— 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

To the nonprofit organizations who are tired of band-aid solutions —
we hope this book helps you create lasting impact.

PRAISE FOR

Candid

"A clear and practical guide to building feedback systems that actually move the needle. Honest, accessible, and essential reading for nonprofit leaders."

FORTHCOMING ENDORSEMENT

"Candid reframes feedback from a compliance task into an act of trust. Every page is grounded in real work with real people."

FORTHCOMING ENDORSEMENT

"If your organization claims to listen, this is the book that will tell you whether you actually do — and what to do about it."

FORTHCOMING ENDORSEMENT

CONTENTS

Table of Contents

Front Matter

Praise for Candid 4

Terms to Know 6

The Feedback Problem 7

Part One — Feedback Foundations

Chapter 1: Feedback Basics for Real-World Impact 12

Chapter 2: Why Gather Feedback as a Nonprofit? 19

Chapter 3: Accidental Defaults 27

Chapter 4: Feedback Loops 37

Chapter 5: Closing the Feedback Loop Effectively 46

Chapter 6: Five Factors of Feedback Systems & How to Jumpstart Them 58

Part Two — Vulnerability & Fear

Chapter 7: The Difference Between vulnerable and Vulnerable 69

Chapter 8: Effects of Fear 78

Chapter 9: Narrowing the Vulnerability Gap 87

Part Three — Building the Habit

Chapter 10: Four Stages of Psychological Safety 97

Chapter 11: The Power of Fear-Free Feedback 107

Chapter 12: The Feedback Habit 118

Back Matter

From Ones and Tens to Hundreds and Thousands 128

References 132

About the Authors 136

A BRIEF GLOSSARY

Terms to Know

A small set of words we use carefully throughout this book. Returning to them now will make the chapters that follow more useful.

Feedback. Honest input, insights, or observations shared to inform decisions, improve

Vulnerable. A state of being powerless to change or influence one's situation, often tied

vulnerable. The act of choosing to be open and honest, even when it involves risk, as a

Psychological safety. The sense of security that allows individuals to express themselves,

Vulnerability gap. The divide created by fear, power disparities, or lack of trust, which

Vulnerable populations. Groups of people who face heightened risk or challenges due to

Lived experience. The personal knowledge and perspective gained from direct

Anonymity. The ability to provide feedback or share experiences without revealing one's

FoFo. Fear of Finding Out; the anxiety or reluctance individuals or organizations feel

Power disparity. The imbalance of authority or control between two parties, which can

PROLOGUE

The Feedback Problem

Many of us operate under the assumption that our feedback gathering systems are working just fine. But are they actually giving people a voice or just checking a box? Too often, feedback feels like a task to complete rather than a tool to connect. And when nonprofit organizations don't have the tools to truly listen (or assume those tools are in place when they aren't), they leave the most vulnerable voices unheard.

We want you to imagine someone experiencing homelessness standing in line at the shelter, clutching a small plastic bag that holds everything they own. They've been coming here for weeks, hoping for a warm bed, a meal, maybe even a job lead. The staff work hard to keep things running, but it's hard to ignore the cold, the overcrowding, and the way some rules seem to leave people worse off. For instance, the shelter requires guests to leave by 6 a.m., no matter the weather, forcing people to wander aimlessly until it reopens. They want to tell someone that this policy is a problem, but there's no clear way to do so. The shelter has a suggestion box, but it's buried in a corner, dusty and obviously ignored.

Even if they could bring themselves to write something down, they're not sure it would make a difference. The last time they shared feedback at another shelter, nothing changed. Worse, they were treated differently afterward, as if their concerns were an inconvenience. That experience taught them it's better to stay quiet and not make waves. As much as they want things to improve (not just for themselves but for everyone), they can't risk losing the little they have. The vulnerability of their situation silences them, leaving them feeling invisible and powerless.

Each time staff members walk by, the feeling of resentment grows. The staff are busy, that much is clear, but their hurried steps seem to confirm this individual's fear: no one is listening. The thought of raising a voice feels futile. The shelter is a lifeline, and they can't afford

to risk biting the hand that feeds them. But the longer concerns go unheard, the harder it becomes to trust the organization or believe anyone truly cares.

In this silence, the sense of helplessness deepens. It begins to feel like they are just another number, not a person with real needs and ideas. Without a way to provide feedback safely and see action taken, faith in the system fades. And, unfortunately, this scenario is very real.

A recent report by Yahoo News highlights the case of Maurice Clark, a man experiencing homelessness in Las Vegas, who felt he could not be honest during a survey. Clark shared how the presence of police officers alongside surveyors made it impossible for him to open up about his struggles. The article said, "Clark didn't feel comfortable being honest with the two surveyors he'd never met before, who were flanked by police officers as they recorded his responses from a questionnaire on a tablet."[1]

The article further explains how these vulnerability assessments often fail to capture the full scope of someone's needs, particularly for marginalized groups like Black individuals, who are disproportionately affected by homelessness. Structural inequities, like biased health systems or systemic racism, compound the problem, leaving individuals like Clark without adequate support. The result? People who need housing most are left waiting on what experts have dubbed a "waiting list to nowhere."

This example illustrates why listening isn't enough, feedback systems need to actively account for the barriers individuals face when trying to share their experiences. Without addressing these issues, organizations risk perpetuating the very inequities they aim to resolve.

This is the feedback problem. In our work, we have seen this same scenario happen time and time again. But one example stands above the rest.

On a crisp day in our hometown, we were on our way to film some videos so we could showcase our latest feedback collection strategies for an upcoming award show. As we wandered the streets to grab some lunch, we walked past a man experiencing homelessness. His clothes were frayed, and his eyes were heavy with the weight of being overlooked by the world.

Now, under normal circumstances, we might have just walked by, like so many others had already done. But he was about our age, and we saw a bit of ourselves in him, so we invited him to join us for lunch. We asked him about the homeless services in the city, expecting perhaps a story of gratitude or a

testimonial to the power of social support systems. Instead, what we heard was sobering: "People don't see me. I'm invisible." Here was a man who felt utterly disconnected from the very systems designed to help him. He believed that to the organizations serving him, he was not an individual with unique needs and hopes; he was a data point.

The irony was palpable. We were en route to receive an award for our feedback-gathering solutions in this city, yet here was this man telling us he felt completely unheard. Naturally, we asked if he had ever used one of our kiosks, strategically placed around the city to gather feedback from people just like him. His response was disheartening: "They don't listen. It doesn't matter."

That encounter stayed with us for a long time. It served as a flashpoint that made us rethink the purpose of our work at Pulse For Good. We realized that collecting feedback isn't enough. What matters is what is done with that feedback, and more importantly, how to make people feel heard in the process.

The desire to be seen, to be acknowledged, is fundamental to the human experience. Yet, many service organizations struggle with this, despite their best intentions. The reasons for this are both complex and, in some ways, predictable.

We have dedicated ourselves to helping nonprofit organizations solve the feedback problem so they can ask, accept, analyze, and act on feedback from vulnerable individuals. Feedback is often collected in a way that is too shallow. Surface-level data can only tell you so much, and without digging deeper, organizations miss the root causes of the problems they aim to solve. This shallow approach leaves significant issues unaddressed, creating a feedback loop that is more illusion than reality. Another challenge is the impact of biases and preconceived notions. When feedback is interpreted through the lens of existing assumptions, organizations run the risk of focusing on the wrong problems or overlooking critical areas that need attention. This kind of misinterpretation can lead to solutions that don't quite hit the mark and opportunities that slip through the cracks.

But perhaps the most critical issue is the incomplete feedback loop. Many organizations excel at gathering and analyzing feedback but falter when it comes to taking action or closing the loop by communicating back to those who provided the input. This missed step can lead to disengagement and can erode trust, making future feedback efforts less effective and widening the gap

between organizations and those they serve.

Finally, there is a deeper, more psychological barrier at play—the fear of complaints. Many organizations instinctively avoid negative feedback, viewing it as a threat rather than an opportunity. By shying away from this feedback, they miss the chance to truly understand and improve. This fear perpetuates the status quo.

These challenges are not insurmountable, but they require a fundamental shift in how we approach feedback. The goal of this book is to equip you with the tools and insights you need to gather, understand, and apply feedback in a way that drives real, meaningful change in the

communities you serve. And we will teach you how to do it in a way that doesn't overwhelm your busy workload.

We know those within nonprofit organizations already feel overwhelmed, perhaps even frustrated. You've been working tirelessly, striving to make a difference, but sometimes progress is elusive. You are not alone in this struggle. Many of the most compassionate and dedicated people on the planet—people just like you—are grappling with the same challenges. The demand for what you do far outstrips your resources, and you might be under pressure from all sides, whether it's from a board that wants immediate results or from the people you serve who are counting on you for their future.

At Pulse For Good, the three of us have helped hundreds of organizations like yours, working with limited resources, both in terms of funding and staffing, to overcome these challenges. You might be dealing with hiring shortages or struggling to find people with the right expertise—and even when you do, you might not have the budget to pay them what they're worth. You might feel like there simply aren't enough hours in the day to get everything done. And let's not forget about compassion fatigue. It's all too easy to lose sight of the individuals you're trying to help when the demands keep piling up. But many of these challenges can be tackled when you master the art of gathering and using feedback to make a tangible difference.

In this book, we'll show you how to gather feedback effectively, how to interpret it in a way that leads to actionable insights, and how to use it to drive meaningful change in your organization. Whether you're struggling to modernize outdated processes, facing a lack of funding, or dealing with burnout, the strategies we share will help you become more effective in your

role.

Why should you trust us? Because we've dedicated ourselves to helping organizations listen better. We've collected over $4^{00},0^{00}$ feedback responses across 2^{00} locations around the U.S. and have helped several organizations automate their feedback systems, giving them the time and resources to create real change. We've seen firsthand the difference these strategies can make, and we believe they can work for you too.

Collecting feedback doesn't have to be a massive project, and implementing it doesn't have to be backbreaking work. Let us show you how you can make a difference and get more time back to serve those in need.

• • •

CHAPTER

01

Feedback Basics for Real-World Impact

"Feedback acts like a lighthouse, piercing through the fog of our own biases."

During the American Civil War, Union forces found themselves stuck, unwilling to attack what they thought was a heavily fortified Confederate stronghold in Richmond, Virginia. From the White House, President Abraham Lincoln could see the intimidating cannons aimed toward his nation's capital. The sight alone was enough to make his generals freeze. Lincoln, desperate for action, kept pushing them to move, but fear of those cannons kept the troops idle for months.

But those terrifying cannons weren't cannons at all. They were "Quaker guns"—logs painted to look like artillery. The Confederates had staged an illusion of power, tricking their opponents into inaction. When the Union forces finally made their move, they realized they'd been held back by nothing more than a clever bluff.

When we operate with bad intelligence, inaction or poor decisions are often the outcome. Through our work with nonprofits, we've seen time and again that many of the obstacles organizations face are not as real as they seem. Without the right feedback, you might be making decisions based on "Quaker guns" of your own: problems that aren't as big as they seem, or solutions that aren't as effective as you believe.

The key is gathering real, accurate feedback (sending out your scouts, so to speak) and getting a true sense of what's happening. Without it, you risk stagnation, missteps, and wasted resources. But with the right feedback, you gain clarity and direction. Before we dive into how to gather that kind of feedback, let's start by breaking down what feedback really is and why it matters so much.

§

FEEDBACK IS A BEACON

Florence Chadwick was the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions. During one of her attempts, a dense fog rolled in, obscuring her view of the shore. Disoriented and discouraged, she gave up, only to learn she was mere yards from her goal. The fog had clouded her perception of reality, just as our preconceptions can cloud our understanding of the world.

At Pulse For Good, we believe gathering feedback is a process by which we see the world around us more clearly. It acts like a lighthouse, piercing through

that fog. It illuminates the path, allowing us to see what's really in front of us, and it is often the difference between guessing and knowing, between acting on assumptions and making informed decisions. It does not have to come from a formal review or a structured process. It can come from a casual conversation, an offhand comment, or an unexpected observation. But each piece of feedback, no matter how it arrives, serves as a beacon that guides us.

This process of gathering and interpreting feedback prevents us from becoming disoriented by the fog of our own biases. Without it, we risk drifting off course and giving up, making decisions based on incomplete or inaccurate information. But when we actively seek out and engage with feedback, we open up to new perspectives and insights that can lead to better outcomes. Just as Florence Chadwick needed a clear view of the shore to complete her swim, we need feedback to ensure we are on the right path to fulfilling our mission.

§

THICK SKIN, SOFT HEART

So, why don't more nonprofit organizations do everything they can to gather in-depth feedback? Unfortunately, in the nonprofit world, feedback can feel like a double-edged sword. It often reveals tough truths, and how we handle those truths can either propel us forward or hold us back. Over the years, we have noticed two common ways people respond to feedback: some take it deeply to heart, feeling crushed by criticism, while others dismiss it outright, convinced the feedback is misinformed or unfair.

Let's talk about the first group—those who internalize everything. For them, every piece of feedback feels like a personal failure. They can end up on an emotional rollercoaster, questioning their worth and doubting whether they're making a difference. We have seen amazing people on the verge of tears because they couldn't separate their personal value from the comments they heard. It's exhausting and, frankly, unsustainable in the already demanding nonprofit environment.

On the other end of the spectrum are those who completely brush off feedback. They read the comments, shrug them off, and continue down the same path without considering the validity of the concerns because they often feel like those providing feedback don't truly understand the limited time and

resources. This "thick-skinned" approach can protect them from the emotional toll of criticism, but it can also lead to stagnation. When you dismiss feedback entirely, you miss out on opportunities to improve, adapt, and better serve those who rely on your organization.

Neither extreme is helpful. The sweet spot is finding a balance: thick enough skin to take feedback without falling apart, but a soft enough heart to stay empathetic and open.

Thick skin means you understand that feedback isn't a personal attack. The goal of feedback is to improve the work, not tear you down. It lets you take in what's useful and filter out what's noise. You don't have to agree with everything, but you also don't have to let it wreck you.

A soft heart, on the other hand, keeps you grounded. It's about staying connected to the people you serve and letting their experiences inspire you to do better. It's what makes feedback not just data, but a call to action. Even when feedback is tough to hear, a soft heart ensures you're still motivated to create meaningful change.

