



Mindful Critique

SHAPING AN EFFECTIVE LEADER USING 'CRITICAL FRIENDS'

By: Neil Fogarty

It's a complex world that the executive lives in: there are expectations to deliver more for less; to manage a wide number of stakeholders, shareholders, employees, and customers; to motivate an increasingly disenfranchised workforce – and maintain a work / life balance. In most cases, at a time when you want to have an objective, balanced discussion and hear the truth, you may find yourself speaking with people with a vested interest – and so there will be a bias in the conversation. Sometimes, the executive doesn't need to hear what those closest to him have to say – but who can they talk to instead? The executive has an option – the critical friend.

A story for you...

According to the Greek historian Plutarch, the King of Syracuse in Sicily (Hieron) was a tyrant: "one who rules without law, and uses extreme and cruel tactics – against his own people as well as others". He was a strict ruler – often loved by the people but also feared by them.

One day, Hieron was having an argument with a bitter rival and his rival shouted at him, "your breath stinks!" Hieron was appalled at this and returned to his wife at the palace to tell her what had been said. But his wife did not deny it – instead, she (carefully) said yes, his breath stinks but she thought it was something all men had in common. In this story, the King only heard the truth from a sworn enemy; not from his friends or family. In fact, the piece by Plutarch is called, "how a man may receive advantage and profit from his enemies".

At times, confiding in key people can be a greater disadvantage than advantage. A critical friend is a trusted individual that provides constructive challenging support – they are there to listen, critique, explore and encourage.

An established concept

'Critical Friend' has its origins in education in the 1970s and is typically a colleague or other educational professional who is committed to helping an educator or school improve. In 1994, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform in The United States began advocating a teacher-led approach to professional development where groups of educators met regularly to engage in structured professional discussions and work collaboratively to improve their school or teaching skills.

In 1998, the term jumped from education into the wider public sector with a UK public sector consultant introducing the term to the Local Government Consortium at the University of Warwick.

The benefits

Whether you are in the public or private sector, there are times when you need someone outside of the organisation to help you sit back and think about what you are doing (or planning on doing) and be challenged.

Your critical friend is someone who is encouraging and supportive, but who also provides honest and often candid feedback that may be uncomfortable or difficult to hear. In short, a critical friend is someone who agrees to speak truthfully, but constructively, about weaknesses, problems, and emotionally charged issues.

"YOUR CRITICAL FRIEND IS SOMEONE WHO IS ENCOURAGING AND SUPPORTIVE, BUT WHO ALSO PROVIDES HONEST AND OFTEN CANDID FEEDBACK THAT MAY BE UNCOMFORTABLE OR DIFFICULT TO HEAR."

- Enabling professional and organizational improvement;
- Helping those avoiding hard truths;
- Supporting you as you consider strategic and leadership issues;
- Confidential and balanced conversations;
- Receiving honest critique;
- Exploring critical questions that are not seen as a threat but as helpful interventions to achieve mutually shared aims;
- Building a high-level network for you to access outside of such places as LinkedIn

Who wants a critical friend?

Critical friendship tends to work best for those in a position of authority: decision-makers with a greater control over what is happening. There is no doubt that coaching and mentoring are great tools but, for leaders, a critical friend brings a new dimension.

Leadership mentoring is where a more skilled or experienced person works with a lesser skilled or experienced person, with the agreed goal of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop.

A critical friend is closer to being an equal but in a balanced adult-adult relationship where they can comfortably disagree – and whilst the critical friend can still be a mentor, they are more likely to be going on the same journey at the same time. Critical friends ask the stupid questions and challenge your thinking.

In my experience, the critical friend is best used by CEOs, leaders, and entrepreneurs.

Some guidelines

- Find someone whose opinion you respect;
- Go for a meal with them – find out if there is more to the relationship than simply business;
- Set out goals to be measured against (on both sides);
- Retain them on a monthly basis;
- Don't retain them for more than 9 months (as the relationship becomes familiar, they are less 'critical' and more 'friend');
- Welcome disagreements – don't be defensive in your discussions;
- Don't just listen and learn... talk, discuss, explore and learn.

Admittedly, critical friendship isn't for every leader – some run their enterprise like Hieron ran Syracuse but, at some point, there is a benefit to be realised from talking to someone outside of the organisation who is not frightened to offend you with the truth.

As a critical friend, I tell a King that his breath stinks but then also help find the best breath freshener!

Do you have someone who can tell you the truth and then help you build on it? **BIG**



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