

Introduction

This note, prepared by the OM evaluation team, responds to the proposal made at the Lead Contacts Group on 2 December 2013 that participants would value input from a critical friend at this stage in the OM programme. It comments on the suggestion that one option to meet this need would be for the evaluation team to take on this role. The note includes a summary of the generally accepted definition and role of critical friends; outlines options to meet the need expressed by Lead Contacts; sums up the response of the evaluation team to the proposal; and outlines practical ways forward for consideration by the OM Director and Lead Contacts.

What is a critical friend¹

- A critical friend can be defined as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides additional data, evidence or lessons from elsewhere that give a different perspective, and offers a critique of a person's or group's work as a friend. The word 'friend' in this context implies someone whose motives and approach you trust, who you know would like to see you achieve what you want to achieve, yet still asks the 'difficult question' or points to the 'elephant in the room' as well as acknowledging what is going well.
- A critical friend takes the time to fully understand both the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working towards.
- A critical friend can help foster an atmosphere in the group where different ways of thinking or doing can be explored openly, whilst maintaining friendly and cordial relationships between the people involved in the conversation.
- Whilst 'friendliness' is crucial in the manner and approach of the critical friend, the role of the critical friend is not about 'friendship.'
- The critical friend is a methodology used in evaluation processes.

What is the role of a critical friend?

A critical friend provides an independent view of the programme and processes underway and prompts honest reflection and appraisal by those involved. The group remains responsible for the development of their programme throughout the relationship with the critical friend. The group 'sets the agenda' and decides, for instance, what processes or practices it wishes to describe to the critical friend in order to request feedback or how best to structure meetings or other exchanges.

The critical friend asks questions in order to understand the practice or other issues described and to clarify the context in which it takes place. The critical friend provides feedback on what seems to them to be significant about the practice; offers

¹ These descriptions of the role are derived from the work of Costa and Killick [1993] and Lima [2001]

insights or observations derived from what they know of the experience of other OM participants or drawn from their wider experience; and critiques the work by raising questions or prompting the group to see the issue from different perspectives.

Both the group and the critical friend reflect on the conversations. The group decides how best to record and use these conversations, thinking about the points and suggestions raised with an eye to how it might affect future practice. The critical friend also reflects on the conversation and may follow up with written suggestions and/or advice, where this seems appropriate.

Options

Critical friends could be selected from a number of sources at this stage in the OM programme:

- Existing contacts with appropriate experience and who already know about the OM programme and your work.
- A facilitator from within the museum or a local contact recommended by a Community Partner: this option could potentially minimise travel costs and enable more frequent face-to-face conversations as well as potentially initiating a longer-term relationship.
- PHF could advertise for/recruit a person or organisation though this could delay the start of relationships and would require full briefing by the OM director and participants.
- Member/s of the PHF OM evaluation team who are already familiar with the programme and participants.

The evaluation team view is that acting as critical friend, as long as the scope and parameters of the relationship are clearly defined and understood, does not conflict with the objectivity of the evaluation process. In principle the evaluators are willing to take on an additional role as critical friend to the organisation they are not currently working with on a regular basis. They also see some benefits in this for the overall evaluation programme. For example, this would allow evaluators to become more familiar with participants across the programme prior to the already planned visits by *both* evaluators to *all* participant museums during 'Year 3'. The evaluation team also understand that an alternative option might better suit the needs of participant museums and their community partners.

Way forward

It seems important, whichever option is selected, for PHF to agree with participants a short standard written agreement for use between critical friend/s and museums/participants with, for example, a common definition of the role and an agreement to review the use of critical friends at a mutually agreed point.

Evaluation Team December 2013