliation against negative feedback is an easy trap to fall into, even unintentionally. When you receive feedback that challenges your vision of your organization, it's tempting to dismiss it or assume it's wrong. People often think, "This person just doesn't understand our limitations," or "They must have a grudge." But pushing back against feedback can lead to shutting down voices that are trying to help.

Retaliation of any kind—whether it's reducing services, ignoring feedback, or even punishing staff for sharing their concerns—breaks the feedback loop and teaches people that honesty isn't welcome. Instead of pushing back, lean into the feedback, even when it feels uncomfortable. Assume that every piece of feedback has value, and take time to understand its message before reacting.

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## 3. FEEDBACK VOYEURISM

Feedback voyeurism is the act of gathering feedback just to look at it without taking any action. It's easy to get stuck in the cycle of reading through feedback, feeling the highs and lows of what people think about your organization, and then . . . doing nothing. This kind of inaction can hurt trust, as it signals to the people providing feedback that their input isn't valued. If you collect feedback and then fail to act, you're effectively breaking a silent promise to those who took the time to share their thoughts.

If you're not prepared to take action, it's actually better not to ask for feedback at all. Gathering input implies a commitment to doing something with it—whether that's making a

small adjustment, acknowledging a concern, or working toward a larger change. By honoring that commitment, you build a culture of trust and respect.

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## 4. WAITING FOR THE "PERFECT" SYSTEM

Perfectionism in feedback gathering is one of the most common pitfalls. Many organizations feel they can't gather feedback until they have a perfect system in place, or they want the feedback to be flawlessly organized before they start. This mindset creates endless delays. We've seen clients who invested in feedback systems but spent months debating what questions to ask, effectively paralyzing themselves and missing out on the real-time insights they could have already gathered.

Start with what you have. Even asking simple questions—like "What should we ask you?"—can yield valuable direction. Waiting for an ideal system often means you're waiting indefinitely, while crucial feedback and improvements slip by. The truth is, no feedback system will ever be perfect. By starting with an imperfect system, you can adjust as you go and, more importantly, demonstrate a commitment to listening and learning, which is far more valuable than waiting for the "right" moment.

Each of these missteps can block the power of feedback and undermine trust. By avoiding these pitfalls, you make room for a feedback culture that's genuinely open, adaptable, and committed to growth.

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## LEARN FROM FAILURES AND SETBACKS

When we present at tradeshows, we often hear people say, "I don't want to know what people will say because I know it's going to be bad. I'm better off not knowing." But this mindset must change in the nonprofit world if we truly want to make a difference.

Too often, we get stuck saying, "I'd love to fix that, but I can't because . . ." and then follow up with an excuse. But real growth happens when you're willing to step up even when it's uncomfortable or hard. In fact, the difference between those who improve and those who stay stagnant often boils down to

one thing: the willingness to try.

However, a growth mindset can't just be a solo effort from a motivated executive. It has to permeate the entire organization. This culture of growth must trickle down through all levels, reaching every staff member. An executive might believe deeply in improvement, but if that attitude doesn't reach the rest of the team, the organization remains stuck.

If you are a nonprofit leader, you set the tone. If you approach feedback with a sense of, "There's no point in trying," then everyone else will follow your lead. Instead, you have to model and share a genuine commitment to growth. You've got to be vocal and transparent about your willingness to learn from feedback and failure. Homework

Gathering fear-free feedback requires a commitment to openness and growth. Here are a few exercises you can do to help build this trust:

- Reflect on your own comfort with feedback. Write down one specific area where you

  tend to feel uncomfortable receiving feedback and identify why.

- Over the next week, gather feedback from different stakeholders—staff, volunteers,

  clients, or those you provide services to. Practice acknowledging each piece of feedback

  without trying to address or solve it immediately. Simply take notes and ensure the

  person feels heard by thanking them for their input.

- Choose one piece of feedback to address directly. For example, if someone suggests a

  way to improve communication, try implementing it for a week, then check back to see

  how they feel about the change.

Even small actions build trust over time. Fear-free feedback isn't about eliminating challenges, but about creating an environment where people feel valued and safe enough to share. Finally, let's review some feedback habit strategies that will set your organization up for long-term success.



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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