CRITICAL FRIEND TOOLKIT

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WHAT IS A CRITICAL FRIEND?

A critical friend can be defined as "a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work."


The role of the critical friend is therefore a strategic one and can be important in assisting improvement. It is essentially a role of support and challenge.

Critical friendship has also been described as less formal than mentoring or coaching and probably best described as "a professional relationship based on mutual regard and the willingness to question and challenge."

(Source: NCSL, 2005: Meeting the Challenge: Growing Tomorrow's School Leaders)

Role of the critical friend in the Principal Class Performance and Development program

A critical friend can support, encourage and stretch you to become more effective in your role as a principal/assistant principal of a school.

A critical friend may help you:

- analyse your Annual Review data, School Review or School Self Evaluation reports, the school context, leadership module results and other feedback sources and support you to develop your School Improvement Strategies and Personal Professional Development Plan
- by being a sounding board when you are trying new ideas, strategies and ways of operating
- by highlighting and challenging contradictions between what you say and what you do
- maintain the focus on your own continual learning and growth
- by providing support when the going gets tough.

A critical friend can be involved in the performance and development process at any stage:

- to establish the plan
- at the beginning cycle review meeting to discuss/negotiate the plan with the SEO
- to engage in regular dialogue
- to support the reflective process and inform the mid cycle self assessment
- at the end of cycle review meeting.
WHAT MAKES A GOOD CRITICAL FRIEND?

An effective critical friend is someone who:

- you trust and respect
- you have a strong relationship with, or believe you could develop a relationship with
- provides honest and critical feedback
- is a skilled observer and listener
- is able to ask provocative/stretch questions
- provides balance between support and challenge
- understands you and/or the school context very well or takes the time to develop this understanding
- provides a different perspective/new eyes
- provides critique utilising higher order thinking
- is available.

Principals with similar school improvement or professional development goals may select to work collaboratively with a group of colleagues and support each other through the process.

In his new book *Leadership and Sustainability*, Fullan (2005) discusses how people learn best from peers “if there is sufficient opportunity for ongoing, purposeful exchange”. The critical friend process enables this exchange.

Critical friends do not:

- assume a directive role
- offer solutions to problems or provide “quick fixes”
- rush to judge
- pretend to know the school better than those in the school
- impose agendas of their own
- undermine the authority of others.

SELECTING A CRITICAL FRIEND

Principal Class Officers are responsible for nominating their own critical friend and then approaching and inviting them to take on the role. A critical friend may be:

- a mentor from a program you are currently undertaking or have completed
- a coach from the Coaching to Enhance the Capabilities of Experienced Principals program
- a colleague in a local school or similar setting
- a retired Principal
- the School Council President
- a teacher
- a professional coach
- a leader from another organisation or business.
WORKING WITH YOUR CRITICAL FRIEND

Some basic protocols

In working with your critical friend, you need to be mindful that:

- confidentiality is essential
- the “critical” aspect relates to the task and the “friend” aspects relates to you as a person
- comments should be seen as professional challenges rather than criticisms
- expectations of each other with regard to availability, commitment to the process, reliability and how progress will be evaluated need to be discussed and agreed
- you need to own the agenda and so need to take responsibility for preparation and follow-up
- openness to discussions about performance is essential
- an agreed process for exploring any conflicts needs to be discussed at the outset of the process
- a simple critical friend agreement (such as that shown in Appendix 1) can make clear expectations and responsibilities from the outset.

Some tools to help extend the dialogue

- The challenge of maintaining regular dialogue – some ideas and tips on how to ensure you meet regularly.
  - Appendix 1: Critical Friend Agreement
  - Appendix 2: Maintaining the Dialogue

- Structures to guide discussions with your critical friend – how to direct the discussions towards feedback and problem solving.
  - Appendix 3: A Generic Problem Solving Model
  - Appendix 4: The Coaching Cycle
  - Appendix 5: The Ladder of Inference

- Making the feedback process work – guidelines for giving and receiving effective feedback.
  - Appendix 6: Feedback and the Johari Window

- Setting goals and formulating actions – an action plan to assist with this process.
  - Appendix 7: A Generic Action Planner

“Success in the knowledge economy comes to those who know themselves – their strengths, their values and how they best perform.”
## CRITICAL FRIEND AGREEMENT

You may wish to complete a formal critical friend agreement or simply use this template as the basis for initial discussion between you and your critical friend.

