

## ROLE OF THE CRITICAL FRIEND

### 1. Just Listening

Put aside any idea that you have to be an expert or that you have to fix anything. What your colleagues need is someone who pays attention to them and gives them space to think.

**Listening** means **wanting** to understand the situation.

- ◆ It means being interested in the person and the way they react to and make sense of the situation.
- ◆ It means putting your views and opinions on hold, so that you can be of service to the other.
- ◆ It also means using all of your experience to imagine your way into what things are like for the other.

### 2. Questioning

Thinking more broadly means picking up on other observations that you weren't aware of at first or putting into words intuitions or hunches.

You will support broader thinking if you ask '*open ended questions*' rather than 'closed questions'. Closed questions have a 'yes' or 'no' answer, so try an open ended question like:

"So, what happened next?"

You will support deeper thinking if you ask a question with many possible answers, rather than a question for which you already have the answer, such as:

"What if you ...?"

"What do you think was going on at that point?"

"What will you do from here?"

Other useful questions as the conversation progresses could include

"What would be a good outcome for you?"

"What would success look like?"

"How will you know that the issue has been resolved?"

*The question that goes to the deepest level is the question that is difficult to ask.*

### **3. Reflecting Back**

Questions invite the other person to think and explore: reflecting back gathers what is found.

You listen, you question and you help to put the pieces together. Reflecting back summarises the essential elements in what the other has said, so that the speaker can keep an overview of the situation.

Instead of keeping track of everything in your head, reflecting back lets you summarise the situation at each step of the discussion. Your summarising says:

“This is what I heard you say – have I got it right?”

### **4. Suggesting other possibilities**

The first job of a critical friend is to create a safe place for the other person to do their thinking. However from time to time, you may see things or think of things that you believe will add to the other person’s work.

The secret to being useful in the possibilities you raise is to do a little at the right time. This allows you to support them as they understand the situation more fully, not to fix the problem.

### **5. Encouraging**

Encouragement from colleagues is absolutely essential particularly the encouragement to keep going, even when it’s hard to sort things out.

It also means seeing the progress that others are making and pointing that out to them. The critical friend searches for what has changed and what effect this is having.

### **6. Focussing**

Focussing means making sure the other person completes each step of the action learning cycle before moving on to the next.

- **describe** fully before going on to reflect.

- **generate** many hunches, so you can choose the one that seems to be central.
- **explore** different approaches when you plan so you can choose the one with the most potential.

Focussing also means being clear about the conclusions that the person reaches at each stage of the cycle.

“So the main thing that happened was ..”,

“So your conclusion is..”

“Alright, let’s get clear about what you are deciding to do”.

## **7. Maintaining the process**

The task now is to draw the significant changes out of the work that has been done and set in place whatever is needed.