— 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

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The Feedback Habit

"You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems."

In the 2008 Beijing Olympics, midway through a race, Michael Phelps' goggles began to fill with water, blinding him completely.47 Luckily, Phelps didn't panic or falter. Instead, he continued his strokes in sync with the internal rhythm he'd developed through years of training. Counting each stroke by memory, he relied on the habits he'd built over thousands of hours in the pool. When he touched the wall, he had set a world record and won a gold medal!

Phelps' preparation was so automatic that even without sight, he could trust his process and deliver his best. In the same way, building habits within organizations can create a kind of muscle memory that allows teams to adapt and perform, even under unexpected circumstances. And this has been extensively researched. James Clear's Atomic Habits[48] emphasizes that building small, consistent actions leads to compounding growth, showing that our habits shape our identity and future success. He says, "You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems." Plus, studies cited in Charles Duhigg's The Power of Habit[49] also highlight how cues, routines, and rewards solidify behaviors, making them nearly automatic over time.

In the context of feedback, developing a feedback habit means establishing consistent, actionable feedback as a natural part of day-to-day operations. The goal is to create a rhythm that feels as natural as clocking in or starting a meeting. Once ingrained, a feedback habit helps us listen, adapt, and grow, even when things get tough.

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INCORPORATING FEEDBACK AS A HABIT

Habits in nonprofit organizations make a huge difference in how resources are allocated and how effectively tasks get done, especially when it comes to consistent fundraising efforts. For instance, nonprofits that make fundraising habitual, like the Salvation Army's yearly bell-ringing campaign during the holiday season, find that it removes much of the planning and decision-making stress. This predictable habit provides steady support, allowing the organization to focus on other needs and goals.

The same consistency can be created when gathering feedback. This habit might feel slow when you first start, but it's a lot like learning to drive a car. The

idea of doing anything else while driving felt absurd when you first learned, but now, the process is likely deeply ingrained and not something you think about at all. Some of us even don't remember the trip! Stopping at lights and stop signs is habitual. When nonprofits have ingrained feedback habits, it allows them to exercise and spend resources in other places.

Many nonprofits, however, are under pressure to keep administrative costs low to ensure maximum funding goes to services. While this approach helps focus resources on immediate service delivery, it often means sacrificing strong internal management practices that, in the long run, are vital to the nonprofit's health.

Feedback is key to managing all the moving parts in a nonprofit—from funding and staff retention to the quality of services. Gathering input from clients, staff, volunteers, and board members gives you a clear picture of where things are running smoothly and where there's room for improvement.

With feedback, you don't have to focus intensely on each part all the time. Think of a juggler—if they tried to watch every ball in constant detail, they'd get overwhelmed and drop

everything. Instead, they rely on quick flashes of the ball as it passes through their line of sight. These brief glimpses give just enough information to make tiny, precise adjustments and keep everything moving smoothly. Feedback works the same way; it doesn't require constant, exhaustive attention. Instead, those small but essential insights allow you to make incremental course corrections, ensuring you stay balanced and on track without getting overwhelmed. With the right feedback at the right times, you can keep all the "balls" of nonprofit work in the air without getting overwhelmed.

Nonprofits have enough on their plates with compassion fatigue, resource juggling, and often very limited funding. You don't need to add more to your team's already-full plates; instead, you can focus on automating parts of the process to reclaim energy for those final, crucial steps that need a human touch. Once the gathering and analysis stages become a habit, you'll find it blends into the background, giving you "flashes" of information you can act on without intense focus.

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3 TIPS TO BUILD FEEDBACK HABITS

Creating a feedback habit starts by creating easy-to-follow practices that integrate into your everyday workflow. When feedback becomes second nature, it transforms from a task into a tool. Below are some tried-and-true strategies to help you make feedback a natural part of your organization's DNA.

1. Integrate Feedback into Daily Routines

Building a habit around feedback isn't much different from maintaining a garden. If you weed a little every day, it's manageable, even satisfying. But let it go too long, and you're dealing with a jungle. The same goes for feedback. When it's part of your daily routine, it stops feeling like a giant project. Instead, it's a regular, manageable part of the day.

Remember: feedback isn't just about outcomes. It's about the process too. Spending a fortune to solve homelessness by giving every person experiencing homelessness a home is a powerful outcome, but if the underlying process isn't working, the problem will just crop up again. Feedback helps you see where improvements are needed in both your outcomes and the steps you're taking to get there. Just like daily weeding in your garden, regular daily feedback highlights where systems need a bit more attention.