Balancing these two qualities allows you to take in feedback, process it, and turn it into something actionable. We should use feedback to move closer to achieving our mission. So, when you receive tough criticism, take a moment. Step back and ask yourself: What's the message here? Is there a truth I can learn from? How can I use this to improve? Then remind yourself this isn't about you. It's about the work and making it better. With that mindset, you can face feedback head on without losing yourself in the process, and maybe gain someone's trust along the way.

§

TURN DETRACTORS INTO PROMOTERS

Fred Reichheld, the creator of the Net Promoter Score (NPS)[2], introduced a simple yet powerful way to measure customer satisfaction. The NPS asks customers to rate their experience on a scale from one to ten. Those who rate a nine or ten are called promoters—people who are genuinely happy with your services and likely to recommend you to others. Scores of seven or

eight, while not terrible, indicate that the customer isn't thrilled, and any score six or below that often signals dissatisfaction.

> *Thick skin to take feedback without falling apart; soft heart to stay empathetic and open.*

Interestingly, Fred's research revealed those who rate their satisfaction as a one or a two actually represent your greatest opportunity to create promoters. Why? Because these customers are experiencing direct, specific problems that, if addressed effectively, can turn their dissatisfaction into loyalty.[3]

When someone is deeply unhappy, they are often very clear about what's wrong, and they give you actionable feedback filled with specific things that need to be fixed. This clarity gives you a chance to step up, address their concerns, and transform their experience. If you can successfully resolve their issues, they will likely be converted into enthusiastic promoters. Yet, unfortunately, many write these people off as "complainers."

§

COMPLAINTS VS. FEEDBACK

It's easy to think of feedback as complaints and to dismiss the input. Especially if we believe they don't understand the challenges your organization faces or they don't truly know what would help them. What if instead, we shifted our perspective? We believe a complaint is actually a subset of feedback, a valuable form of communication that tells us something isn't working as it should. If we view complaints solely as negative, we miss out on the opportunity to understand the underlying issues and make improvements.

Instead of putting someone in a box as a complainer, try to see their feedback as a gift. Whether someone is complaining to get something fixed or just to express frustration, the core

message is the same: something needs attention. Complaining is a signal that points directly at opportunities for improvement. When someone takes the time to voice a complaint, they're essentially providing you with a roadmap to enhance your product, service, or process.

The key to turning complaints into constructive feedback lies in how we choose to receive and respond to them. If we approach complaints with an open mind and a willingness to listen, we can uncover actionable insights that might otherwise be overlooked. But we also acknowledge that sometimes, nonprofit organizations receive feedback they can't do anything about.

§

HANDLING FEEDBACK YOU CAN'T ACT ON

It's natural to feel anxious when you realize that, despite asking for feedback, gathering it, and analyzing it, you can't implement the changes people are asking for. But you don't always have to fix everything. Sometimes, simply acknowledging the feedback and validating the person's concerns is enough.

Too often, when we can't address a complaint, we inadvertently invalidate the feedback by dismissing it as unimportant. This can make the person who issued the complaint feel ignored or devalued. Instead, focus on letting them know you hear them, you care about their perspective, and you're doing what you can within your limits. When people feel heard, even if their issue can't be resolved right away, they are more likely to remain engaged and supportive.

A good example of this exists at airport customer service desks. When a flight is canceled, the representative on the phone, or in front of you, can't change the fact that the flight is canceled, but they can acknowledge the frustration, show empathy, and try to offer alternative solutions like booking the next available flight or providing a credit. Even when the outcome

isn't ideal, the experience of being heard and valued can change a negative situation into a positive one. If you've had this experience before, you know that when this situation is handled well, you leave that customer service desk feeling heard and taken care of, even if you are still in that same frustrating situation.

When receiving feedback, don't overlook the power of acknowledgment. Making someone feel heard, even without immediate change, builds trust and keeps them open to sharing feedback in the future.

As we mentioned in our introduction, the feedback problem is pervasive, and we have seen it time and time again. These basics give you an understanding for how to view feedback, so you can start this process centered around the values that will lead to success as you implement the strategies in this book. We

will also include a homework section at the end of each chapter to help you start thinking about the current systems you have in place and how to change them. Below is your first one. Homework

Take a moment to reflect on how feedback flows within your organization. Like a juggler relying on flashes of movement to keep multiple balls in the air, your organization depends on those moments of insight to adjust. In the next chapter, we'll dive into the role feedback plays in helping nonprofits adapt, improve, and make a greater impact. But before diving in, consider this: are you listening deeply enough to uncover the real issues, or are you skimming the surface? Here are a few questions you can ask to analyze your current feedback process:

- Identify areas where you may be operating with "Quaker guns." Where might you be

  acting on assumptions rather than real feedback?

- Review your current feedback channels. Are there opportunities to ask for feedback in a

  way that encourages honest, constructive input?

- Examine how you process criticism. Are you balancing thick skin and a soft heart when

  dealing with tough feedback?

- Reflect: Are complaints viewed as opportunities for improvement? If they aren't, next

time you hear a complaint, pause, and remember detractors often have the most valuable feedback.

CHAPTER

02

Why Gather Feedback as a Nonprofit?

"When we don't prioritize feedback, we are effectively operating in the dark."

During a chat with a Utah state senator, he told us that though the state is spending hundreds of millions on homelessness, they have no idea if their funding is actually helping. For us, that hit hard. Clearly, there was a want to help and money budgeted to help, yet that help was directionless. The state was effectively pouring money into a cause without a game plan and hoping it would aid those in need. You can see straight away how that might be an ineffective strategy. Yet, at Pulse For Good, we consistently see this same issue in the organizations we work with. They don't have the right feedback they need to inform their strategy, so they end up throwing money at the wall and hoping it helps to do something for those in need.

What's more, the funders who donate that money wonder if those funds are making any real difference or simply just vanishing into thin air. Without any feedback loop in motion to see how their donations are making a difference, they might stop donating all together. These days, nonprofits are being stretched thin, resources are tight, and there are more organizations competing for the same dollars. If you're not helping puppies or kids, it's getting tougher to keep donors happy because they are tired of giving money to problems that never seem to get fixed.

To make a difference and show their donors that difference, nonprofits need to make feedback a priority. Too often, nonprofits assume they know what's best without asking for input, or they are so busy that gathering feedback feels impossible. But when we don't prioritize feedback, we are effectively operating in the dark or throwing money at the wall.

Sadly, sometimes even when nonprofits do gather data, it's not the correct data. We have found that many nonprofit organizations tend to focus on the numbers—how many meals served, how many people housed—but they forget to ask how those people feel about the services they receive. Feedback helps fill in those blanks, making the story you tell more complete and

compelling. Sometimes, the feedback that points out problems can be what attracts more donation support, as it shows where help is urgently needed.

From a strategic standpoint, feedback is gold. It helps nonprofits tell their stories in a way that resonates. There's an old saying: "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." If everything looks perfect on the outside, funders might assume you don't need their help. Or, experienced funders might know that if everything looks perfect, there are probably some problems hidden away, like

the clutter tucked under a bed. But when they see some of the dirty laundry, it often helps organizations feel more authentic to funders, and they are excited to put their money towards fixing a problem they can see.

Take a homeless shelter, for example. Donors aren't impressed by how clean the place is. They care about whether homelessness is being addressed. If they still see people on the streets after they have donated, they will be more concerned about your impact than your facilities.

In the end, gathering feedback helps you build trust, improve your services, and understand the true value of what you provide. Listening is key. It shows you're not just slapping a band-aid on the problem, but that you are committed to solving it with the help of the very people you serve.

§

HOW FEEDBACK CAN IMPROVE YOUR NONPROFIT

In case we haven't given you enough of a reason to care about gathering feedback, here are five more.

1. Gives Clients a Voice

When clients have strong feelings but no way to express them within your organization, they often vent on platforms like Yelp or Facebook. This external feedback can be damaging if it's the first time you hear about an issue. By providing an in-house outlet for feedback, you can address concerns before they spiral, keeping the conversation within your control and allowing you to manage it effectively.

2. Is Often Required

Gathering feedback is no longer optional—it's quickly becoming a must for nonprofits, especially when federal or state funding is on the line. In healthcare, for example, patient feedback is required across the board, with entire departments dedicated to it. The same trend is spreading to the nonprofit sector, making feedback collection a standard expectation for continued funding and operational success.

3. Helps to Secure Grants

These days, most foundations expect nonprofits to include data and feedback in their grant reports or, at the very least, explain how they plan to

gather this information. Grantors want to know that the organizations they fund are making data-driven decisions and actively listening to the communities they aim to serve. By showing that you're not only gathering input but also acting on it, you make a compelling case that your investors' money will lead to meaningful and measurable results.

4. Outlines Service Gaps

Feedback is also crucial for spotting gaps that other review systems might miss. While platforms like Google focus on five-star ratings, that type of feedback can often be shallow. Real, actionable feedback provides the insights needed to identify and address areas for improvement. It is invaluable for nonprofits looking to make meaningful changes and enhance their services.

5. Helps You Become "Restaurant Smart"

In the book Unreasonable Hospitality[4], Will Guidara talks about the difference between being "restaurant smart" (focusing on what's best for guests) versus "business smart" (focusing on running a tight ship). The same idea applies to nonprofits. You can be business smart and still miss the mark on what's best for the people you serve. The only way to really know if you are meeting their needs is by asking them directly.

These five reasons show why feedback is so powerful for your nonprofit. At Pulse For Good, we're all about doing less but better. We believe in the power of feedback to make nonprofits more effective by streamlining processes to focus on what truly matters and systematizing feedback collection. Without feedback, you are just guessing, relying on assumptions instead of facts. Feedback lights the way, showing you what's working and what needs improvement.

Our approach outlined in the coming chapters is designed to help you gather the data you need efficiently, so you can make informed decisions that truly make a difference. You don't know what you don't know, and that's why asking for feedback is so important. Embracing a growth mindset, rather than fearing the gaps you might find, is the key to refining your services.

> *Donors aren't impressed by how clean the place is. They care about whether homelessness is being addressed.*

With the right systems in place, you can gather the data you need to make better decisions and create a bigger impact with less effort.

§

NONPROFITS WHO HAVE BEEN EMPOWERED BY FEEDBACK

Feedback is powerful, but you don't have to take our word for it. Here are a couple of stories from nonprofits that have used feedback to seriously level up their impact.

§

CATHOLIC COMMUNITY SERVICES

A few years back, Catholic Community Services (CCS) was in the running to operate a new homeless shelter in Salt Lake City. While they had experience with a soup kitchen, running a shelter was new territory. To those in the running, we suggested gathering feedback from the people they'd be serving, and CCS was the only organization to take our advice.

They started collecting feedback and quickly found out that the lack of shower curtains was a big deal for their guests. The curtains had been removed to prevent issues, but the feedback showed that this caused discomfort. CCS listened, installed shower curtains, and immediately saw a positive response from the community.

But they didn't stop there. They kept gathering feedback and making small but meaningful changes. When they submitted their proposal to run the shelter, they included all the feedback they collected, along with what they had done to

address that feedback. The result? CCS won the contract. Not because they had the most experience, but because they showed a real commitment to listening and improving. They built trust with both their clients and the broader community, proving that they were dedicated to getting better, even if they weren't perfect. Today, many other service providers look to follow CCS's example.

§

HOUSING FIRST

The Housing First model, now the gold standard in addressing homelessness, came from a simple yet powerful idea: ask people experiencing homelessness what they need. Initially, the creator of Housing First tried different approaches without much success. They focused on helping the homeless with food, job assistance, and many other services. But once they asked those affected directly, the solution became clear. People needed stable housing first and foremost.

This approach set a new benchmark for nonprofits working in homelessness and helped to shape a program that truly works. By prioritizing immediate housing, Housing First became a transformative program, now adopted nationwide. This is what it means to really listen to those you serve. When you engage directly with the people impacted and base your solutions on their input, you create programs that are effective and successful.

§

REMEMBER: FEEDBACK IS FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

Gathering meaningful feedback means engaging with people who have lived experience. According to the Oxford dictionary, lived experience is "personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people."[5] In other words, we need to get feedback directly from those who have faced homelessness, addiction, mental health challenges, or any number of difficulties our nonprofits aim to serve.

Sadly, connecting with these individuals isn't always easy. How do you engage someone who's in the thick of such struggles? Approaches like including

people on boards, running

listening sessions, or hiring individuals with these experiences can help. But we believe the most effective and thorough way is through a structured approach to gathering feedback. This system prevents tokenism (where people are included superficially) and ensures the feedback is relevant and comes from genuine expertise.

Note the difference between lived experience and lived expertise. Lived experience is something that happens at a specific moment, while lived expertise comes from dealing with something over a long period. However, lived expertise can become outdated. For example, advice from those who experienced a vulnerability such as homelessness early during the COVID-19 pandemic might not apply as the pandemic evolved. Similarly, travel advice from before 9/11 doesn't necessarily hold up today. It's the difference between a chef and a diner—one cooks the food, and the other enjoys it. The diner's knowledge is valuable, but it might not reflect the realities of the kitchen.

For nonprofits, this means recognizing that while lived expertise offers valuable historical insights, lived experience is often more relevant to current challenges. Fresh, up-to-date feedback from those still in the experience provides insights that apply directly to the present, rather than relying on outdated knowledge.

We hope this chapter has made it clear just how essential feedback is for your nonprofit's success. Whether it's building trust, securing funding, or improving services, feedback is the key to understanding and meeting the needs of those you serve. In the upcoming chapters, we'll dive into how to gather feedback effectively and the importance of addressing biases. Homework Here are a few things you can do today to understand how you are gathering feedback:

- Identify where you currently gather feedback. Are there gaps where important voices are

  being missed?

- Reflect on whether your feedback process is geared toward validation or genuine

improvement. The goal of feedback gathering isn't to hear about how good of a job you are doing.

- Check that your surveys and feedback tools are accessible and user-friendly for the

  people you serve.

- Evaluate how you respond to feedback today. Are you showing that you value feedback

by acknowledging it and making adjustments to solve the issues it uncovers?

