Network leadership in action:

What does a critical friend do?

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Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other | learning with each other | learning on behalf of each other

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One of the distinctive features of successful networks is dedicated facilitation and leadership. This may come from one person or from a small team, depending on the scale of the network and the nature of its activities.

As part of the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has been conducting research amongst network leaders and others in leadership and support roles in school networks to find out how they have interpreted their roles. What has emerged is an understanding of the key issues facing leaders and an appreciation of the complexity and importance of their role in school networks.

The tools in this series have been generated largely through the work of the Networked Learning Communities programme over the past two years. They draw upon the findings of a research seminar, the outcomes of a collaborative enquiry undertaken by Ron Ritchie and the NLC steering group, and from collaborative work with Demos.

Key roles

This tool is structured around a series of key roles. Although they might not all become critical immediately after the launch of the network, they may become issues if they are not planned for at the beginning. This approach was informed by the question 'What would I have liked to have known before I started?'

Reflective questions

The reflective questions are designed to challenge thinking about the systems and processes of a network to enable the key roles to be tackled successfully.

Possible starting points

These provide suggestions and ideas about how you might approach the questions. Sometimes these are quite formal, where they have been synthesised from a discussion or taken from some of the outcomes generated. Occasionally they are statements or direct quotes from an individual.

Examples from practice

Also included are some examples from practice to illustrate how network leaders and others in leadership and support roles in school networks have tackled certain issues and challenges.

Key roles	Relective questions

Offering support

Establishing and leading a network takes courage and resilience. A critical friend builds confidence in network leaders to help them to take risks and to experiment with new ways of working.

- How will you introduce yourself to network leaders and participants? How will you build on or reorientate existing relationships?
- Who speaks and who listens in your interactions with network leaders?
- How can you create a space to be inquisitive and to lead through enquiry?
- To what extent should you be taking the initiative in developing new ideas in the network?
- How will you build trust and confidence?
- Where will you meet?

Providing challenge

Avoiding 'group think' and cosy relationships can significantly influence the kind of network that emerges. A critical friend does not always agree with the network leaders - its their job to extend and question thinking and to offer alternatives.

- Why might it be important for you to model reflection?
- How do you find a balance between being clear and focused and being open to possibilities and ideas?
- What kinds of things can you do to encourage a positive attitude to risk?
- How can network data and evidence help you to present an objective and analytical view of the network for leaders to build on?

Consultancy

Leading a network is different from leading a school. A critical friend brings operational ideas from organisations other than schools. Often they can see different ways to connect schools within the network that will help build relationships and improve cohesion around the network focus.

- How will you persuade network leaders that you have the right background and experience to support them? What kinds of things will you share?
- What administrative and project management resources can you put at the network's disposal? What models and processes can you introduce?
- How will you get to know the network and its participants so that you can help network leaders to think of ways to involve a range of practitioners.
- What will be your criteria for identifying good practice and how will you share them?
- What training opportunities can you broker or provide for network leaders? For participants?

Leading enquiry

Some critical friends are based in a Higher Education Institutions and have a background in research. Some are from Local Authorities where enquiry ad research are encouraged. Good enquiry processes are essential to a network and a critical friend is often well placed to offer or to broker this kind of expertise.

- What access to evidence from research and practice can you broker or provide for the network?
- What processes to develop research and evidence informed innovation and practice could you support network leaders to develop?
- How will you persuade network leaders and participants to access research and evidence when they are "too busy to learn"?
- What role might collaborative enquiry have in the leadership and sustainability of the network? What role will you take in supporting and developing a range of enquiry models?
- To what extent are you prepared to change your practice on the basis of evidence gathered through your work with the network? How will you make this visible and explicit?

Brokering knowledge

Access to research and policy developments or practice elsewhere enables the network to stay in touch with the big picture, keeping the network current and relevant and open to new ideas. A critical friend is often the person chosen by the network to perform this role.

- How will you make and protect time for your role in the network?
- Who else might the network benefit from knowing? Can you broker those relationships?
- What contacts do you have that you could mobilise on behalf of the network?
- How will you ensure that you are up to date with developments in research, policy and practice that are relevant to the network? How will you share your insight?
- What services might your organisation be able to offer the network?

■ Networks often start off with a launch event to raise awareness and build ownership. Attend as a keynote speaker or discussant and take the opportunity to be visible in your role. If you can, stay for the whole event and work with participants in their sessions.
■ Be an extra pair of hands in times of crisis. Stand in for a network leader. Offer guidance and practical help during individual school Ofsted inspections and when the network is under scrutiny during review processes.
■ Visit network schools and get close to the contexts in which they are operating. Spend time listening to practitioners and their concerns.
■ Avoid building dependency by using coaching techniques in your interactions with network leaders and participants. Help them to arrive at their own solutions. Model enquiry.

