

HOW TO GUIDE: Critical friend conversation

OVERVIEW: Guide to how to use the critical friend conversation method to gather critical feedback from colleagues.

OBJECTIVES:

- Help colleagues reflect together about issues
- Help identify and question one’s own assumptions
- Ensure that all parties enter a conversation with a clear purpose, and end with an outcome

ACTIVITY:

What is a critical friend?

A critical friend is a trusted person who asks proactive questions, examines problems through a different lens and offers critique of a person’s work. A critical friend needs to take the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that a person is working towards. A critical friend seeks to find a balance between providing support and challenge.

HIGH

Support	WARM BATH	ON TARGET
	ABDICATION	SPANISH INQUISITION
Challenge		

LOW

A critical friend relationship can be built on a one-on-one basis over time, or the method below can be used to facilitate a critical friend conversation with a small group.

The critical friend conversation requires a facilitator, unless the group is very familiar with the process. Below are approximate timelines for a 40 minute facilitated conversation:

- 1) **Group creation.** Break into small groups of 2-4. Decide who will be the presenter. If problems or issues to discuss have not already been identified, this can be done during this step. (5 minutes)



- 2) **Facilitator overview.** The facilitator provides an overview of the process and time limits. (3 minutes)
- 3) **Presenter overview.** The presenter shares their problem or issue, provides context and states the essential question for the discussion (5 minutes)
- 4) **Probing or clarifying questions.** Other group members ask the presenter more questions to learn about the issue. These questions are to get at the surface meaning and to better understand context. This is not a time to give advice or start to discuss the problem. (5 minutes)
- 5) **Group discussion.** The group now discusses the presenter's problem or issue. The presenter is silent during this time and takes notes. The presenter may sit with their back to the group if the urge to participate in the discussion is difficult to resist. The group discusses potential solutions to the problem and next steps for the presenter. (12 minutes)
- 6) **Presenter response.** The presenter responds to the group feedback. (5 minutes)
- 7) **Debriefing.** The facilitator leads a discussion critiquing the process. (5 minutes)

Timelines can be modified to meet your time requirements. If time permits, a second group member may become the "presenter" and the process may be repeated.

The goal of this process is not necessarily to come to a tidy solution by the end of the discussion, but instead to provide the presenter with some suggestions from alternative points of view in an attempt to broaden thinking around the issue.