### Agreement between:
- **Principal**
- **Critical Friend**

### Specific requirements of the Critical Friend relationship:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confidentiality</th>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

### Communication methods and frequency of meetings:

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### Review processes:

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### Problem resolution/help:

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Appendix 2

MAINTAINING THE DIALOGUE

Together, you and your critical friend need to determine how best to maintain the dialogue. While it is certainly important to meet face-to-face for the first meeting, other options for maintaining contact/dialogue can be explored.

These could include:

a. Regular telephone contact

You and your critical friend would need to put aside dedicated time, clear their desks of all distractions, and focus just as they would if they were meeting face-to-face.

Some people find it useful to utilise visual prompts, such as a special reflective diary that they get out for conversations with their critical friend or changing to a different room, to help develop and maintain their focus.

b. Interactive journal writing

This strategy for learning involves an agreement to use a reflective journal as the basis for an on-going professional conversation between you and your critical friend. It is particularly helpful where distance or work commitments make it impossible for face to face meetings.

Models such as the Kolb Learning Cycle can help inform your entries (refer http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/history/kolb.html for further information). Here you would use the cycle to:

- experience something
- try to make sense of what you experience by thinking things over with your critical friend, gathering information and analysing details
- together, you and your critical friend make connections, draw inferences, create theories and models for viewing the world, all as a way of processing your experiences
- then check the reality of your ideas and test them through planning and action.

Email offers an ideal medium for this kind of professional interaction and should remind the writer of the need for purposeful and brief entries.

c. Regular face-to-face contact

If you and your critical friend decide that you will maintain the dialogue by continuing to meet face-to-face, then you will need to agree on:

- where – this may be the principal’s school or off-site – depending on the issues to be discussed
- timing – how often to meet and at what part of the day.
Appendix 3

A GENERIC PROBLEM SOLVING MODEL

The following problem solving model is intended as a guide only. It offers a structure within which you can clarify issues formulate actions.

Step 1: You and your critical friend explore your current situation as it relates to the purpose of the session.

Step 2: Together, you define the problem or issue to be addressed – preferably in one sentence. If it can’t be expressed in one sentence, it is likely that there is not yet enough clarity.

Step 3: Both you and your critical friend review all of your possible options.

Step 4: Your critical friend helps you to clarify and prioritise your values.

Step 5: Your critical friend helps you to explore feelings, hunches etc.

Step 6: Your critical friend assists you to establish a hierarchy of possible solutions.

Step 7: Together, you and your critical friend analyse the risks, alternatives and consequences of each potential solution.

Step 8: You nominate which solution should be progressed.

Step 9: Together, you and your critical friend list all possible obstacles to achieving the solution.

Step 10: Your critical friend assists you to brainstorm possible strategies to minimise/overcome these obstacles.

Step 11: You implement the action plan.

Step 12: Together, you and your critical friend review the outcomes of the action plan and continue the process until all relevant issues are worked through/resolved.
Appendix 4

THE COACHING CYCLE

Zeus and Skiffington (2003, *Coaching at Work*) represent The Coaching Cycle as shown below. In the diagram the critical friend has been substituted for coach and the principal for coachee and is presented from the perspective of the critical friend.

![Diagram of the coaching cycle](image)

- **Step One**
  - Re-establish support
  - Ask for feedback on what has been happening
  - Affirm successes
  - Review any between-session work

- **Step Two**
  - Find out what the principal's current situation is
  - Find out what the principal wants to focus on in this session

- **Step Three**
  - Dialogue – give information and guidance
  - Review goals and obstacles
  - Problem solve
  - Review habitual patterns of self-limiting beliefs, feelings, etc.