The result? Better processes, better outcomes, and an organization that grows stronger over time.

2. Schedule Time to Review Feedback

One of the simplest ways to make feedback a habit is to schedule regular time for it, just like you would with any important meeting or task. It's easy to think, "I'll fit in a feedback review when I have time," but in practice, gaps rarely appear in a busy schedule. When you treat feedback like a regular standing appointment, whether it's a monthly meeting or a weekly check-in, it becomes part of your organization's rhythm. Scheduling this time means feedback is no longer an afterthought.

Making feedback sessions a consistent practice also sends a strong message to those involved in your programs. It shows you are serious about improvement. That you are not just collecting feedback to check a box and you genuinely want to know how to make things better. Over time, this consistency builds a feedback culture. People start to see that their input is valued, and they become more engaged, knowing their voice helps shape your organization's growth. As a bonus, when your staff sees you treating client feedback in a

positive and constructive way, they're more likely to feel comfortable sharing their own feedback.

Consistently gathering and acting on feedback—without the intense emotions often tied to large, one-time feedback sessions—creates a strong signal that it's safe to be open and vulnerable as a member of the team.

3. Automate Where Possible

We found there are some things you can automate in feedback, and some things you can't. In the five steps of the feedback loop, the first three (ask, collect, analyze) can work well with tech. Then the final two steps (implement, notify) are harder to automate. Tech isn't great at helping you come up with solutions that can help fix the issues you uncover. This is where the human touch is critical—whether it's finding creative solutions to recurring issues, celebrating progress, or simply being transparent about adjustments.

This feedback cycle then starts all over, powered by those initial three automated steps that keep it moving. It's your own "set it and forget it" loop, leaving you with more energy to make meaningful changes in the last two steps.

When feedback collection becomes something that happens automatically, it's one less thing you have to worry about actively managing. Yet, we have found most organizations spend far too much time on the first few steps of the feedback process (like gathering and organizing data) when it's in the last steps where the real impact is felt. This is a quick way to get burnt out. And it applies to more than just nonprofit organizations.

In the book Compassionomics by Dr. Stephen Trzeciak and Anthony Mazzarelli[50], their research highlights that it's not the compassionate work itself that burns doctors out. Instead, it's everything that pulls them away from compassion. In fact, they found that just 4^0 seconds of 5^0 (Trzeciak & Mazzarelli, Compassionomics: The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence That Caring Makes a

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DIFFERENCE, 2019)

genuine compassion can improve patient outcomes and reduce burnout in healthcare providers.[51] It's the same for nonprofit organizations. Though administrative tasks are required to keep operations running smoothly, they can

often pull staff away from the core mission, leaving less time and energy for the meaningful compassionate work that truly drives impact.

Focusing too much on the gathering of feedback can be part of what wears us down. If we're bogged down in tasks that can be streamlined or automated, we drain our energy on things that take us away from the heart of our mission. By letting technology handle some of the process-heavy, repetitive work, we free ourselves to focus on what truly matters: the people we want to serve.

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PERFECTIONISM IS A VICE

Over the years, we've heard all the reasons nonprofits feel they can't do many of the things we suggest in this book. However, the most common is: "We're too stretched. We don't have the time, energy, or resources to get this feedback loop set up right." It's the "I don't have time to get in shape" mentality that many of us have when it comes to our health. Which is an understandable excuse (especially with how busy our lives are today), but it's ironic because often the action we are avoiding is exactly what would help us save time and energy in the long run.

> *A feedback habit helps us listen, adapt, and grow — even when things get tough.*

And then there's the "I don't want to know" camp, or as we call it, the "FOFO" syndrome—fear of finding out. As we mentioned before, some leaders shy away from feedback because they assume it's going to be negative or uncover things they'd rather not deal with. Both of these mindsets are perfectionism in disguise. The first is process perfectionism: "If the process

isn't perfect, I'm not going to do it." The second is outcome perfectionism: "If I can't be sure the feedback will be good, why even bother?"

Neither of these approaches will get you anywhere. If you're waiting for the "perfect" way to gather and act on feedback, you'll just stay stuck in your current loop, avoiding the improvements you need. Nothing moves forward because you're either waiting for that flawless setup or those dream results.

Think about it this way: say you're trying to learn to shoot a basketball. You could spend hours watching videos, reading up on technique, and analyzing pro players. But until you actually pick up the ball and start shooting, even if you miss, you'll never make progress. Waiting for that "perfect shot" from the start isn't realistic.