CHAPTER

03

Accidental Defaults

"What you don't question, you accept — and what you accept becomes the way things are."

Think of the last time you drove somewhere. How conscious were you of the actual act of driving? You might have been thinking of where you're going, who you were meeting with, or even what you were going to have for lunch. But we are willing to bet money you weren't thinking about how far down to push the gas pedal, when to use your blinker, or what side of the road to drive on. Those are actions, decisions, and processes that are ingrained in us after years of use. We rarely stop to think about them nor about where they came from unless something changes. But these defaults can also have unintended consequences.

Blake, a co-founder and CEO of Pulse for Good, once faced a moment where his "default" settings nearly led to disaster. After spending two decades living in the United States, he moved to Australia to participate in religious services for a few years. A few days after arriving, it was time for him to attempt his first drive in the country. Things started off poorly when he instinctively opened the passenger door, expecting it to be the driver's side. Only after a moment of confusion did he realize the steering wheel was on the other side of the car.

Once in the correct seat (or the "right side," as his Australian friends often joked), he turned on the car and headed for the parking lot exit. As he went to make a right turn, he absentmindedly flicked the blinker—only to activate the windshield wipers instead. Embarrassed and flustered, he fumbled to turn off the wipers, found the blinker, and made the turn. But in his haste, he instinctively drove onto the wrong side of the road, straight into oncoming traffic.

Had someone asked Blake before this experience if he could drive, his answer would have been a confident "yes." But at that moment, he wasn't so sure. Something that had always felt natural and automatic suddenly felt foreign and dangerous. His default settings were entirely wrong for this new context.

Defaults, by their nature, are things we don't consciously think about. They allow us to focus on bigger challenges, like what to say in a meeting, instead of worrying about which side the blinker is on. But as Blake learned, defaults can trip us up when they no longer fit the situation. Even decades after returning from Australia, he occasionally finds himself flicking the windshield wipers instead of the turn signal.

Technology provides another clear example of defaults at work. Open the settings on any smartphone, and you'll see hundreds of tiny decisions already made for you: screen brightness, call notifications, battery optimization, and more. These defaults are designed to make things faster and easier, allowing us to focus on what really matters—texts, apps, calls—without getting bogged down by endless choices. These technological defaults demonstrate the power of assumptions in shaping user experiences, but they also remind us that assumptions, when applied to serving vulnerable populations, can lead to unintended harm. Slowing down and questioning these automatic settings becomes crucial, as the unintended consequences of our assumptions can have a real and lasting impact.

When Defaults Become Dangerous

The book Invisible Women[6] by Caroline Criado Perez analyzes data bias against women. She mentions that back in the 19[70]s, a male engineer designed crash test dummies based on the "average" male: 5'9" and 1[71] pounds. For women, he used a much smaller model based on his wife—just 4'1[1]" and 1[08] pounds. This might have seemed reasonable at the time, but the problem was these dummies were used to test car safety for everyone, and they didn't accurately represent the average woman.

According to the Department of Transportation's (DOT) Female Crash Fatality report[7], women are 2[8]% more likely to die and 7[3]% more likely to be severely injured in crashes compared to men, largely due to flawed crash test dummy standards. Sadly, even today, current female dummies are just scaled-down versions of male models, failing to accurately represent female physiology. According to Ms. Magazine[8], the DOT has started developing a more accurate female dummy, but economic considerations have limited its use, especially in the driver's seat.

The tragic reality of car safety is real and frustrating. But it wasn't done out of malice. Instead, it came from a default assumption of what works for men should work for everyone. And as a result, the consequences are difficult to swallow.

The same problem happened within the pharmaceutical industry. For years, this industry mostly tested drugs on men, assuming they would work the same for women. This "one-size-fits-all" thinking overlooked how different men's and women's bodies can be, leading to some medications being less

effective—or even risky—for women. It's only recently that we've started to realize the importance of testing drugs on both men and women to make sure everyone gets safe and effective treatments.

The first step toward meaningful change is questioning the assumptions we've always worked with. Every step forward begins with a question: are we serving people as they are or as we assume them to be?

See People as They Really Are

We often put people into "boxes" based on our first impressions or assumptions about them. It's hard not to do. These boxes are a mental shortcut our brains use to quickly categorize people, helping us make sense of the world faster. But instead of really getting to know the person, we end up interacting with this simplified version we've created in our minds.

To truly see someone, you need to fight the instinct to categorize them quickly and recognize them as a whole person instead. Think about how much more meaningful your interactions would be if you saw beyond the assumptions. That donor who gives a small amount every year? It might not seem like much at first glance—but for them, it could represent a significant sacrifice. And that teenager who's acting out in class? They might not just be "trouble"—they could be carrying challenges at home, like instability or neglect, that are shaping their behavior in ways you don't see.

The challenge is that the more we think we know someone, the easier it is to rely on these boxes we quickly put them in during our first impression of them. Over time, we stop seeing the person in front of us and interact instead with our mental version of them. It's like returning to your hometown and being treated as if you're still fifteen. People aren't seeing you as you are now; they are stuck on the mental image of who you were when you were younger and less experienced.

Breaking out of this habit means making a conscious effort to see and engage with people as they truly are. When we do this, we inject empathy back into our relationships and decisions and become much more inclusive. We start to see the real experiences and needs of others outside of the preconceived box we put them in.

If you have put someone in a box, don't feel too bad. We all have our own accidental defaults we need to overcome. Just like when you get married and realize you and your partner have completely different ideas about what the

thermostat should be set at. You likely assumed everyone likes the same temperature, but it's just your personal default.

These defaults show up everywhere in our society. We're programmed in certain ways without even realizing it. Remember in Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse when Peter Parker realizes Doc Ock is a woman? His first reaction is to say out load, "Step one, reassess personal biases." It's a perfect example of how we jump to conclusions based on the experiences in our own lives. We do this all the time, not out of malice, but because it's how we're wired. But when these defaults go unchecked, they can lead to designing cars or medications that aren't safe for everyone. Recognizing accidental defaults will help nonprofit organizations make more inclusive and thoughtful decisions for the people they serve. Removing Defaults from Your Systems

When we set up feedback systems, it's easy to go on autopilot and stick to what feels familiar. But have you ever stopped to think about the hidden assumptions behind those choices? The methods we choose, the questions we ask, and even how we deliver surveys can all reflect default settings that might not serve everyone equally.

For example, surveys are a common method for collecting feedback, but are they accessible to everyone you're trying to reach? Do the people you're surveying speak the same language you do? Are you using internal jargon or industry language that might confuse them? Consider the logistics too: Does your survey require internet access, and if so, do your respondents have a data plan? Do you send out surveys by mail, assuming everyone has a

mailing address? Or do you expect people to comfortably answer sensitive questions face to face?

All of these are defaults that could significantly impact the quality of the feedback you receive. There's no one-size-fits-all approach, and different situations call for different methods. The key is to make these decisions consciously, rather than relying on automatic, unexamined defaults. Sometimes an email survey might be the best option, but this choice should be made deliberately, considering your audience's specific needs. Are they tech-savvy? Do they prefer digital communication? Simply opting for the easiest method for you could lead to missed opportunities for meaningful feedback.

The truth is, feedback is being given all the time, whether we realize it or not. The key is to make intentional, thoughtful decisions in how we collect and

respond to that feedback. Think of how our bodies give us feedback. Eating something sweet feels good, so our body wants more, even though we know too much sugar isn't healthy. This is a feedback loop that can lead to unhealthy habits if we're not careful.

When it comes to feedback systems, the defaults we rely on can shape everything, from the voices we hear to the insights we gain. By questioning those defaults, we open the door to truly hearing from the people we serve in ways that reflect their realities, not just our assumptions. The goal isn't to reinvent every process, but to ensure that each choice (whether it's the format of a survey, the language we use, or the method of delivery) is made with intention. When feedback systems are built thoughtfully, they become more inclusive, more effective, and ultimately more powerful in driving real change.

The Price of Unexamined Systems

> *Defaults are powerful because they shape our actions before we even realize they're at play.*

Defaults can streamline decisions, but when applied poorly, they can lead to devastating outcomes. Defaults are essentially assumptions made on behalf of others, and when those assumptions go unexamined, they can perpetuate harmful systems, silence voices, and cost lives. Let's explore how bad defaults manifest and the profound impact they can have in other industries.

In Outliers[9] by Malcolm Gladwell, a chilling example of bad defaults is highlighted in the aviation industry. Korean Air faced a series of fatal crashes, many of which stemmed from cultural norms around authority and communication. Co-pilots, hesitant to challenge their superiors, used what's known as mitigated speech, which is indirect, deferential language that avoided confrontation. Instead of directly pointing out dangers, co-pilots would make polite suggestions or observations that often went unheeded. This communication breakdown, rooted in cultural assumptions about hierarchy, cost lives.

To address this, the aviation industry developed Crew Resource Management (CRM) protocols.[10] These protocols encourage open communication, teamwork, and a reduction in hierarchical barriers to ensure that every voice in the cockpit is heard. CRM's success in reducing airline accidents is a testament to the cost of bad defaults and the value of rethinking assumptions.

On the topic of how authority plays into defaults, Hofstede's Power Distance Index, which measures how comfortable a culture is with unequal power and authority between individuals, provides a fascinating framework for understanding how individuals interact with

authority. In countries with low power distance scores, such as Denmark, people are more comfortable questioning authority. In contrast, countries with high scores, like Russia, tend to discourage such challenges.

However, power disparities amplify significantly in vulnerable populations, regardless of cultural norms. Vulnerable individuals, whether due to homelessness, poverty, or dependency on services, often behave as though they are in a high power distance environment, regardless of their cultural background. For example, in the U.S., where challenging authority is more common, vulnerable individuals might still refrain from voicing concerns, fearing retribution or loss of access to essential resources.

This fear-based compliance mirrors the same dynamics that led to communication failures in aviation. Without addressing these amplified power disparities, organizations risk perpetuating systems where those in need remain silent and underserved.

The consequences of bad defaults are particularly stark in healthcare. One report found that healthcare providers often operate under unexamined assumptions or implicit biases that disproportionately harm vulnerable populations.[11] For example:

- Stereotyping: Healthcare providers may assume certain symptoms are less severe in

  minority patients, leading to underdiagnosis or misdiagnosis.

- Communication Barriers: A default reliance on medical jargon or digital access assumes

  patients are literate, fluent, or digitally connected, leaving many behind.

- Resource Allocation: Decisions about who gets prioritized for treatment can inadvertently

favor more assertive or well-resourced individuals, sidelining the most vulnerable.

As PBI Education, an organization dedicated to providing high-quality, clinical and academic based continuing education programs notes, these mistaken assumptions can have deadly consequences. For instance, ignoring a patient's pain report due to unconscious bias or assuming someone "looks fine" can lead to delayed or insufficient care.[12] These are bad defaults in action—defaults that harm the very people they're meant to help.

Bad defaults are not just inefficiencies; they are barriers to equity and effectiveness. Whether it's an airline crash, a vulnerable person unable to voice their concerns, or a patient receiving substandard care, the cost of leaving assumptions unexamined is far too high. Nonprofit organizations should slow down, identify their defaults, and ask critical questions: Who are we leaving out? What assumptions are baked into our processes?

Who Feedback Is Really For

Another accidental default not often discussed is why an organization might feel the need to gather feedback. Typically, we gather feedback for one of two reasons: to get validation or to improve. When you ask someone, "How do I look?", are you genuinely seeking an honest critique or simply fishing for compliments? The same logic applies to organizations.

Many times, feedback is collected because the organization wants to feel validated, not because they're focused on making meaningful improvements for their customers or clients. A restaurant that pushes Yelp reviews, for example, may be more interested in receiving high-star ratings to attract more customers than in using feedback to enhance the actual dining experience. The motive behind feedback matters.

It's easy to seek out only the positive. Everyone enjoys a pat on the back, but it's the tough, constructive feedback that helps us grow and make impactful changes. Unfortunately, most organizations gravitate toward validation. This is the path of least resistance. But the real work, and the real value, comes from asking for feedback that challenges the status quo.

Think about how feedback is often incentivized. If the purpose of feedback was truly to improve the client's experience, would there be a need for gift card

rewards or discounts just to get them to respond? Probably not. Incentives become necessary when people feel like their feedback won't make a difference to them personally. When feedback loops are designed to benefit the people providing feedback (because they know their input will lead to improvements), the need for these external motivators disappears. The incentive becomes the change they experience.

So, what kind of questions are you asking in your feedback surveys? Are they designed to make your organization look good, or are they genuinely aimed at improving the customer experience? Too often, feedback questions are skewed toward validating the organization's performance. For instance, a question like, "How satisfied are you with the company's leadership?" doesn't necessarily help improve the customer experience. It's self-serving—designed to boost internal morale rather than creating a space for constructive criticism.

A great example of this is seen on platforms like Glassdoor, where companies frequently ask about approval ratings for the CEO. That's feedback for the organization, not for the employees providing it. It highlights where the focus really lies.

Ultimately, the feedback you gather should be for the benefit of the people you serve, not just your organization. When organizations design feedback systems that serve their own

interests, they fall into an accidental default of validation over improvement. Questioning and correcting this default is one of the best ways to help those you hope to serve. The most valuable feedback challenges the norm and forces growth. The key is to ensure your feedback system is built to serve the needs of your customers and clients, not just to make your organization look good. Homework Here are a few things you can do today to challenge your accidental defaults:

- Audit your current feedback processes and identify any accidental defaults that may limit

  genuine feedback.

- Reflect on whether you're seeking validation or improvement. Are your feedback

  questions pushing for growth or just reaffirming what you already know?

- Check if your survey questions focus on customer experience rather than organizational

  performance. Revise if needed.

- Ensure your feedback systems are easy to use, accessible, and inclusive for all audiences.

You can't change everything all at once. Start small and work your way forward.

CHAPTER

04

Feedback Loops

"Without a complete loop, you're just collecting data. You aren't creating change."

Think of a feedback loop like your home thermostat. It queries the current temperature, collects that information, analyzes it, then implements a change if needed (either heating or cooling) and notifies you of the new temperature. This process is ongoing; the thermostat constantly checks and adjusts the temperature to keep things comfortable, moving through the feedback loop continually in the background as you go about your day.