■ Much of the work of the network takes place at steering groups and other network meetings. Being part of these will help you to stay in touch with the needs and aspirations of different groups within the network.
■ Providing written notes and feedback after each meeting means that you can create an opportunity to pose challenging and reflective questions to network leaders, without the risk of undermining them during the meeting itself.
■ One-to-one meetings with network leaders can be helpful too. Set yourself up as 'devil's advocate' and offer different perspectives on an issue. Support network leaders to formulate alternative scenarios. Model risk one-by-one by asking the difficult questions.

■ Learn about the different parts of the network and present the findings of your enquiry as an accessible report to network leaders. Help them to make sense of the complex interrelationships and conflicting priorities.
■ Design processes that support the generation of written product to record the learning and history of the network.
■ Encourage the use of project planning tools and project management processes like risk analysis and progress reporting to help secure successful outcomes for the network.

■ Work with enquiry groups (eg teachers, school leaders, pupils) to develop good questions that will resonate in different contexts. Support the development of joint data collection and analysis methods so that schools can work together on a shared enquiry focus.
■ Lead study groups of headteachers and other practitioners to model 'quick and clean' collaborative enquiry methods.
■ Provide continuing professional development.
■ Pass on, synthesise and summarise research and/or policy papers.
■ Highlight relevant conferences and other learning opportunities.
■ Support a range of approaches to self-evaluation.

■ Stay in touch informally by telephone and email.
■ Advocate for the network in other forums.
■ Represent the network at conferences and seminars.
■ Share contacts and make connections on behalf of the network.
■ Support network leaders to make sense of external influences through network processes and practice. Help them to align networked learning with other policy imperatives to build sustainability and credibility.

Our critical friend was incredibly helpful when we were setting up the network. She helped us to think through the tons of things we wanted to do to get to the key issues that would really get us started. And then she opened our launch conference with an inspiring keynote.

Just having an expert to work with gave us an enormous sense of security at the beginning. We felt that we were validating our ideas

with someone who had a sense of what else was going on 'out there' and we were delighted that we seemed to be on the right track most of the time.

What surprised me the most was how things that seemed quite wacky and radical at the beginning of a steering group meeting had become normal and entirely possible by the end of it. There was a bit of a coaching process going on between us and our critical friend – that helped us to think through all the problems before we started.

There was a sort of positive ruthlessness about the way that our critical friend helped us to see that we were doing too many things. We were being unrealistic about our time and our expectations. By using skilled questioning she encouraged us to be more focused and more honest with ourselves about what we could achieve.

We use our critical friend as a sounding board for our plans and ideas. He asks lots of tough questions and sometimes introduces completely new ideas that can sometimes seem irrelevant to begin with... but we always end up somewhere better than where we started.

Having a critical friend who managed a large network of schools before has helped us to be more realistic about what we can achieve with the resources we have. We focused on one major innovation and then involved lots of different groups in finding out how it works in different places around the network. Its a strategy that's really pulled people together and helped us build good relationships where everyone has something to contribute.

I thought that project management was all about budgets and Gantt charts, but actually it's a brilliant way of distributing leadership. Our critical friend led a session on risk management for all the heads in the network, where they chose a network project and talked about what could go wrong and what they might do to prevent that happening. Absolutely brilliant.

Most of our schools have had some teacher research going on before and individuals have really benefited, but we couldn't see how to make that work for the network as a whole. Our critical friend has helped us to build a community of teacher researchers who are working for the whole network, sharing enquiry methods and data as well as outcomes.

We get access to the university library and online subscription to research and professional journals through our relationship with our critical friend. We are in process of negotiating an MEd module to accredit our teacher researchers.

Our critical friend facilitates a collaborative leadership learning group involving some of the heads. Its becoming a really powerful group that's attracting quite a lot of attention in the Local Authority.

We share a critical friend with another network and she does an amazing job of swapping ideas and experiences between the two. We feel like we're really connected even though we've never actually worked together. I usually get a call or an email from her about once a fortnight, mostly we just chat about what's new in the network and in her 'day job'. Sometimes she'll send me through papers or a link to website, but she knows I'm really busy so she usually checks to see if I'm interested first.

Our critical friend brought knowledge from other networks and enabled us to focus on pupil learning much more effectively, through her questioning. She gave us the tools to extend our thinking and become evidence-based. She encouraged us to think about how we would know we were adding value. We came up with richer definitions of attainment and we feel we have gained credibility through this.

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networked learning communities visit:
www.nlcexchange.org.uk
www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc

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