In our experience, a lot of nonprofits struggle with this. We've seen organizations that sign up for a feedback platform, then get bogged down for months trying to figure out the "perfect" rollout strategy. By the time they're finally ready, they've used up half their project timeline with us! If they'd started sooner with even small steps, they'd have been collecting valuable insights all along. And, believe it or not, that hesitation can actually feel exhausting before the work even begins. In nonprofit work, we're often dealing with complex, even unsolvable problems. This is where perfectionism can become a trap. When we're hyper-focused on flawless outcomes (which are rarely in our control), we set ourselves up for frustration, fatigue, and failure.

The nonprofits that get the most out of feedback loops are the ones that lean into that discomfort. Instead of worrying about every detail, they get curious. They're not stuck on creating a flawless feedback system. Instead, they are focused on learning what they need to work on, and that's the real game-changer.

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EMBRACE GOOD ENOUGH

In his article The Perfectionist Trap: How to Know What's Good Enough, Michael Sender explains how perfectionism can lead to a "law of diminishing returns." He uses the below graph to explain that the extra time and energy spent trying to reach "perfection" often yield minimal benefits, which are typically not recognized by others. Sender's model shows that finding the "good enough" threshold, or a "sweet spot," allows for productivity without falling into the trap of unachievable perfectionism.

Perfectionism can waste time and resources, leaving nonprofits with less capacity for meaningful impact. The "good enough" mindset is all about finding balance and producing quality work without letting the pursuit of perfection slow down or halt progress.

In nonprofit settings, this approach is especially valuable because resources are often limited and demands are high. By focusing on what's "good enough," teams can allocate their time maximizing impact rather than perfecting every detail. When teams focus on setting achievable standards, they become more agile, better able to respond to feedback, and more committed to continuous improvement, which drives trust and confidence from those they serve.

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SUCCESS ISN'T ABOUT PERFECT OUTCOMES, IT'S ABOUT EXPERIENCES

Nonprofits, especially those working with complex, difficult issues, face unique challenges. Perfection isn't always realistic because so much lies outside of your control. Instead of focusing on perfect outcomes, think about the experience your clients have. In healthcare, for instance, the goal might be for every patient to leave fully healthy, but the reality is that many factors influence health outside of a hospital's walls. However, the experience people have within those walls—their interactions with staff, the comfort of the environment—is within the hospital's control.

Nonprofits are no different. You can't control every aspect of a person's life, but you can make sure their experience with your organization is a positive one. Shifting your focus from perfect results to meaningful experiences helps you stay motivated and avoid burnout. You're no longer chasing something impossible; you're improving the quality of every moment someone spends in your organization.

At the end of the day, perfectionism doesn't serve us. It stalls us. Rather than trying to get everything "just right," start with what's good enough. And remember as they commonly say in the Navy Seals, "Slow is smooth, smooth is fast." Progress is a journey. Aim to make it a steady one.

Homework

Reflect on your organization's approach to feedback so you can find ways to make it more habitual. Here are a few exercises to help:

- Write down all the current ways you gather, analyze, and act on feedback in your

organization. Do these processes feel natural and consistent, or sporadic and

cumbersome? Identify one area where feedback could be gathered more efficiently.

- Define what "good enough" looks like for your team, based on Michael Sender's concept

of avoiding the perfectionist trap. Note this down as a realistic standard to help guide you

toward progress without unnecessary delays.

- Look for one part of your feedback process that could be automated. Implement this

automation, if possible, or outline a plan for introducing it to your organization.

- Create a recurring feedback review on your calendar and invite relevant team members to

attend. Use this meeting to discuss trends, actionable insights, and areas of improvement.

- Write down any "FOFO" (fear of finding out) tendencies or areas where waiting for the

"perfect" process has led to delays. Commit to taking one small action that moves you

forward without waiting for the perfect conditions.

Building a feedback habit is less about rigid schedules and more about finding consistent, manageable ways to listen and adapt. Start with small steps, automate where you can, and remember that good enough is often more than enough. By staying curious and flexible, you create an organization that continuously learns and grows with the people it serves.

Now we have given you the tools you need to solve the feedback problem. Everything from addressing your biases and building feedback loops within

feedback systems to closing the vulnerability gap and creating a feedback habit within your organization are strategies we have used repeatedly to help nonprofit organizations better serve Vulnerable populations. With these strategies, you can scale your efforts and be more effective.

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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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