Feedback loops in your organization should work the same way. They should be continually running so you can respond to marginal changes as needed. And just like the thermostat, these feedback loops should be ongoing, including the process of asking for feedback, collecting it, and analyzing the data, so you can stay on top of minor issues before they turn into major problems.

All around us, feedback loops exist, and they guide how systems work and adapt. In biology, they help regulate our body temperature—when we get too hot, we sweat, and when we get too cold, we shiver. These loops also play a role in processes like childbirth, where contractions create pressure, leading to more contractions until the baby is born. In business and nonprofits, feedback loops shape behavior. When we do something and get positive feedback, we're likely to do it again. Most of our body's chemistry, like the release of dopamine, is driven by these loops, reinforcing behaviors that feel rewarding.

The first steps of a feedback loop often happen automatically. For instance, with a product, gathering feedback might be easy. But analyzing it and making changes takes more effort. As your feedback loop becomes more advanced, it takes more work to make significant changes. Just like exercising! At first, you get sore quickly and see muscle growth, but over time, you have to work harder to achieve the same results.

There's a lot of research around feedback loops in biology, psychology, and other fields. They govern so much of what we do and how systems around us function, both for better and for worse. Understanding these loops helps us see how small actions can lead to big changes. Then we need to learn how to take charge of them.

§

POSITIVE VS. NEGATIVE FEEDBACK LOOPS

Positive feedback loops often encourage you to do more of something. For example, if you receive praise or see success from a particular action, you're likely to repeat that behavior. But it's also important to note that even positive feedback loops lead to negative outcomes. Sometimes, we can get stuck in a runaway feedback loop which isn't healthy for us. Like when we binge watch TV or eat way too much candy. These things feel good, so we want more of them. Technically they are positive feedback loops, but they aren't necessarily good for us, which leads to a negative outcome.

Positive feedback loops are often easy to spot because they feel rewarding. When something works well or gets a good response, it encourages us to keep doing it. For instance, in a nonprofit, if a fundraising campaign brings in a lot of donations, the positive feedback loop would suggest running similar campaigns in the future. This kind of loop can lead to growth, success, and repeated wins.

However, positive feedback loops can also create blind spots. If you're only focused on what's going well, you might miss underlying issues or areas that need improvement. In some cases, a positive feedback loop can even escalate into something harmful—like the tech bubble, where in the early 20^{00}s, excessive speculation on internet-based companies led to inflated valuations and eventual market collapse when many failed to deliver sustainable profits to their investors.[13] It's important to remain aware of the broader context and not get too caught up in the immediate rewards.

On the other hand, negative feedback loops are those that discourage certain behaviors. They don't always have a negative outcome. If you see brake lights ahead and slow down, that's a negative feedback loop. It's stopping something, yet creating a positive outcome. Negative feedback loops, while often seen as less desirable, are just as crucial. They act as a check on behavior, signaling when something needs to stop or change. For instance, if a program isn't meeting its goals and receives critical feedback, this loop helps you reassess and adjust before further resources are wasted. In everyday life, negative feedback loops often keep us safe.

Both positive and negative feedback loops are essential. They help us understand what actions to continue and what actions to reconsider or stop altogether. The real challenge—and opportunity—comes in balancing positive and negative feedback loops. Both are necessary to create a healthy, adaptive

system. Positive loops drive innovation and progress, while negative loops provide the necessary corrections to keep things on track. Together, they help you understand what's working, what isn't, and how to make informed decisions that lead to long-term success. But remember, you can't put a feedback loop in place and leave it alone.

§

5 STEPS OF THE FEEDBACK LOOP

Now that we've established that feedback loops are always happening, whether positive or negative, it's time to take charge of how we collect and use that feedback. Instead of letting feedback happen by accident, we can structure it intentionally to make sure it's meaningful and actionable. This is where the five steps of a feedback loop come in. By following these

principles, we can create a system that gathers the right feedback and helps us respond effectively.

Here is a visual representation of the feedback loop we should follow:

§

STEP 1: ASK

Curiosity drives us to seek more information or clarity on something specific. For example, a nurse asking, "What's your pain level today?" or measuring blood pressure are common ways we gather information. Asking comes naturally to most of us—it's something we do without even thinking because we understand its value. The key here is to be intentional about what we want to know more about. It all starts with the right questions and considering any accidental defaults we might have about those we serve.

§

STEP 2: COLLECT

Once you ask the question, the next step is to collect the information. This can be as simple as listening to someone's response or as structured as gathering data through a survey or a listening session. The best part about collecting

information is this step can often happen automatically and in the background if you have set up the right processes.

§

STEP 3: ANALYZE

After collecting the information, the next step is to analyze it. While this step might seem automatic, it usually requires more human effort and expertise. This is where data analysis, consultants, or experts come into play. Many people don't feel confident analyzing data on their own, so they bring in someone with the right knowledge to interpret it.

For example, a doctor knows how to interpret blood pressure readings based on their expertise, but for many of us, those numbers don't mean much. This step translates raw data into actionable insights that matter to your organization. However, this is also where many feedback loops stall. It's easy to get stuck here, especially in organizations where implementing change can be difficult. Knowing what needs to change is one thing, but making those changes is a whole other challenge. To close the feedback loop effectively, we must overcome this stagnation.

§

STEP 4: IMPLEMENT

Implementing change is tough because humans, by nature, often resist change. Even when we know what needs to be done, the effort required to make it happen can be overwhelming.

> *Feedback loops are everywhere — the only question is whether yours is designed or accidental.*

For example, everyone understands that the national debt is a problem, but the steps to address it are so complex and daunting that change seems impossible. Or when it comes to personal health, many of us know we need to eat healthier, but following through is the hard part. Cravings, habits, and resistance to change get in the way.

To overcome this in your organization, start small. Building new habits takes time. We believe that James Clear had it right when he mentioned in Atomic Habits[14] that change should begin small. Manageable actions can make the process less daunting. Focus on making tiny, consistent changes that build on each other over time.

§

STEP 5: NOTIFY

The final step in the feedback loop is to notify. This step closes the feedback loop by letting people know their feedback was heard and what you are going to do about it. According to the book CEO Excellence by Carolyn Dewar, Scott Keller, and Vikram Malhotra, "Following up on surveys is the most important part of a survey."[15]

When you notify people that you have listened and are taking action, they are more likely to give you even more feedback, and the quality of that feedback will improve because they know you have truly listened. Often when people first give feedback, they are only sharing the surface level of a problem. But if they see you taking that feedback to heart and making a change, you will get deeper, even more actionable feedback from them. Much like when you have a conversation with someone: if they are engaged and nodding along, you naturally want to share more with them. But if they are distracted, you are less likely to continue.

Most of us are really good at notifying people of our feedback in conversation, but not as good at notifying people in other places. Notifying also acts as a reward in the feedback loop. Just like in The Power of Habit[16] by Charles Duhigg, where the final step in habit formation is a reward, notifying is the acknowledgment that encourages more participation. Even something as small as a "thank you" can motivate someone to provide feedback again.

In building your feedback loops, it's important to create these notifications, even if they are small. Just like setting goals and rewarding yourself after reaching them, these notifications create positive reinforcement, encouraging continued engagement and helping to build a more effective feedback loop.

When building out a feedback loop, keep these five steps top of mind and use them as a guide for where to automate and where to focus your resources. If you include each of these steps in your processes, you will start to see immediate improvement in the feedback you receive. In the next chapter, we will discuss how to close the feedback loop effectively (the last three steps of this loop), and in chapter six, we will offer you a few ways to jumpstart these feedback loops. But first, let's analyze one of the issues that plays into the feedback problem.

§

FEEDBACK LOOPS NEED TUNING

Keep in mind, feedback loops are always at work, whether we notice them or not. One of the most basic examples is pain—like when you touch a hot stove. Your body immediately tells you to pull away. But what happens when that loop breaks down and stops working?

When Blake's son was three, he had dental work done. After getting his mouth numbed, he didn't realize he was chewing on his own lip because he couldn't feel it. As a result, his lips

almost quadrupled in size, and he had sores for weeks! The feedback loop was broken, and he ended up hurting himself without even knowing it. If the feedback is wrong or missing, we make decisions based on faulty data, leading to unintended consequences.

When your feedback loops aren't tuned correctly, it could lead to significant problems because the information it provides is skewed. What's worse is, at the moment, these decisions might seem right. But because they are based on inaccurate or incomplete data, they are the wrong decisions. Just like driving a GPS that's out of sync might lead you somewhere you don't want to go.

Misaligned feedback loops often create a false sense of security. You might feel you are making progress, only to find you are just reinforcing mistakes. For example, if you're running a nonprofit and only hearing positive feedback from

a select group, you might assume everything's going great. But if you miss out on critical voices (those who might be unhappy or disengaged), you aren't seeing the full picture, which means you are not as effective as you think.

Worse still, when these broken loops persist, they can create a feedback cycle that's hard to break. The wrong decisions lead to more flawed feedback, which in turn leads to more misguided actions. Over time, this can steer your organization further away from its goals, making it increasingly difficult to course correct.

So, the question becomes, what is the best way to fine tune our feedback process so it keeps us on track? While automating the first few steps (asking and collecting) of the feedback loop can help manage this, analyzing, implementing, and notifying usually require more direct involvement.

It's a lot like starting a fitness journey. At first, you might think lifting weights is the key, but then you discover that diet, sleep, and consistency are just as important. The same goes for

feedback. There is more to it than just collecting responses. To truly benefit from feedback, you must be ready to adapt your approach as you go. After gathering feedback, you might realize that your initial questions were too broad or not resonating with your audience. In this case, you should refine those questions to dig deeper into the issues that matter most. If feedback indicates that certain programs aren't meeting needs, you should implement targeted changes, then follow up to see if those adjustments are making a difference.

By continually refining your process based on the feedback, you are proactively improving your organization in a way that's responsive to the real, evolving needs of those you serve. This fine-tuning turns feedback into a dynamic tool that shapes your organization's direction.

The bottom line? If you don't set up a feedback loop, one will be set up for you—usually in ways you'd rather avoid. It's better to be proactive in establishing and tuning these loops, so you always get the right data and can make informed decisions that truly benefit those you serve. Homework Now that you've explored feedback loops, it's time to apply this knowledge to your organization. Start by identifying the existing feedback loops within your organization and analyzing if they include the five steps outlined in this chapter. Here are some questions to guide you:

- What feedback loops currently exist in your organization?

- Do each of these five steps exist within your feedback loops? If not, what steps are

  missing or could use improvement?
- Do you have any broken feedback loops that aren't delivering the insights you need?
- Are there ways you can fine-tune your feedback loops to become a more powerful tool to

help steer your organization? Remember: you must take charge of implementing feedback. It won't happen without you. If you want to gather candid feedback, this is where you should start. Then, you need to master the art of closing the feedback loop.

• • •

CHAPTER

05

Closing the Feedback Loop Effectively

"You give feedback, but then ... crickets. No follow-up. No changes. Just silence."

We've established that feedback loops happen all the time, whether we plan for them or not. They're part of every process, every decision, and every service we provide. But closing the feedback loop (the last three of the five steps) is a deliberate act. It is not, and never will be, a passive process.

Yet, many nonprofits find it difficult to close the feedback loop because they are overwhelmed by a mix of operational constraints, limited resources, and complex reporting structures. Nonprofits juggle a heavy load: fundraising, service delivery, compliance, donor relations, and much more, often with volunteer workers. Amidst all these responsibilities, collecting feedback can feel like one more box to check. Nonprofits still gather feedback because they know it's important, but taking that next step—analyzing it, responding to it, and communicating back to the people who provided it—often falls through the cracks.

You may end up with a disconnected process that leaves vulnerable populations feeling unheard, unimportant, and skeptical of your intentions.

It's a position we've all experienced at least once in our lives. You give feedback, but then . . . crickets. No follow-up. No changes. Just silence. And after that happens a few times, you stop giving feedback altogether because why bother? Clearly, nothing is going to change, so why waste your time trying to shout into the void? This disconnect is what makes the difference between accidental feedback loops and those designed with intention and trust.

Feedback loops can be purposeful or accidental. Things might go your way even if you don't have a set process to close the feedback loop. But accidental loops are a gamble—you might hit the jackpot, or you might lose trust altogether. Instead, we need to close feedback loops with purpose by using time and trust.

Time

Time is one of the biggest factors when closing a feedback loop, but it is not a one-size-fits-all strategy. Depending on the size and nature of the actions you're taking, the time needed to gather meaningful feedback can vary widely. If you're a graphic designer, for instance, you can share a design with someone and get feedback in minutes. But when you're working with large groups of vulnerable individuals, gathering the right feedback can take weeks, months, or even years to understand the full picture and make changes that improve lives.

The timeline for your feedback loop needs to be practical. Sometimes, you can make changes within a week. Other times, feedback comes slowly, and the changes take longer, maybe even years. Your process should account for these differences. The last thing you want is to implement a plan, then let months or even years go by without gathering new feedback. What happens then? You might make a change based on outdated input, wait to see if it helps, and then realize you're still missing the mark.

This happens a lot in government agencies. Long cycles of planning, implementation, and waiting for feedback, only to find out the changes didn't quite land. Then, more time is spent analyzing and adjusting. It's an endless cycle that drags on because the feedback loop is too slow.

The goal is to have the minimum amount of time necessary to gather valuable input. If you implement a change today and people can start seeing the effects tomorrow, your feedback system should start gathering information on the updates tomorrow. Yes, feedback takes time, but your job is to minimize that time without sacrificing the quality of the input.

Take, for example, one of the longest-running studies in human development, the British Birth Cohort Study[17]. It started tracking babies born in 19[58] and is still ongoing. The goal of this

study was to observe and understand how social and economic circumstances influence life outcomes over time. Throughout its seven-decade span, researchers collected a range of data at different points in participants' lives—from childhood to adulthood. Some feedback loops in this study were immediate, like childhood health and development markers, while others were much longer, such as adult employment outcomes, health in midlife, and aging patterns.

