**Critical Friends Consultancy Overview**

***Overview:***

The Critical Friends process focuses on developing collegial relationships, encouraging reflective practice, and rethinking leadership. This process is based in cooperative adult learning and pulls all participants out of the independent unit in which they often operate.

Critical in the context of this process is intended to mean “important” or “key” or “necessary.” In bringing critical friends together, there is an opportunity to both solicit and provide feedback in a manner that promotes reflective learning.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University first developed the Critical Friends model for collegial dialogue. We will utilize a modified consultancy protocol during this session to provide an opportunity for each school leader to solicit and provide consultative feedback about an issue important to the leader.

***Group Roles:***

Each group member has a distinct role they will play during the process.

Each school leader will be a presenter. The presenter prepares an issue for consultancy; is clear about the specific questions that should be addressed; sits outside the group during discussion and does not maintain eye contact, but rather takes notes and gauges what is helpful and what is not. Later, the presenter is specific about the feedback that is helpful.

Facilitators and timekeepers will remind you of the roles, process, and objectives and ensure that every group adheres to time limits and stays on topic.

The discussants address the issue brought forth by the presenter and provide feedback that is both warm (positive) and cool (honest, direct, critical). The feedback should be given in a supportive tone and should include practical suggestions.

***Preparing an Issue for Consultancy***

Reflect on and identify an area in which you are seeking fresh ideas or a different approach. What challenging dilemmas exist? Where do you hope to strengthen your planning? You may choose to zero in on one focus area or step of the offline process.

Dilemmas deal with issues with which you are struggling — something that is problematic or has not been as effective as you would like it to be — anything related to your work. Consultancies give presenters an opportunity to tap the expertise in a group; you will be able to rely on the people in your consultancy group to provide respectful, thoughtful, experienced-based responses to your dilemma.

Frame the issue carefully. It is important to provide the discussants with enough information to discuss effectively and create solutions for the issue you are presenting. Discussants will have five minutes to ask clarifying and probing questions, however it is very important that your five minute presentation lets the group know exactly what you want to get as a result of the conversation.

A couple of caveats — consultancies often don’t go well when people bring dilemmas that they are well on the way to figuring out themselves, or when they bring a dilemma that involves only getting other people to change. To get the most out of this experience, bring something that is still puzzling you about your practice and that is within your locus of control.

***Steps in the Consultancy Process:***

Step 1: Facilitator Overview (3 minutes)

* Review process
* Set time limits

Step 2: Presenter Overview (4 minutes)

* Share issue with group
* Provide context
* Frame key question for specific consideration

Step 3: Probing or Clarifying Questions (4 minutes)

* Group members ask more questions to learn about the issue
* Reminder, this is not a time to give advice or get into the discussion

Step 4: Discussants’ Group Discussion (10 minutes)

* Group discusses issue (both warm and cool)
* Presenter is silent, taking notes
* Group addresses possible suggestions related to the issue

Step 5: Presenter Response (4 minutes)

* Presenter responds to group feedback

Step 6: Debriefing (4 minutes)

* Reflect on and critique the process

***Pre-Work***

Prepare a five minute presentation of a dilemma for consultancy. As part of the five minute presentation, you will present your identified dilemma to your critical friends group. During the consultancy process you will ask for specific feedback from your critical friends’ consultancy group.

Come to the session with a written description of a dilemma that you are grappling with related to your practice. Write your dilemma with as much contextual description as you feel you need for understanding. Shoot for half a page to one page of thoughtful description in order to ensure a rich, focused discussion. Please utilize the graphic organizer on page 5 to guide your preparation.

End your description with a specific question. Frame your question thoughtfully. What do you REALLY want to know? What is your real dilemma? This question will help your consultancy group focus its feedback. Questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no” generally provide less feedback for the person with the dilemma, so avoid those kinds of questions. A process for framing consultancy dilemmas and questions is provided on following page.

Prepare speaking notes for a five minute presentation of your identified dilemma.

Provide context in which your issue presents itself – related to your charter, school, teachers, students, achievement data, etc.

***Consultancy Process***

1. Think about your dilemma. Dilemmas deal with issues with which you are struggling or that you are unsure about. Some criteria for a dilemma might include:
   * Is it something that is bothering you enough that your thoughts regularly return to the dilemma?
   * Is it an issue/dilemma that is not already on its way to being resolved?
   * Is it an issue/ dilemma that does not depend on getting other people to change (in other words, can you affect the dilemma by changing your practice)?
   * Is it something that is important to you, and is it something you are actually willing to work on?
2. Do some reflective writing about your dilemma. Some questions that might help are:
   * Why is this a dilemma for you? Why is this dilemma important to you?
   * If you could take a snapshot of this dilemma, what would you/we see?
   * What have you done already to try to remedy or manage the dilemma?
   * What have been the results of those attempts?
   * Who do you hope changes? Who do you hope will take action to resolve this dilemma? If your answer is not you, you need to change your focus. You will want to present a dilemma that is about your practice, actions, behaviors, beliefs, and assumptions, and not someone else’s.
   * What do you assume to be true about this dilemma, and how have these assumptions influenced your thinking about the dilemma?
   * What is your focus question? A focus question summarizes your dilemma and helps focus the feedback (see the next step).
3. Frame a focus question for your consultancy group. Put your dilemma into question format.
   * Try to pose a question around the dilemma that seems to you to get to the heart of the matter.
   * Remember that the question you pose will guide the consultancy group in their discussion of the dilemma.
4. Critique your focus question.
   * Is this question important to my practice?
   * Is this question important to student learning?
   * Is this question important to others in my profession?

***Focus Question - Abbreviated Example:***

Teachers have an abundance of data. They review the proficiency levels of their students, but they don’t use it to differentiate Tier I instruction for their students.

Question: How do I work with teachers so they move to a deep authentic understanding of how data should drive instructional practice?

***References:***

Appleby, J. (1998). Becoming Critical Friends: Reflections of an NSRF Coach. Providence, RI: The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

Cushman, K. (May, 1998). How Friends Can Be Critical as Schools Make Essential Changes. Oxon Hill, MD: Coalition of Essential Schools.

Bambino, D. (March, 2002). Redesigning Professional Development: Critical Friends.

Educational Leadership, 59 (6), pp. 25-27.

***Dilemma Presentation - Graphic Organizer***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Context in which the issue presents itself |  |
| Important components surrounding the situation – important actors, past history, personnel structures that affect your ability to act |  |
| Your actions/reactions around the issue |  |
| What you would like the group to discuss or the outcome you seek from the discussants – e.g. alternate suggestions for a desired outcome or critical actions; identify potential obstacles; refine progress  indicators; etc. |  |
| Focus question: specific and thoughtful –  What do you REALLY want to know?  What is your real dilemma? |  |