

## **Critical friends**

I would say a critical friend does four key things:

First of all they establish trust with the organisations.

Secondly, they listen very carefully

to what that organisation is trying to do.

Thirdly, they give accurate feedback to the organisation.

And fourthly, they offer information

based either on their own experience

or on the experience of other organisations

who are engaged in similar kinds of activity.

The critical friend is someone

who, whilst a friend in the sense of being friendly

and positive, it is not really

a relationship of friendship.

It's about the person being able

to ask the difficult question

or bring the question into the open

that perhaps others are avoiding.

I think that balance between being positive and constructive,

but also teasing out the real challenges

the organisations are facing, is really quite critical

to the role of the critical friend.

I think the first thing

a critical friend has to do is to establish trust,

and that is done I think by demonstrating

a clear understanding of the context

in which the organisation is operating

and also that you understand  
what it is they are aiming to change  
about the way the organisation is managed or led.

Well I think listening carefully  
means listening both to what's being said  
and also to what is not being said.

And so for example, looking at body language  
as well as what people are saying.

To give you a little example of that:

In a meeting noticing when people are flashing eyes  
at each other across the room  
because that often indicates  
dissent with what's being said.

So often I would say, "Does everyone  
actually agree what's being said here?"

I know it seems like a very small thing,  
but often it liberates a much better discussion.

I think it's a good idea to give you  
an example of feeding back accurately:

Someone who watched me  
acting as a critical friend said  
that the most useful thing that I'd done  
was to summarise at the end  
of a very complex discussion.

And that gives everyone in the room a chance to say,

"No that's not what I said,"

or to say, "Yes, it is what I said,

but I'd like to add to it."

I try to offer information from my own experience.

So for example, with one organisation

I'm co-leading a session on reflection

with them so that they can learn

not just about the content

of what they are trying to reflect on

but also something about reflective techniques.

Another organisation is trying to map its learning

and in order to be able to disseminate it across the organisation.

What I'm doing there is I'm looking for examples

of how other organisations have done this

so I can feed it into their discussion.

Sometimes a critical friend

can be a very useful part of a discussion

between different players within an organisation,

where for reasons of hierarchy or just normal practice,

it's quite difficult for someone say, to bring up an issue,

even though they think it's terribly important.

And a critical friend can help surface those questions

or directly ask difficult questions

to the person with power or the person that is perhaps

not taking part fully in the process.