Whether your feedback loop is weeks long (like responding to feedback on a specific program tweak) or years long (like tracking the long-term outcomes of a housing initiative), the keys are knowing when and how often to collect feedback and making sure that process is as responsive as possible. Some feedback loops will need to be immediate, while others might require more patience and reflection. By planning for both, you ensure that you're gathering the right data at the right time. Trust

More than time, closing the feedback loop requires trust. Trust is the currency that fuels the entire process. When you ask people to share feedback,

you're essentially asking for an investment of their trust. When you close the feedback loop properly, they earn interest on that trust. The result allows you to set the stage for deeper and stronger relationships down the line.

We tend to assume a trust deficit exists on the side of the people we serve, that they don't trust us enough to offer feedback. However, it's often the organizations or service providers who struggle with trust. They may doubt that individuals will give feedback at all, that the feedback will be useful, or that the people providing it truly understand what's needed. There's a lack of trust that the feedback will be valuable and actionable at all.

For a feedback loop to work effectively, trust must flow both ways. The people giving feedback need to trust that their voices matter, and the organization needs to trust that those

voices will have ideas that could guide them towards creating meaningful change. Fortunately, because the trust deficit is often on the organization's side, there are steps you can take to address it. You can train your staff to embrace feedback, create systems to handle it seriously, and show—through your actions—that you're committed to using feedback to improve services.

Building trust starts with small wins. When you close a feedback loop by showing people their input led to real change, it creates a self-sustaining cycle. Over time, it becomes a trust-building machine. The more feedback you receive and act on, the more trust you gain from the people you serve.

For nonprofits, especially those working with vulnerable communities, the stakes are even higher. When trust is broken, it's not just the feedback loop that fails, it's the relationship with the community. Rebuilding that trust is a much harder task. This is why we need to honor feedback, close the loop, and show that we are committed to making the necessary changes. Trust starts here, and it grows the more we show that we truly do hear those we seek to serve.

§

STRATEGIES TO FUEL TRUST

1. Use Anonymity to Strengthen Feedback Loops

Trust is one of the two main keys to closing feedback loops, but sometimes, building that trust requires an extra layer of protection—anonymity. We have found that allowing anonymity is much like offering an emotional safety net

because it acts as a protective bubble that allows people to express their thoughts without fear of personal repercussions.

However, the more specific the feedback is, the easier it is to identify who provided it. If you ask someone how their 1[0] a.m. Wednesday appointment went, it's obvious who's

responding. That's why creating anonymous channels, such as feedback forms, kiosks, or online surveys, gives people the security they need to be completely transparent.

Take the lottery, for example. Winning should be the ultimate form of good news, right? But publicizing a win can bring unwanted attention, pressure, and even safety concerns. That's why many lotteries allow winners to remain anonymous, protecting them from the social consequences of being identified. In a similar way, providing anonymity in feedback processes protects individuals from the potential negative fallout of their honesty.

Witness protection programs and whistleblower protections operate on the same principle: anonymity shields individuals from harm, whether it's physical threats, ostracism, or backlash. This level of protection allows people to share vital information, even in high-stakes situations, without fear of retribution. The protection of anonymity encourages openness where there might otherwise be silence.

2. Allow Peer-to-Peer Feedback

One of the most effective ways to build trust in your feedback process is by introducing peer-to-peer feedback. When feedback is given to someone who shares similar experiences or challenges, there is an immediate connection between the two of them that builds a deeper sense of trust. It's like having someone who's faced the same health issue as you explain what's going on in language that you understand, as opposed to hearing it from a doctor who uses technical jargon to explain what's happening in your body.

In a feedback loop, having a peer advocate or feedback champion can make all the difference. It allows the person giving feedback to feel more comfortable, knowing they're speaking with someone who gets it on a deeper level. They share a common language, not just in

terms of words, but in lived experience. This sense of empathy makes the feedback process feel more genuine and less intimidating, which encourages more honest and open conversations.

For nonprofits, this approach can be particularly powerful when serving vulnerable or underprivileged communities. Having a peer who understands their specific struggles and challenges serve as a feedback advocate can help bridge the gap between service providers and the individuals they serve.

3. Create a Safe and Comfortable Environment

Giving feedback can be intimidating, especially if the situation feels tense. Imagine trying to offer constructive feedback to a police officer while getting a ticket. Not exactly the most comfortable setting, right? In that authoritative interaction, people will hold back sharing their honest thoughts to protect themselves.

When people feel at ease, they're much more likely to provide genuine and useful feedback. The feedback process shouldn't feel like it's happening under a spotlight. In fact, the best environments often remove the pressure and allow people to share their thoughts in ways that feel natural and low stakes. But what feels natural and low stakes to some, might not feel that way to others.

To combat this, provide multiple avenues for feedback. Some people may prefer an anonymous survey, while others might be more comfortable with calling a helpline. Offering multiple options shows you're serious about gathering feedback and you respect the comfort of the individuals providing it.

4. Offer Strength in Numbers

When people band together to give feedback, it empowers them in ways that might not be possible individually. Just like the "they can't arrest everybody" mindset that comes with protests, there is strength in numbers. When many voices unite to amplify a message, it becomes much harder to ignore. We were lucky enough to see this in action.

Marc is a co-founder, and the COO and CFO for Pulse For Good. His daughter Penny struggled with physical development, but doctors kept reassuring him and his wife that Penny would grow out of it. For years, they sought the help of various professionals (chiropractors, therapists, and pediatricians), yet no one could pinpoint the real issue. Then, Penny broke her leg in a trampoline accident. After the initial relief of knowing the break had healed, it became clear that Penny wasn't returning to her former level of mobility. The injury had exposed something deeper. That's when they were referred to a neurologist who, within minutes, diagnosed Penny with Spinal

Muscular Atrophy (SMA), a genetic condition that causes muscle weakness and wasting.

The diagnosis was a mix of relief and heartbreak, and they quickly started Penny on treatments for her condition. However, while his family was struggling through treatments for this rare disease, Marc's insurance company told him they were no longer covering the medication his daughter needed—a medication that costs around $3^{40},0^{00}$ a year. Marc did everything he could to appeal this decision, but his efforts were denied at every turn. Frustrated and running out of options, Marc turned to LinkedIn, sharing his situation and asking if anyone had connections that could help.

At first, it was a shot in the dark, but within days, his post went viral, garnering over half a million views. As more people saw and shared the post, Marc found himself surrounded by an

> *"Accidental loops are a gamble. You might hit the jackpot, or you might lose trust altogether.*

outpouring of support, giving him the confidence to keep pushing back. The weight of the collective voice was undeniable. The sheer number of people rallying behind him shifted the power dynamics. Marc wasn't just a single, frustrated parent anymore; he had an army of advocates amplifying his message.

Soon, big organizations listened. His insurance provider reached out, acknowledging the post and reversing their decision. They even admitted the drug should have never been denied in the first place!

Marc's story is a powerful reminder that sometimes it takes a crowd to close the feedback loop. What started as a seemingly hopeless situation for one person became a movement. Social media, in this case, was the perfect platform for Marc to share his story, and the collective support from the online community closed the gap and evened the playing field.

Sometimes, an organization might not want the feedback loop to be closed. But when enough people rally behind an issue, they force it closed. Nonprofit

organizations can offer that strength up front by creating environments like town hall meetings to provide feedback. That way, individuals aren't alone when they speak up—there is a group of others in their same situation, rallying behind them.

§

RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY

As you add more of these trust-building strategies into your feedback loops to better close them, we also want to highlight that relationships are key in this process. Relationships are the most natural way to fuel trust. When you trust someone, you're more likely to open up to them.

On an individual level, fostering these one-on-one relationships allows for deeper feedback, where people feel comfortable sharing even the tough stuff. This is often seen in

religious settings, where clergy members may have known individuals for decades and have built a strong level of trust. In these scenarios, people are more likely to open up because they don't fear retribution for what they share. It's the same dynamic in close personal relationships with spouses, children, or friends. Trust removes the barriers to honest communication.

But as effective as this approach is, it's also the hardest to maintain at scale. Building deep, trusting relationships takes time, and in a society that has become increasingly transactional, it's difficult to replicate. The more people you need to engage with, the more challenging it becomes to cultivate that kind of one-on-one connection. Time becomes a limited resource, and creating meaningful relationships with hundreds or thousands of people is nearly impossible.

We need to find balance. While you may want to build personal relationships to gather feedback, it takes years—sometimes decades—to reach the point where people feel safe sharing openly. Until then, it's important to offer other ways for people to provide feedback, especially if they're not ready to share directly with you yet.

§

KEEP TECHNOLOGY IN MIND

Social media has proven to us repeatedly that relationships and technology go hand in hand. When organizations rely solely on manual feedback collection methods, they can easily become overwhelmed, and valuable feedback gets lost in the shuffle. Technology can help you keep relationships while you scale.

For smaller organizations, direct relationships and manual feedback methods may work well, but as soon as you scale into the hundreds or thousands, gathering and processing feedback becomes far more cumbersome. That's where technology steps in as the scalable solution. By

integrating tech solutions, organizations can keep up with the volume of responses, ensuring every voice is heard, every opinion analyzed, and every opportunity for improvement acted on.

Technology turns an overwhelming flood of data into actionable insights. It ensures that even at scale, feedback loops stay purposeful. We need to invest in technology that helps us scale. Otherwise, we will lose the trust of the communities we serve simply because we don't have the capacity to review, respond, and close the feedback loop. This makes technology a key resource to building stronger relationships with the community.

§

FEEDBACK LOOPS IN PRACTICE

We can discuss the theory behind feedback loops all day, but nothing compares to seeing them in action. Here are a few excellent examples of how other nonprofit organizations have closed them.

§

CATHOLIC COMMUNITY SERVICES (CCS) TOWN HALLS

Using our system to gather feedback with surveys, Catholic Community Services (CCS) has developed an effective way to use feedback loops to engage their community and drive change. They start by gathering feedback through surveys and then periodically hold town halls where they bring everyone together to discuss the feedback. During these town halls, they go over all the feedback they received and discuss how they will implement the feedback. This approach is where CCS really shines, especially when it comes to the crucial step

of notifying.

Blake had the chance to observe one of these town halls at a homeless drop-in center. The process was simple yet powerful. After reviewing the feedback, the facilitators clearly explained how they were using it to make real changes. But they didn't stop there. At the end of the

session, they pointed out kiosks at the back of the room where attendees could leave more feedback.

What happened next was a clear sign of the success of their approach. As soon as the meeting ended, a line of people formed at the kiosks, eager to provide more input. Why? Because they had just seen that their voices were heard, and that their feedback led to tangible improvements. Through this simple action, CCS built significant trust within the community, and those offering their feedback knew their words would be taken seriously.

§

VALLEY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH WHITEBOARDS

Valley Behavioral Health had been using kiosks to gather feedback for a while, but they needed a better way to notify people about what was being done with that feedback. Their solution was brilliantly simple: they placed whiteboards above each kiosk with the messages, "This is what we've heard" and "This is what we're doing."

This small change had a big impact. It immediately let people know that their feedback was being taken seriously and acted upon. The whiteboards showed that the feedback loop was complete, and as a result, responses to the kiosks increased. People could see that their input wasn't just vanishing into a void, but was leading to real changes, sometimes even addressing specific concerns they had raised. What's more, it was a cost-effective solution!

Too often, organizations think they need an elaborate or expensive system to notify people, but this example shows that even something as simple as a whiteboard can make a huge difference. Many of our customers use this tactic now due to its popularity.

§

MONTGOMERY COUNTY LIVED EXPERIENCE BOARDS

Montgomery County took a unique approach to their feedback loop by creating a Lived Experience Board, composed mostly of individuals who had experienced homelessness. Initially, they struggled to notify everyone in the broader community of the changes they had made, but they found that this board was an effective way to share updates.

What made this particularly valuable was its dual role. Not only did they receive updates on the lived experience of those they served, but these updates also helped shape the questions being asked in the feedback loop. As the organization worked through the loop, they realized that their questions needed to evolve. If they kept getting the same positive feedback, it was a sign to dig deeper or shift focus to other areas that needed attention.

By engaging with this smaller, more focused group, Montgomery County could refine their feedback process, leading to more targeted and meaningful conversations. This collaboration ensured that the feedback loop was dynamic and adapted to the needs and insights of those with real-life experience. Homework Because we know we can't rely on accidentally closing the feedback loop, let's focus on a few ways to make this close purposeful:

- Take some time to outline the feedback process you currently have in place, whether it's

intentional or accidental. Write down each stage, from how you gather feedback to how

you communicate changes back to your community or team.

- Once you've mapped your process, identify where the loop isn't closed. Ask yourself:

Are we getting back to the people who gave the feedback? Is the feedback being

implemented in a way that's visible to those who gave it?

- Based on what you've learned about time in this chapter, establish a realistic timeline for

your feedback loops. Consider how long it typically takes to gather enough feedback,

analyze it, and make small changes.

- Think of at least three ways you can improve trust building within your feedback process.
- Choose one specific piece of feedback you've received and plan a small, concrete change

to address it. Document the process, from gathering feedback to making the change and

communicating it back to your community. Did the feedback loop feel complete? If not,

what was missing?

Closing the feedback loop is about making changes that people can see and experience. When you take action, even in small ways, you signal to the people you serve that their feedback is valuable and that they are part of the process. That's where real trust is built, and that's what keeps the feedback loop running strong.

Now you know how to effectively close the feedback loop and have some clear examples of how others have done this. Next, we will share a few tips on how to jumpstart your feedback systems into action so you can get started on the right foot from day one.

• • •

CHAPTER

06

Five Factors of Feedback Systems & How to Jumpstart Them

"Feedback is like water. It will always find a way down."

§

JUMPSTART THEM

Think of a feedback system as the bigger chain that consists of several smaller, interconnected feedback loops. As we mentioned in chapter four, a feedback loop is a cycle of asking, collecting, analyzing, implementing, and notifying—one individual process. The feedback system, on the other hand, brings multiple loops together. It gathers input from employees, customers, and communities and uses that information to guide decisions and actions. The system ensures that feedback from different loops gets processed in a coordinated, meaningful way.