- **Step Four**
  - Devise an action plan for the next session
  - Explore potential obstacles
  - Establish a between-session task

- **Step Five**
  - Ask what the principal has learned
  - Summarise gains made in the session
  - Allow reflection time
  - Conclude the session
Appendix 5

THE LADDER OF INFERENCE

The Ladder of Inference helps us to understand how our mental models are formed and provides a pathway for in-depth reflection. Your critical friend is well placed to walk with you both up and down the rungs of your ladder.

An example of the Ladder of Inference in use

You are the principal at a staff meeting where you see a teacher presenting a proposed change in the science curriculum. Doris, an experienced teacher and (KLA leader) sitting at the end of the table, seems bored out of her mind. She turns her eyes away from the presenter and puts her hand to her mouth. She doesn’t ask any questions until the presentation’s almost done, when she breaks in: “I think we should wait until next year.” In this school, that typically means “Let’s forget about this and move on.” Everyone starts to shuffle papers and put notes away. Doris obviously thinks that the teacher is incompetent - which is a shame, because these ideas seem to be exactly what she needs. Now that you think of it, she hasn’t liked any of the ideas at the meeting. Clearly Doris is power-hungry.
Appendix 5

During the course of this meeting, you have climbed up a mental ladder of inference - a common mental pathway of increasing abstraction, often leading to misguided beliefs:

- You started with the observable data: Doris’s comment, which is so self-evident that it would show up on a videotape recorder.
- You selected some details about Doris’s behaviour: her glance away from the teacher and apparent yawn. (I didn’t notice her listening intently one moment before.)
- You added some meanings of my own, based on the culture around me. (Doris wanted the teacher to hurry up and finish.)
- You moved rapidly up to assumptions about Doris’s current state. (She’s bored.)
- You concluded that Doris, in general, thinks the rest of the staff are incompetent and not worth her time.

It all seems so reasonable, and it happens so quickly, that you’re not even aware you’ve done it. Moreover, all the rungs of the ladder take place in your head. The only parts visible to anyone else are the directly observable data at the bottom and your own decision to take action at the top. The rest of the trip, the ladder where you spend most of your time, is unseen, unquestioned, not considered fit for discussion, and enormously abstract.

The more you believe that Doris dislikes the staff, the more you reinforce your tendency to notice her disengaged behaviour in the future. This phenomenon is known as the “reflexive loop”: our beliefs influence what data we select next time. And there is a counterpart reflexive loop in Doris’s mind: as she reacts to your strangely antagonistic behaviour, she is probably jumping up some rungs on her own ladder. For no apparent reason, before too long, you could find yourselves becoming bitter enemies.

Now imagine you, Doris, and three others on, say, a school curriculum committee, with your untested assumptions and beliefs. When you meet to deal with a concrete problem, the air is filled with misunderstandings, communication breakdowns, and feeble compromises. Thus, while your individual IQs average 140, your team has a collective IQ of 85.

You can’t live your life without meaning or drawing conclusion. It would be an inefficient, tedious way to live. But you can improve your communications through reflection and by using the ladder of inference. For instance, once you and Doris understand the concepts behind the ladder of inference, you have a safe way to stop a conversation in its tracks and ask several questions:

- What are the observable data behind that statement?
- Does everyone agree on what the data are?
- Can you run me through your reasoning?
- How did you get from that data to these abstract assumptions?
- You can ask for data in an open-ended way: “Doris, what was your reaction to this presentation?” Or you can simply test the observable data by making a comment like: “You’ve been quiet, Doris.” To which she might reply: “I’m taking notes; I think there’s a lot of potential here.”
Appendix 5

Note that you don’t say: “Doris, I think you’ve moved way up your ladder of inference. Here’s what you need to do to get down.” The point of this method is not to diagnose Doris’s attitude but to make your own thinking processes visible, to see what the differences are in your perceptions and what you have in common. You might say: “I notice I’m moving up the ladder of inference, and maybe we all are. What are the data here?”

The ladder can be used in staff development, in the classroom, and in a variety of school and community meetings. When teaching, for example, instead of letting arguments among students escalate, you can ask: “What did you actually hear or see that led you to this conclusion?”

