

Guidance note: What does it mean to be a critical friend?

This guidance note is relevant to all governors at any stage of their tenure. Often the relationship between a college governor and a college manager is described as being like that of a critical friend. But what does that mean in practice?

- **As a college governor do you believe that the term ‘critical friend’ is an appropriate way of describing your role and relationship with the college Principal and executive team?**
- **Do you know the college well enough to be an informed friend?**
- **Do you believe that you deploy the appropriate balance of high support and high challenge?**

This briefing note will:

- Suggest the origins of the phrase
- Explain what it might mean in practice
- Explore the importance of the balance of support and challenge by governors.

‘The Critical Friend is a powerful idea, perhaps because it contains an inherent tension. Friends bring a high degree of unconditional positive regard. Critics are, at first sight at least, conditional, negative and intolerant of failure. Perhaps the critical friend comes closest to what might be regarded as ‘true friendship’ – a successful marrying of unconditional support and unconditional critique.’

(John MacBeath, Professor of Education Leadership, Cambridge University).

Where does the phrase come from?

Critical friend is a term that developed in education where it is often used to describe a critical friend of a research project who supports and challenges the research project by bringing an informed external perspective on the work. It is also used as part of school improvement processes where again an informed external perspective is brought to the school.

In their book **The A-Z of school improvement: principles and practice** (2013 Bloomsbury Educational) Tim Brighouse and David Woods include a section on Critical Friendship. Here a critical friend is seen as an external person *‘who understands and is sympathetic to the purpose of the school, knows its circumstances very well, is skilled in offering a second opinion about an issue. Critical Friends are seemingly effortlessly skilled at asking questions. They bring to that questioning task a mastery of inflection and timing, so that questions are never damaging’*.

Brighouse and Woods consider that Governors need to work at being the ‘critical friend’ to the head and the staff: *this requires them to be known in the school, otherwise their questions will be seen as hostile or irrelevant. Governing bodies act as critical friend to a school, providing the*

head teacher and staff with support, advice and information, drawing on members' knowledge and experience.

In this description, in the school context, Governors are seen as both insiders and outsiders who know the school well enough to be trusted and bring outside knowledge and experience. They also need to be able to ask perceptive questions about the difficult issues without being hostile.

Similarly in the context of the governance of Higher Education, this same notion is seen as helpful:

'The need for a governing body both to constructively support and challenge the head of the institution and other senior members of the executive team is a constant theme in the research on board effectiveness, For example, one governing body chair noted that 'in an open and honest governing body, governors (in particular the chair) will feel comfortable taking on another key role: the critical friend. This is important in assuring the governing body is able to challenge and question the executive on issues and makes sure the executive is adequately held to account'.

(What is an effective and high performing governing body in Higher Education?, published by Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, 2009, by Allan Schofield, paragraph 4.54)

What does critical friendship mean for college governance?

The idea of being a critical friend can be a helpful way of describing the relationship between college governors and college managers. It captures a combination of support and challenge, but challenge that is constructive and not hostile.

An effective governor is a friend of the college who supports the college, who wants the college to succeed, who has ambitions for the college, who has a clear idea of its purpose, its strengths and weaknesses, and presents the college to others in a positive way.

But an effective governor, like a true friend, has a relationship with the college that means he or she can also be frank when the college does not meet the requirements and expectations of the governing body. We will take notice of criticisms when they come from a friend we respect and who has our best interests at heart.

The notion of a critical friend indicates a relationship that is open, trusting, transparent and built on mutual respect. Critical questions are not seen as a threat but as helpful interventions to achieve mutually shared aims. Questions are not asked to try to catch people out but to enable a clearer understanding of issues and how they can be resolved. Based on trust, probing questions are asked to verify that what is being reported and proposed is built on sound analysis and appropriate and deliverable actions.

The Ofsted report on **How Colleges Improve (2012)** sums up the appropriate informed relationships between governors and managers which Ofsted inspectors look for in colleges:

'The governors of good and outstanding colleges were well-informed, received the right information and could challenge managers vigorously on the college's performance. Problems occurred when governors did not know what questions to ask or when relationships with senior leaders were too close.'

Support and Challenge

Critical friends develop an appropriate blend of support and challenge.

In a recent edition of **Management Today** (December 2013/January 2014) Miranda Kennett of *firstclasscoach.co.uk* argued that the twin levers of successful leadership are support and challenge. She listed some characteristics of each as:

SUPPORT

Listening, coaching
 Suiting tasks to skills
 Promoting harmony
 Process focused
 Emphasis on development
 Encouraging innovation

CHALLENGE

Telling, directing
 Setting stretch targets
 Demanding performance
 Task focused
 Focused on achievement
 Intolerant of failure

One is not better than the other, but we need to be able to operate in both modes if we want to succeed. In which quadrant do you tend to operate as a governor?

		HIGH
Support	WARM BATH	ON TARGET
	ABDICATION	SPANISH INQUISITION
	Challenge	
		LOW

If there is both low support and low challenge then this can be seen as abdication of responsibility. If there is high support and low challenge this can be seen as too comfortable (warm bath). If there is low support and high challenge than this can be seen as constant antagonism (Spanish Inquisition) which may achieve short term results but is not likely to be sustained.

As often with matrixes, top right is the ideal place to be, combining high support with high challenge. Leaders that can deliver this balance tend to create the best results over a sustained period. Staff remain motivated because they feel fully supported while stretching themselves to accomplish new challenges.

In the report on **Challenges for FE college governance and priorities for development (2012)**, one of the challenges was identified as :

'Imbalance of support and challenge – this challenge is a reflection of a broader issue that governors, especially in weaker colleges, tend to see their role primarily as appointing the right leaders, then supporting them. There is often a lack of adequate challenge in the form of asking powerful questions and probing behind what is presented based on a good level of understanding. Frequently governors are unwilling, or lack the confidence and skills, to challenge, especially if the chair is very close to the principal. Not enough boards are engaged in the creation of strategy at its earliest stages and then throughout its formation; they do not shape strategy, nor do they ultimately own or always understand it well enough to monitor it robustly. They can be over-reliant on management assurances, without drilling down effectively.'

- Do you believe that your governing body has met this challenge?

See also guidance notes on:

Effective challenge of the senior team

Asking powerful questions

Board self evaluation

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