By creating multiple feedback loops that work together, you build a feedback system that's comprehensive and scalable. It takes data from different places, processes it, and turns it into actionable insights. So, while a loop is one cycle, the system combines all the loops, forming an ongoing, continuous feedback mechanism. A strong feedback system means you have built a structure that constantly pulls in valuable information, allowing you to make smarter, proactive decisions.

Remember, feedback is like water: it will always find a way down. When you don't create proper channels for it to flow within by formalizing the feedback, it can spill into areas you can't control. For example, Southwest Airlines had a booking app where users could book flights, but the feedback left on the app often targeted Southwest itself, not the app performance. There wasn't an easy way for people to share their feedback with Southwest. So, when they had a bad experience, they left their comments in a section that was supposed to be only for feedback on the app's performance. Southwest likely wasn't even seeing most of this feedback because it

was in the app store! As a result, Southwest's issues spilled over into the wrong space, affecting the app's reviews instead.

Feedback flows wherever it finds space, usually landing somewhere unhelpful if you haven't created a formalized system for it. Building a proper feedback system is like installing gutters and flood channels, it allows you to ensure that, whether it's a small stream or a flood of feedback, the information is directed to the right place where it can be addressed.

§

5 FACTORS TO JUMPSTART THE FEEDBACK SYSTEM

Over the years of working with organizations to build and formalize their feedback systems, we have identified a handful of key factors that consistently lead to success. Whether you are starting out, or trying to refine an existing process, these five areas can help you jumpstart your feedback system and make it more effective.

1. Purposefully Happening

This means having feedback loops that gather the right information, not just any information. Think about the frustration of trying to leave a review only to find a broken page or an unused comment box gathering dust. Your feedback system needs to be deliberate, so it is clear that feedback is being actively collected and used.

Many organizations don't do this because there is often an unconscious desire not to seek feedback. Or they tend to think no news is good news. But that's a trap. If you don't get feedback, it's likely that problems are simmering beneath the surface, waiting to bubble up in ways you can't control. On the other hand, purposeful feedback systems help highlight areas for improvement and often reveal positive feedback you might not expect. Many organizations are

surprised by how much good feedback they receive when they finally open proper feedback channels. They discover they have been providing great experiences all along but weren't aware of what people liked.

A purposeful feedback system prevents information, both positive and negative, from slipping through the cracks. People want to share what's going well, and if they trust you, what will make their experience better. But if there is no purposeful place to provide feedback, that valuable information will be lost, or worse, be shared in situations and conditions that are damaging to your organization's reputation.

2. Immediate

This might feel obvious, but the faster you can collect feedback after an experience, the more accurate and useful it will be. People's memories fade,

emotions dull, and details get lost over time. If someone is asked to provide feedback months after an event, they are unlikely to remember the nuances of their experience. You'll end up with vague extremes like: "It was great!" or "It was terrible!" without the actionable details.

If you were asked to review an oil change six months ago, you probably wouldn't remember specific things like how the technician interacted with you or whether you appreciated how quickly the service was handled. All you might recall is whether it was generally good or bad. But if feedback is requested immediately after the experience, those finer points are fresh. Maybe the tech was particularly helpful, or maybe something about the process could have been improved. Either way, that specific information is more useful to the organization than generalizations about the service.

Immediacy equals accuracy. When providing feedback to a hotel, it's the difference between someone saying, "I hated my stay," versus, "The towels in my room were rough." One is hard to address; the other is an easy fix.

This also applies to how you ask the question. We have found when you get specific with the question, you get better answers. If you ask people about their overall experience at an event, you'll likely get decent but vague answers. However, when you ask how the food was at the event, you get a lot more feedback on what was good and what wasn't. Especially if you ask on the day that food was served.

To capture feedback quickly, many businesses use surveys on receipts or offer kiosks with simple questions. These often come in the form of quick prompts at self-checkouts or the survey at the end of Zoom meetings. These small, immediate questions give people a chance to reflect on their experience while it's still fresh in their minds.

One final note here: immediate feedback can act as a release valve. People tend to give instant feedback when they are upset, and if you don't offer a simple and quick way for them to share it with you, they will find other outlets. Often, front-line staff bear the brunt of this feedback, which can be stressful. But when you provide a dedicated space for feedback (like a kiosk or comment box), you can redirect that energy away from your employees and capture the insights in a way that's more useful for your organization.

3. Convenient

When it comes to feedback systems, convenience is a game-changer. If it's easy for people to give you feedback, they will. If it's a hassle, they won't bother.

Let's look at Southwest Airlines again. If you asked them, they would likely say they have a feedback system in place. You can go to their webpage anytime and leave feedback. But this is only convenient for Southwest, not necessarily for their customers. People don't want to hunt down a webpage and fill out a form when they are already frustrated or tired. Sure, Southwest has taken a step in the right direction, but without thinking about what is more convenient for the customer, they miss out on important insights.

Another great example of an inconvenient feedback system is the surveys you get on receipts. Have you ever actually filled one out? If the answer is no, most of the population is the same. Visiting a website to enter a code and maybe get a free entree sounds easy, right? But most people won't bother because the effort to complete the survey feels like more work than the reward is worth. Dangling a prize in front of people doesn't guarantee you will get feedback, but convenience will greatly increase how much feedback you receive.

You have probably seen this firsthand. At Walmart, for example, at the self-checkout, a survey pops up on the screen right after your purchase. You are already in the flow, and your hands are on the screen, so you're more likely to fill out the survey. It's quick, easy, and convenient. That's what we are looking to create when it comes to convenience in your feedback systems.

Now, think about a redeye flight where the airline hands you a paper survey as you're walking off the plane. You're tired, cranky, and just want to get to your hotel. Filling out a physical survey at that moment is the last thing on your mind. It might be convenient for the airline, but it's definitely not for you. That's why a lot of feedback systems fail—they prioritize the organization's convenience over the customer's.

How do you know if your feedback system is truly convenient? You need to ask yourself: are you letting people give feedback when it's best for them, not just for you? Sure, immediacy is important, but not if it's inconvenient for the person giving feedback.

Employee reviews are another great example of this. For the employer, it is convenient to gather feedback during the scheduled review. But for the employee, they might not have anything specific to say at that moment. Maybe a month later they'll have valuable feedback, but by then, the opportunity has

passed, and the organization hasn't created a place employees can continually submit their feedback, so the insight gets lost.

Convenience, like immediacy, is required for gathering accurate and meaningful feedback. If you make it hard for people to give their opinions, they'll either skip it or share it somewhere you don't control. But if you make it easy and convenient, you will get better feedback every time.

4. Scalable

One of the biggest hurdles organizations face when setting up feedback systems is scalability. Getting feedback in small doses is one thing, but how do you handle mass amounts of input without letting people down? Without a plan to manage and respond to that input, even the best intentions can lead to frustration and lost trust.

In Australia, floodplains act as natural buffers, redirecting excess water to prevent damage to nearby cities. Just like floodplains manage overwhelming amounts of water, your feedback system needs a plan for handling large volumes of input. If you aren't ready for the flow, and can't effectively close the feedback loop, you'll lose trust from those submitting

feedback. A well-built feedback system must be able to redirect and process large volumes of feedback to avoid overwhelming your organization.

> *When you don't create channels for feedback to flow, it spills into places you can't control.*

Let's circle back to Southwest Airlines and the paper survey people received as they deboarded their flights. We've already pointed out how that method isn't convenient, but it's also not scalable. It costs a lot to employ someone to stand at the end of a jetway all day long, handing out and collecting surveys, then (supposedly) reviewing each physical piece of paper for valuable insights. Over time, this approach just doesn't work. You can't have people stationed everywhere to gather feedback. It's not efficient.

So, what do organizations often do instead? They opt for something like a feedback link at the bottom of an email. But while this solves the scalability issue, it often fails at being convenient or immediate. People don't feel compelled to click, and the feedback that does come in may not meet the needs of the organization in any meaningful way.

A scalable feedback system should strike a balance between immediacy, convenience, and efficiency. It should be automated enough that you don't need to hire an army of people to gather feedback, but still personal enough that people feel like their voices are being heard.

A good example of a scalable feedback system is one that integrates technology, like automated surveys or kiosks, while also allowing for human interaction when necessary. For instance, an organization could use feedback kiosks at key locations where customers can quickly rate their experience, combined with online surveys triggered by specific interactions. These systems can gather large amounts of data automatically, yet still provide personal touches, such as follow-up emails or meetings for more detailed feedback, so the voices of those giving input are acknowledged and acted upon.

However, scalability doesn't just apply to gathering feedback; it also applies to closing the feedback loop. You can't follow up one on one with every single person who gives feedback, especially as the volume increases. But you can make your actions visible and accessible to many people at once. You could display the results or changes made based on feedback in a public space or online forum. This approach closes the loop with the people who gave feedback and encourages more people to engage because you have shown their input will be taken seriously.

Scalability is about building systems that grow with you, allowing for large-scale input without compromising the quality of the feedback process. If done right, it creates a positive cycle where people are more willing to provide feedback because they see tangible results.

5. Psychologically Safe

To gather honest, actionable responses, our feedback systems need to be psychologically safe. How many times have you had to fill out an annual review survey, with space for providing feedback, knowing that raises come on the next paycheck? You might have genuine feedback to share, but the fear of repercussions often leads you to hold back. This is a failure of a psychologically

safe feedback system. It's incredible how happy everyone is with their boss and company when raises are around the corner, they're new, or the economy isn't going well. If you give them some time, some space, and some confidence that they can get another job, you'll find people have a lot more to say.

Some companies try to fix this by making surveys anonymous, but too many of us know anonymity usually isn't the case. Blake's wife once took an anonymous survey at her organization and shared some negative feedback only to have her boss call her almost

immediately after to talk about her "anonymous" comment. Sadly, this is not an unusual situation.

Today, people are savvier than ever about digital privacy. Even if a survey claims to be anonymous, there's often a lingering suspicion that the company knows who filled it out. Device tracking, IP addresses, and follow-up "thank you" messages in your email after completing the survey all add to the belief that the feedback isn't truly anonymous. Handwritten surveys are even worse for psychological safety. You literally hand the survey back to the person who asked for the feedback! It feels like there is no real barrier between you and the individual reviewing your responses.

If you want to create a truly psychologically safe feedback system, you need to design it in a way that eliminates these fears. One way to do this is by providing feedback options that don't involve personal devices. This is why we like public kiosks or a shared computer. Additionally, in your surveys, ask broad non-identifying questions that don't single people out. For example, instead of asking, "Who's the best person you work with?" ask for feedback on general team dynamics or processes.

Anonymity is another way to create psychological safety, but it can be tricky to truly achieve. Creating real anonymity starts with not asking questions that give away personal details and providing a way to complete the survey that doesn't link back to a personal device. This will build confidence that the feedback truly won't be traced—otherwise, people will naturally hold back.

But anonymity is not the only way to foster psychological safety. Building trust between groups with power disparities is another effective approach. Psychological safety means people feel secure enough to share honest feedback, even when there is a clear power imbalance. If you

have built a strong relationship with someone, they are more likely to provide candid feedback because of the trust between you. But keep in mind that those on the high end of the power disparity often overestimate how comfortable someone is sharing feedback. Executives will often say that their teams feel they can share anything, but the staff is withholding feedback out of fear.

The person providing feedback needs to believe that their ideas will be used constructively, and without negative consequences. Which will then make them feel secure enough to be honest because their input will be valued rather than weaponized. If someone believes their feedback could harm their standing, job, or relationships, they will either avoid giving it or water it down. The more trust you build, the more candid and useful the feedback will become.

This is one of the reasons (among many) we named this book Candid. We want you to move past the idea of simply gathering feedback and assuming what you see is the truth of the situation. Instead, we want to help you create feedback loops that actually reveal the needs of those you serve so you can get to the heart of a situation and make a true difference. These five factors we've listed to jumpstart your feedback systems will help you level up your feedback gathering and the effectiveness of that feedback.

§

TIPS TO OVERCOME STAGNATION

Now that we understand how to jumpstart our feedback systems, we would also like to address stagnation. This tends to happen when a system that once held promise is now stuck in neutral, either because the organization did not have the processes in place to manage the feedback, or it's clear that the feedback being provided isn't actually heard.

Unfortunately, we have seen stagnation occur many times. A nonprofit makes a concerted effort to collect input from everyone involved: they have sent out surveys, held town hall meetings, and even set up feedback boxes. But months go by, and nothing happens with the feedback. This is often because the organization spends all their time and energy on the collection and analysis of the feedback, then don't have any time remaining to implement changes and close the feedback loop. The organization is too overwhelmed by day-to-day

operations to analyze the data, let alone implement changes. And soon, clients start to notice their suggestions are ignored. Feedback boxes gather dust, town halls become empty, and engagement dwindles, causing frustration on all sides, all because nothing is done with the feedback provided.

That is where automation comes in and can help with creating simplicity in your feedback system. Automating feedback collection ensures a steady flow of real-time information without extra manual work. This keeps the feedback loop active and gives you the time you need to then analyze and act on that data. It also reduces the risk of data being overlooked or delayed, and allows for feedback to be gathered continuously, making the system more scalable and convenient.

When feedback becomes part of a seamless and ongoing cycle, it keeps the loop flowing and allows the organization to stay responsive to the needs of those they serve. The more simplistic and automated your system, the more likely it is to lead to impactful change because you can focus on making those changes a reality and not spending your energy elsewhere!

Remember that building a solid feedback system is about more than just gathering opinions—it's about creating a sustainable cycle that continuously provides you with valuable insights and causes lasting change. By focusing on purposeful collection, immediacy,

convenience, scalability, and psychological safety, you ensure that your organization is always in touch with the needs of those you serve. If you keep your system simple, and look for places to automate it, you'll avoid stagnation, which will help you increase trust. Homework Here are a few practical steps to help apply the concepts within this chapter:

- Audit your current feedback loops and ask yourself what formal or informal systems you

already have in place. Are they working? Are they capturing the right information?

- Pick one feedback loop to improve or implement. Start small to ensure you can manage

it, whether it's for employees, clients, or the community.

- Focus on immediacy and convenience in your feedback loops. How can you make it

easier for people to give feedback right after their experience?

- Evaluate whether your feedback methods are psychology safe. Do people feel

  comfortable giving honest responses?