Appendix 6

FEEDBACK AND THE JOHARI WINDOW
The Johari Window, devised by Joe Luft and Harry Ingram, is depicted in the following diagram.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Known to self</th>
<th>Not Known to self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Known to other</td>
<td>Known to other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Free Activity</td>
<td>2. Blind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Known to other</td>
<td>3. Hidden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Unknown</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

A critical friend can help you to open your area of free activity, and therefore your self awareness, in two ways:

1. **Self Disclosure**
   - By telling others about ourselves we expand our area of free activity into the hidden area (so reduce the size of Quadrant 3).

2. **Feedback**
   - By asking others to tell us about ourselves, we expand our area of free activity by extending into the blind area (so reduce the size of Quadrant 2).

3. **As the previous happens we may, through free and open discussion, expand into our unknown area (so reduce the size of Quadrant 4).**
Appendix 6

An open Johari Window can then be depicted as:

In this situation, there is a large area of free activity. This allows for the building and maintenance of effective interpersonal relationships as resources and energy can be directed at the task at hand. The critical friend can help you move from any of the other three windows to the open window.

However, not all relationships need to develop such a large “open” area. For example, it would be appropriate to have a smaller area of free activity in a relationship with a local trader where communication needs are basic and simple.

Points to note regarding the Johari Window

- A change in any one quadrant will affect all other quadrants.
- The smaller the first quadrant, the more limited the communication.
- It takes energy to hide, or be blind to our behaviour – this energy can be much more productively used.
- Threat tends to decrease awareness whereas trust tends to increase awareness.
- Forced awareness (exposure) is undesirable and ineffective.
- Sensitivity means appreciating the covert aspects of behaviour in Quadrants 2, 3 and 4 and respecting the desire of others to keep them so.
Appendix 6

BENEFITS OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK
Effective feedback does many things, including:

- Honouring competence and reinforcing desired behaviours
- Helping align expectations and priorities
- Filling gaps in knowledge
- Enabling people to know where to take corrective action
- Alleviating the fear of the unknown.

A few simple guidelines for giving effective feedback

Prepare

- Consider the school/educational reason for giving feedback
- Determine best time and place
- Get the information you need
- Determine how to support yourself

Present

- Give the school/education reason for the feedback
- Offer specific examples
- Explain the impact on the school and you personally

Listen

- Hear the other person’s point of view
- Listen with open ears

Engage in dialogue

- Hold a conversation
- Listen to each other

Plan for action

- Search for solutions that all can agree to

Acknowledge

- Thank the person and acknowledge what you have accomplished together.
Techniques for giving effective feedback

• Be aware of your motive – your only motive should be to be helpful
• Focus on the behaviour, not the person
• Speak for yourself only
• Use “I” not “you”
• Restrict your feedback to things you know for certain
• Focus on descriptions, not judgement
• Choose an appropriate time and place
• Focus on recent behaviour – don’t harp back to the past
• Feedback should be lean and precise
• Check the other person understands the feedback, accepts it and is able to do something with it
• Always end feedback with a request for future action.

Techniques for receiving effective feedback

• Place clear boundaries around the feedback
• Listen carefully to all that is said
• Listen beneath the words
• Ask open questions for clarity
• Explore gently
• Acknowledge the feedback
• Acknowledge the valid points
• Don’t defend yourself
• Take time to sort out what you have heard and what you want to do with it
• Express your thanks.

“The art of criticism is often overlooked in school life yet within other spheres, for example theatre and literature, criticism is seen as an integral part of the process of developing quality.”
(Source: Costa & Kallick, 1993, Through the Lens of a Critical Friend, Educational leadership 51(2) 49-51)
Appendix 7

A GENERIC ACTION PLANNER

The following Generic Action Planner is intended as a guide and offers a structure within which goals can be set and actions formulated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Today’s Date:</th>
<th>Deadline Date:</th>
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**SMART Goal:** To

**How will I know if I have achieved this goal?**
1.
2.
3.
4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions/Strategy</th>
<th>Resources/$</th>
<th>Target date</th>
<th>Done</th>
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<th>Obstacles /Challenges</th>
<th>Solutions to Obstacles</th>
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