SILVERTON PRIMARY SCHOOL
“CRITICAL FRIENDS” PROGRAM

CRITICAL FRIEND TOOLKIT

Contents

WHAT IS A CRITICAL FRIEND? ................................................................. 2
WHAT MAKES A GOOD CRITICAL FRIEND? ........................................ 3
SELECTING A CRITICAL FRIEND ............................................................ 3
WORKING WITH YOUR CRITICAL FRIEND ........................................... 3
MAINTAINING THE DIALOGUE ............................................................... 4
THE COACHING CYCLE ........................................................................... 5
FEEDBACK .................................................................................................. 6
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 “Critical Friend” Program at Silverton Primary School

A critical friend can support, encourage and stretch you to become more effective in your role as a teacher and educator.

A critical friend may help you:

- critiquing and challenging your teaching strategies.
- assist in developing your 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.
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 or takes the time to develop this understanding
- provides a different perspective/new eyes
- provides critique utilising higher order thinking
- is available.

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
- impose agendas of their own
- undermine the authority of others.

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.
- openness to discussions about performance is essential
- an agreed process for exploring any conflicts needs to be discussed at the outset of the process

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

MAINTAINING THE DIALOGUE
Together, you and your critical friend need to determine how best to maintain the dialogue.

These could include:

a. Regular meetings

You and your critical friend would need to put aside dedicated time, clear their desks of all distractions, and focus.

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.

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.

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.
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 teacher for coachee and is presented from the perspective of the critical friend.

**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 teacher’s current situation is
- Find out what the teacher 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 teacher has learned
- Summarise gains made in the session
- Allow reflection time
- Conclude the session
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)