- Make sure your feedback system can handle growth and won't stagnate as it gets bigger.

  Are your processes built to handle more input without overwhelming you?

Keep in mind that when you formalize the feedback loops you want, you will ensure your organization remains adaptable and aligned with the voices that matter most.

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?

• • •

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.

§

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.

§

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.

§

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.

• • •

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.

§

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.

§

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:

§

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.

§

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.



CHAPTER

10

Four Stages of Psychological Safety

"When failure isn't feared, people are free to state their mind."

In a TED talk by Tom Wujec titled Build a Tower, Build a Team37, he explains the marshmallow challenge. It's a common teambuilding challenge used by many organizations where each team is given marshmallows, tape, and spaghetti sticks to build the tallest tower possible.

What's interesting is that kindergarten students consistently outperform MBA graduates in this challenge. Why? The children aren't afraid to experiment and fail. Without fear of judgment or repercussions, they quickly try new ideas, learn from mistakes, and iterate rapidly, while the adults spend more time talking and planning.

Why? When it comes to this challenge, children often have more psychological safety than the adults. They aren't afraid of any consequences should they fail the challenge. They don't have inner struggles telling them, "If I fail this, people will laugh at me," or "If I don't do well, I might not be considered for a promotion." They simply throw themselves into the activity and fail until they find a solution.

When failure isn't feared, people are free to state their mind. Or in our case, when fear isn't present, people are more likely to offer feedback. In fact, we can't get true feedback unless there is at least some element of psychological safety from those we serve. This has been proven time and time again.

For example, Google conducted a study called "Project Aristotle" to figure out what makes an effective team.[38] Guess what they found? Psychological safety is the answer. It didn't matter who was on the team, how long they had worked together, or their past experiences. Out of one-hundred and eighty teams studied, those that thrived had an environment of high

psychological safety. When people felt comfortable speaking up, ideas flowed, but if they didn't, the team always hit roadblocks. Which led Google to build teams with this element in mind moving forward.

§

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

Psychological safety is essentially the belief that you can speak your mind (whether it's sharing ideas, asking questions, or admitting mistakes) without fearing negative consequences.

Think about it like this: in a setting where you know you can be honest, you're more likely to speak up and offer genuine feedback. But it takes time to feel comfortable enough to do that. Early on, whether it's a new job, joining a group, or seeing a new doctor, you might stick to safer topics. Over time, as trust builds, you become more willing to share deeper thoughts, even the controversial ones, because you know you will be heard and not judged harshly.

Nembhard and Edmondson's research shows how trust and respect play a major role in building this type of environment in healthcare teams. In the Journal of Organizational Behavior, they wrote, "The more members feel they work in a team characterized by interpersonal trust and respect, the more enthusiastic and devoted they are to participating in quality improvement efforts, which often require the interpersonally risky act of collaborative learning."[39] It's in these safe spaces we finally feel that we can advocate for ourselves and others.

Sadly, people often don't realize how important psychological safety is until they encounter a lack of it. Those negative experiences, being judged, ignored, or dismissed, make us realize just how valuable it is to feel safe enough to speak up. But we, and the nonprofits who serve others, often don't experience the same psychologically unsafe scenarios those we serve

do. So, the question becomes, how can we be sure we have created psychological safety for those we serve? We've found the answer in Timothy Clark's book The Four Stages of Psychological

§

SAFETY: DEFINING THE PATH TO INCLUSION AND INNOVATION.40

§

TIMOTHY CLARK'S FOUR STAGES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Clark delves into how creating a safe and trusting environment allows teams to thrive. His framework breaks down psychological safety into four stages, each of which helps guide leaders in fostering environments where people feel included, safe to learn, able to contribute, and confident in challenging the status quo.

Let's review each of them and how they relate to the underprivileged communities we serve.

1. Inclusion

Inclusion, the first step in making individuals feel like they belong. It's the barrier you overcome when you feel comfortable enough to join a group without feeling awkward. You know you've reached inclusion safety when things become more relaxed, people start sharing jokes, you feel comfortable being yourself, and there's a shared feeling of belonging. It's that shift from being the "new person" to feeling integrated within the group.

When serving underprivileged communities, fostering inclusion safety creates a sense of belonging. When individuals feel that they are genuinely included, not just as beneficiaries but as active participants in the process, they are more likely to engage, share their insights, and advocate for themselves. For example, when someone experiencing homelessness feels truly

included in a discussion about their housing options, they are more likely to voice their real needs and preferences.

The opposite of this level is tokenism, where organizations use the theatre of involvement to meet their ends but don't genuinely include the people affected in the process. It's important to note that including people does not mean giving them complete power over a project. We've seen enough survey comments asking for drugs, hot tubs, and other illicit activities that its clear involvement requires a genuine partnership. However, when that partnership is achieved, you not only provide inclusion safety, but can more easily jump to learner and beyond.

2. Learner

Learner safety is the second stage of psychological safety, and it revolves around the ability to make mistakes and learn without fear of severe negative consequences, like losing your job or facing heavy criticism. This is where people feel free to explore, experiment, and grow. The key to this stage is knowing that errors are part of the process and won't lead to punishment, as long as they're addressed responsibly.

A great example of this in action comes from Blake. He was assigned to edit the website of his new employer, and as he did, a prompt came up that he didn't read well. He hit "okay" and accidentally deleted the entire website! He quickly worked to fix his mistake, but the website was down for a few hours as a result.

Once fixed, he fought his nerves and went to tell his boss what happened and how he fixed it. In truth, he wasn't entirely sure how he might react, and he feared for his job.

His boss, however, listened to what happened, then calmly asked how they could prevent the mistake from happening in the future. It was clear to Blake by his boss's reaction, he

wouldn't be fired for the mistake. That moment helped Blake trust that he could share mistakes without fearing for his job, which is the foundation of learner psychological safety.

When serving underprivileged communities, fostering learner safety means creating an environment where individuals feel they can share their experiences, ask questions, and make mistakes without fear of judgment or losing access to critical services. The goal is to make people feel supported, not penalized, as they navigate complex systems like healthcare, housing, or education. Especially because in these communities, individuals may already carry a sense of vulnerability, and the fear of making the wrong move can be paralyzing.

3. Contributor

Contributor safety is when you feel like your voice, ideas, and opinions are valued as much as anyone else's. After experiencing inclusion and learner safety, you gain the confidence to share your insights and make real contributions to the team. At this stage, you know your input matters.

However, it's possible to get stuck between the learner and contributor stages. In certain environments, individuals are never fully empowered to move beyond being an "expert beginner." They are given the chance to learn but are rarely asked for their opinions or ideas. In such cases, organizations might view people as cogs in a mechanism, valuable only for their technical skills but not for their perspectives. This is often the case when leadership centralizes decision-making and discourages individual initiative. Jim Collins refers to this in Good to Great[41], where he talks about the "hero with a thousand followers." When all decisions flow from one person at the top, others become stuck in lower levels of engagement, never stepping into their potential as contributors.

> *Psychological safety is the foundation. Without it, the rest is just paperwork.*

For underprivileged communities, contributor safety is a critical step toward empowerment. It's not enough for individuals to feel included or to know they can make mistakes; they need to feel that their experiences and insights are genuinely valued. When someone from a marginalized background feels safe enough to offer their perspective, it's a significant sign that they've moved from being a passive recipient of services to an active participant in shaping outcomes. These voices bring invaluable lived experiences to the table and help nonprofits build more effective, equitable solutions.

4. Challenger

The Challenger stage represents the pinnacle of psychological safety, where individuals feel confident enough to challenge others, even those higher up in the hierarchy. It's the power to say, "Hey CEO, you are wrong and here is why." At this level, you're able to push back on decisions, offer alternative perspectives, and disagree—even if there is a power disparity at play—because you know it won't jeopardize you.

Reaching this stage is incredibly difficult because it means going against the flow and risking conflict, especially when challenging those in power. Unfortunately, this is also where psychological safety can easily break down, as many organizations don't create environments where it's safe to push back on authority. Leaders often prefer compliance and silence over dissent—which stifles innovation and growth. In teams that really nurture this kind of environment, disagreements aren't seen as disruptions; they are seen as opportunities to grow. There's space for respectful pushback, and that helps the team find better solutions together.

Now, imagine what this looks like when serving underprivileged communities. Reaching the Challenger stage here means not just accepting the services or support provided but being

able to question them. This could look like someone experiencing homelessness feeling comfortable enough to tell their caseworker that the system isn't working for them or that they disagree with a certain policy. For many, this feels nearly impossible because they fear that if they speak up, they might lose access to the services they rely on. If a nonprofit can achieve Challenger safety, they empower people to challenge the systems meant to support them, so they can shape their own future rather than passively accept whatever's given.

§

BETWEEN RESPECT AND PERMISSION

Along with the above four stages of psychological safety, Tim Clark also makes the case that true psychological safety exists in the sweet spot where both respect and permission are present. For example, if an individual is given a lot of respect but very little permission to act, it can feel like a parent-child dynamic. This is someone who really values your input but doesn't let you make decisions. Sure, they care about you, but they're not giving you the freedom to do anything with that trust. It's like saying, "I know you're great, but just follow my lead." It leaves you feeling stuck.

On the flip side, when someone is given permission to act but isn't respected, it can feel like they're being taken advantage of. You're allowed to contribute, but there's no respect behind it, which leads to feeling undervalued and used. This often happens when people are stuck between the learner and contributor stages. They are being given tasks but not the respect that validates their worth.

In nonprofits, an imbalance between respect and permission could look like a caseworker who genuinely respects the individual's needs and challenges, but often, the interaction becomes one-sided, where the caseworker assumes the authority to make decisions for the individual,

rather than with them. The client might feel they have to go along with whatever housing options are suggested, even if it doesn't align with their personal goals or experiences because they need a solution. In this scenario, respect is present, but the permission for the individual to advocate for themselves is missing.

For people experiencing homelessness, this imbalance shows up in different ways. On paper, they might have "permission" to make choices, but they often feel like their lives are under a microscope. Their decisions are recorded, monitored, and sometimes used as stories to raise funds for the organization. In this case, they may feel exploited, like they're being allowed to act, but only as a means to an end, rather than being respected as individuals with valid perspectives.

When creating psychologically safe environments, we need to consistently keep this line of thinking at the forefront of our services. Are we offering permission but not showing our respect? Or are we offering respect but not giving permission? Leaning one way or the other will hinder our progress to creating a psychologically safe environment.

§

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IS THE GOAL, BUT NOT ALWAYS ACHIEVABLE

In some instances, you may never get those you help to the later stages of psychological safety. You should try, but you may not be able to due to scaling problems or the trauma experienced by the populations you support. And that's okay. The goal isn't necessarily to bring every person you serve to the highest level of psychological safety, but you can still find ways to create meaningful shortcuts.

What's more, not everyone will progress through the stages of psychological safety at the same pace. The gap between feeling included and becoming a challenger varies widely from

person to person. For those facing serious hardships, they might never feel completely safe or ready to challenge authority directly. That's why it's critical to offer alternative avenues like anonymous feedback to ensure their voice is still heard, even if they're not ready to step into the later stages of psychological safety.

Remember Marc's daughter who suffers from Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA)? When navigating patient advocacy, they found that caregivers—especially doctors—often had a hard time when their expertise was questioned. In these roles, there is often an unstated expectation to remember

that they are the "expert" and you should "follow [their] lead." It's not malicious, but it can create an atmosphere where the patient or their family might not feel safe contributing to the decision-making process.

This same dynamic plays out in organizations too. You might think you're open to being challenged by the people you serve, but how often do they feel comfortable enough to challenge you? It's unlikely, especially in hierarchical settings. As an executive or leader, you might want people to feel safe enough to give you feedback, but creating that level of trust takes time, effort, and training.

Even in situations with high levels of psychological safety, understanding the needs of the people you serve requires constant reflection. Ask yourself, "Have we earned enough trust to ask these people to contribute honestly?" Creating psychological safety isn't a one-and-done deal. It's a continued effort your nonprofit organization should consistently assess.

Homework

Now we've discussed what psychological safety looks like and how it's relevant to getting feedback from those we serve. Here are a few ways to analyze the psychological safety you have created (or might need to create) in your feedback loops:

- Reflect on the four stages of psychological safety. Where do you think your nonprofit

currently stands with those you serve? Are there any stages where you feel stuck or

hesitant?

- Ask yourself: What questions would the people you serve be comfortable answering?

What questions would they not feel comfortable answering? Reflect on how to create a

safe space for them to express difficult concerns.

- Evaluate your interactions with the people you serve. Are you giving them enough

respect and permission to act? Write down one way you can create more balance between

these two in your daily work with your community.

We might not always be able to achieve the highest level of psychological safety, but the more safety we create, the better feedback we receive. Next, let's dive into the power of fear-free feedback and how it helps your nonprofit organization move in the right direction.

• • •

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.

§

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

§

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.

§

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.

§

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.

§

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."

§

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.

§

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:

§

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.

§

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.

§

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.

§

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.

§

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.



CHAPTER

12

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.

§

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.

§

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

§

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.

§

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.

§

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.

§

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.

• • •

EPILOGUE

From Ones and Tens to Hundreds and Thousands

A friend of ours used to be a chaplain in the Navy. He told us about the unique weight of his role: when someone died, he was often the one making that painful call home. And sometimes, he'd be the one informing sailors if tragedy struck their families back home.

On a large ship, he was responsible for the wellbeing of thousands, but his gift was working one-on-one, connecting deeply with the people who needed it most. Yet, one day, his commanding officer pulled him aside, saying, "I hate working with you." It took our friend aback. He wasn't sure what he had done wrong. He asked why, and the officer replied, "You're great with the ones and tens, but I need you to be good at helping the hundreds and thousands." His commanding officer was asking him to think bigger—not to stop caring for individuals, but to find ways to ensure that the same care reached everyone on board.

Most nonprofits are already exceptional at the ones and tens. Every day, they're changing lives, even if just one at a time. But too often, they put everything into helping one person and lose sight of how to help at scale. For the issues that define our society—poverty, homelessness, hunger—the scale is massive, and we need solutions that work for hundreds and thousands, not just ones and tens.

In our introduction, we had you imagine an individual experiencing homelessness who didn't feel they could offer feedback to the systems meant to support them. Sadly, this is how many Vulnerable individuals feel. Even if they

try to provide feedback, the lack of follow-through causes them to feel abandoned. For too many, the consequence is being out in the cold, both figuratively, and literally.

Imagine how this story could change when an organization applies the lessons from this book. Instead of a neglected suggestion box in a corner, there's an accessible, anonymous

feedback system that's actively promoted and trusted. When feedback is submitted, it's acknowledged, whether through a visible board tracking what's being addressed or a personal response assuring the individual that their concerns have been heard. The organization doesn't stop there; they follow up with meaningful action, even if it's as simple as sharing updates about ongoing efforts or explaining why certain changes might take time.

For the person who once felt invisible, the shift is world-altering. They begin to see their voice as a tool for change, not just an echo lost in the void. Trust starts to grow. They believe their input can shape policies, improve conditions, and create better outcomes for themselves and others in need. This renewed trust fosters engagement, and engagement drives progress, creating a cycle of empowerment (instead of neglect) for the hundreds and thousands instead of just the ones and tens.

This is all possible when feedback systems are intentional, transparent, and empathetic. You have the tools and steps to start transforming the way you gather feedback. When you act on what you hear, those you serve will feel seen and valued, your team will grow stronger, and your impact will ripple outward. You've learned how fear-free feedback builds trust, how the right habits can make feedback a core part of your organization, and how to overcome perfectionism to focus on what matters. Now it's time to act.

At Pulse For Good, we're all about doing less but better. We believe in the power of feedback to make nonprofits more effective by streamlining processes to focus on what truly matters and systematizing feedback collection. Because without feedback, you are just guessing, relying on assumptions instead of facts. Feedback lights the way, showing you what's working and what needs improvement.

Our approach outlined in this book is designed to help you gather the data you need efficiently, so you can make informed decisions that truly make a difference. You don't know what you don't know, and that's why asking for

feedback is so important. Embracing a growth mindset, rather than fearing the gaps you might find, is the key to refining your services. With the right systems in place, you can gather the data you need to make better decisions and create a bigger impact with less effort.

Every piece of feedback, whether positive or negative, brings you closer to the people you serve and the change you're working toward. Remember, the fear of risk has actually become the largest risk that nonprofits and government agencies experience. By being risk-averse to the point of paralysis, organizations find themselves unable to adapt to changing situations fast enough to meet the needs of individuals. It takes a crisis that provides a more significant risk than the risk of doing something wrong to get the gears of progress moving. When we think of gridlock, we often think of argument and debate, but really, gridlock is built from fear—fears that stack upon one another until people stop moving altogether.

We hope this book has given you a path forward and the ability to challenge those fears. To take risks, ask for deeper feedback, and truly listen to those you serve. It's time to put what you've learned into action. Go beyond listening. Make candid feedback a priority. Then take what you hear and build something powerful with it. When you make every voice count, you unlock real, lasting impact.

Acknowledgements

Years ago, when we initially were starting Pulse For Good, we had the opportunity to meet with a collection of human service providers and pitch them on the radical idea of attempting to automate their feedback process. We shared our ideas to use self-service kiosks to help gather feedback, and the response from most was far less excited than we had assumed it would be. One told us that our machines wouldn't last more than five minutes before being stolen, broken, or both. Others talked about the need to only have good publicity as they have too much negative press already. Some talked about the fact that all anyone would submit was complaints, and that they get enough of those complaints every day.

One, however, spoke up from the end of the long conference table around which we all sat and said, "I think it would work. People will respect it, and I think the people we serve deserve to have their voices heard." That organization hosted the first kiosk, and over the last decade, that kiosk has gathered nearly

eight thousand pieces of feedback, all because someone was both brave enough and kind enough to put their ego aside and give people a voice. This story is just one of many as incredible leaders from all walks of life have caught the vision of using feedback to fuel the change they're bringing into the world.

To each of those and to those who have been so gracious with their time and talents, who have shared their expertise, their connections, and their friendship, we say: Thank you. You've made the world a better place and helped build powerful feedback muscles in organizations all around North America. To those of you who have read this far but haven't yet pulled the trigger to build a feedback system in your own organization, we say: Be brave! Feedback can empower your organization to do its best work, and the world needs your best work.

• • •

CITED WORKS

References

(n.d.). From Net Promoter System:

https://www.netpromotersystem.com/about/history-of-net-promoter/ (n.d.). From Walden University:

https://www.waldenu.edu/online-masters-programs/ms-in-clinical-mental-health-counseling/r

esource/how-stress-impacts-decision-making (2025). From Oxford Reference:

https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100109997 (2025). From National Alliance to End Homelessness:

https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homel

essness/ (2025). From Family Gateway: https://familygateway.org/about-us/facts-statistics/

Andersen, H. C. (n.d.). The Emperor's New Clothes. From

https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html Association, A. P. (1996). Rules and procedures: June 1, 1996. American Psychologist, 529-548. Bennett, M. (2023, August 22). 25+ Psychological Safety at Work Stats [2024]. From Nigerian

Institute: https://www.niagarainstitute.com/blog/psychological-safety-at-work? Clark, T. (2020). The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and

Innovation. Berrett-Koehler Publishers. Clear, J. (2018). Atomic Habits. Avery. Collins, J. (2001). Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't. Harper

Business. Dewar, C., Keller, S., & Malhotra, V. (2022). CEO Excellence. Scribner. Duhigg, C. (2014). The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business. Random

House. Dye, M. C. (2013). Assumptions Can Mislead: Failures in Health Care and Elsewhere. Trafford. Education, P. (2019, July). WARNING: Mistaken Assumptions Can Be Hazardous to Your Patients'

Health. From PBI Education:

https://pbieducation.com/warning-mistaken-assumptions-can-be-hazardous-%E2%80%A8to-

your-patients-health/ Ganti, A. (2022, October 1). Tech Bubble, What It Is, How It Works. From Investopedia:

https://www.investopedia.com/terms/t/tech_bubble.asp Gehlert, S., & Mozersky, J. (2018). Seeing Beyond the Margins: Challenges to Informed Inclusion of

Vulnerable Populations in Research. The Journal of law, Medicine & Ethics : A Journal of

the American Society of Law, Medicine & Ethics. Gladwell, M. (2011). Outliers. Back Bay Books. Goldenberg, S. (2011, January 5). BP cost-cutting blamed for 'avoidable' Deepwater Horizon oil

spill. From The Guardian:

https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/jan/06/bp-oil-spill-deepwater-horizon

Google's Project Aristotle. (2024, March 28). From Psych Safety:

https://psychsafety.co.uk/googles-project-aristotle/#:~:text=They%20found%20that%20of%2

0the,productive%20discussions%20and%20innovative%20solutions. Grant, A. (2023, October 25). A Better Way to Ask for Advice. From Behavioral Scientist:

https://behavioralscientist.org/a-better-way-to-ask-for-advice-learn-from-the-best/ Guidara, W. (2022). Unreasonable Hospitality. Optimism Press. Hart, A. (2025, January 4). From Yahoo News:

https://www.yahoo.com/news/waiting-list-nowhere-homelessness-surveys-083000459.html?g

uccounter=1 Holland, M. (2025, July). Wrong Roads and Revelation. From Church of Jesus Christ:

https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2005/07/wrong-roads-and-revelation?lang

=eng Korreborg, M. (2024, December 16). Psychological Safety in the Workplace: Key Statistics and

Trends for 2024. From

https://www.peaky.io/post/unlocking-the-secret-to-psychological-safety-in-the-workplace? Kuhn, M. W. (2023, August 8). From Ms. Magazine:

https://msmagazine.com/2023/08/08/car-crash-women-test-dummy Lioudis, N. (2024, December 9). The Collapse of Lehman Brothers: A Case Study. From

Investopedia:

https://www.investopedia.com/articles/economics/09/lehman-brothers-collapse.asp Long Term Care Community Coalition. (2023). They Make You Pay. From Long Term Care

Community Coalition:

https://nursinghome411.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/They-Make-You-Pay-June-14-2023.

pdf Nembhard, I., & Edmondson, A. (2006). Making it safe: The effects of leader inclusiveness and

professional status on psychological safety and improvement efforts in health care teams.

APAPsycnet. Noh, E. Y. (2022, August). Female crash fatality risk relative to males for similar physical impacts.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Organizational Agility. (n.d.). From PMI's Pulse of the Profession:

https://www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/white-papers/org-agility-where-spee

d-meets-strategy.pdf?rev=a988026ae41c42b1921d2a8abbd0dabf& Perez, C. C. (2021). Invisible Women. Harry N. Abrams. Pope, M. (2024, October 16). Kentucky head coach Mark Pope shares a powerful perspective on how

overcoming obstacles provi.... Potts, H. (2018, July 12). A Brain-Changer: How Stress Redesigns our Decision-Making. From The

Decision Lab: https://thedecisionlab.com/insights/health/stress-redesigns-decision-making Power, C., & Elliott, J. (2006). Cohort profile: 1958 British birth cohort (National Child

Development Study). International Journal of Epidemiology, 34-41. Providing constructive feedback is a critical aspect of effective leadership. (n.d.). From Results

Driven Leadership:

https://rdltraining.com/management/overcoming-the-fear-of-giving-difficult-feedback-a-guid

e-for-managers/ Raymond, A. (2019, August 29). Ellen DeGeneres, Trevor Noah have a message for Utah's tech

industry: Be inclusive. From Deseret News:

https://www.deseret.com/utah/2019/8/29/20837636/ellen-degeneres-trevor-noah-utah-tech-in

dustry-inclusive-pluralsight/ Reddy, S. T., Zegarek, M. H., Fromme, H. B., Ryan, M. S., Schumann, A., & Harris, I. B. (2015).

Barriers and Facilitators to Effective Feedback: A Qualitative Analysis of Data From

Multispecialty Resident Focus Groups. Journal of Graduate Medical Education, 214-219. Reiley, J. (2023, February 1). How The Columbia Shuttle Disaster Changed Space Travel. From

Texas A&M University College of Engineering:

https://today.tamu.edu/2023/02/01/how-the-columbia-shuttle-disaster-changed-space-travel/

Rossow, M. P. (2015). Engineering Ethics Case Study: The Challenger Disaster. Continuing

Education and Development, Inc. Srivastava, N. G. (2022, June 6). "My Goggles Filled Up With Water"- Michael Phelps Swam Blind

for Over 175m to Achieve One of His Biggest Career Achievement. From Essentially Sports:

https://www.essentiallysports.com/us-sports-news-swimming-news-my-goggles-filled-up-wit

h-water-michael-phelps-swam-blind-for-over-175m-to-achieve-one-of-his-biggest-career-ach

ievement/ State of the American Workplace Report. (2018). From Gallup:

https://www.gallup.com/workplace/238085/state-american-workplace-report-2017.aspx Stringer, G. (2021, January 7). Blowback after Mayor Mike Coffman poses as homeless person for a

week. From Sentinel Colorado:

https://sentinelcolorado.com/metro/blowback-after-mayor-mike-coffman-poses-as-homeless-

person-for-a-week/ Trafton, A. (2017). Stress can lead to risky decisions. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Trzeciak, S. (2018, August 6). Can 40 Seconds of Compassion Make a Difference in Health Care?

From Knowledge at Wharton:

https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/podcast/knowledge-at-wharton-podcast/the-compassio

n-crisis-one-doctors-crusade-for-caring/ Trzeciak, S., & Mazzarelli, A. (2019). Compassionomics: The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence That

Caring Makes a Difference. Studer Group. Various. (2025). From Wikipedia:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crew_resource_management?useskin=vector Williams, Y. (2024, February 26). How to Conquer the Fear of Feedback: 3 Strategies for Nonprofits. From Listen 4 Good: https://listen4good.org/insights/how-to-conquer-the-fear-of-feedback-3-strategies-for-nonprofits/ Wujec, T. (2010, April 22). Build a Tower, Build a Team. From https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0_yKBitO8M

THE TEAM

About the Authors

Remington Rainey

CO-FOUNDER & CHIEF REVENUE OFFICER

is a Co-Founder and CRO of Pulse For Good and a feedback expert. He has dedicated his career to empowering Vulnerable individuals by providing organizations with the tools to hear and act upon their voices. With a passion for technology and partnerships, Remington excels at creating innovative solutions that enhance organizational effectiveness and client engagement. Drawing from his extensive experience as a sales leader in multiple hardware and software tech solution companies, Remington brings a wealth of knowledge in developing strategic partnerships. A problem solver at heart, Remington thrives on tackling challenges both professionally and personally. When he's not innovating in the tech world, he loves spending time outdoors with his family, embracing the beauty of nature and the joys of family life.

Blake Kohler

CO-FOUNDER & CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

is a Co-Founder and CEO of Pulse For Good and a community advocate with deep roots in service. As a leader of Pulse For Good, he champions the voices of Vulnerable individuals by creating innovative feedback solutions for behavioral health and homeless services. A lifelong learner, Blake holds a bachelor's degree in Economics, Law and Constitutional Studies, and a master's degree in Information Systems from Utah State University. He is also currently pursuing a master's degree in Organizational Psychology at Harvard. When he's not working or studying, Blake serves in his church, co-hosts a fantasy book

YouTube channel with his wife, and treasures time spent with his kids, exploring interests like Dungeons & Dragons and, of course, basketball.

Marc Weaver

CO-FOUNDER, CFO & COO

is the Co-Founder, CFO, and COO of Pulse For Good, where he helps organizations amplify the voices of society's most Vulnerable. With a sharp financial mind and a passion for operational excellence, he ensures Pulse For Good empowers behavioral health providers, homeless shelters, and refugee organizations to listen and respond more effectively. A devoted husband and father of six, Marc balances entrepreneurship with family life. A lifelong athlete, he has competed in basketball, football, track and field, CrossFit, and Olympic weightlifting. He also finds renewal in hiking and exploring nature with his family. Deeply committed to his faith, Marc serves actively in his church and enjoys coaching his children's sports teams. Whether in business, athletics, or family life, he approaches every challenge with resilience, discipline, and a heart for service.

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