

HANDBOOK **FOR CRITICAL FRIEND** **REVIEW**

EUROCITIES WORKING GROUP ON SOCIAL
INCLUSION THROUGH EDUCATION
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AIM

The handbook aims to provide:

- guidance to cities hosting a critical friend review
- a tool for the participants in the critical friend review
- help to host sites and host cities with analysing and supporting development

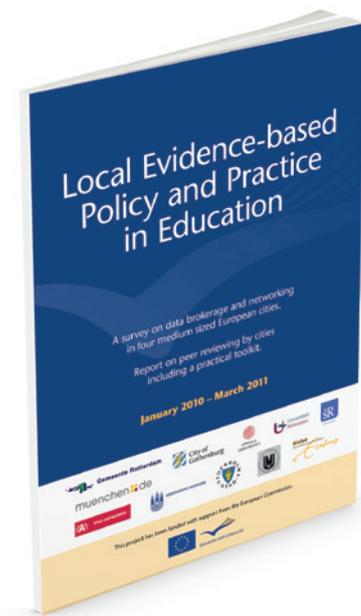
Background

When representatives from different European cities meet, they are keen to learn from each other's experiences and expertise. So-called 'study visits' have been organised over the years.

Based on the results from the European project 2009-2011, **Local evidence-based policy and practice in education**, (<https://bit.ly/2l5x6iX>) the EUROCIITIES working group on social inclusion through education, introduced the critical friend review in 2011 to replace the study visits. Following its introduction, the critical friend review was not adopted as the standard methodology during all working group meetings until 2015.

In 2015, a steering group¹ moved to support host cities prepare and implement the methodology. Since then, the experiences, learning points and reports, from various meetings created new dynamics in the host cities, and based on the critical feedback from the European friends, EUROCIITIES members' local policy approaches improved.

In autumn 2015, the working group decided to produce a manual on how to organise a critical friend review as an alternative to ordinary study visits. This handbook is the result of that work.



Objectives

- The objective for using the CFR is to provide mutual learning for all participants.
- The handbook serves as a manual on how to organise the CFR and the requirements for preparation, implementation and dissemination.

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TERMINOLOGY

Term	Explanation
CFR	critical friend review (CFR) for one and a half days: day one, preparing for the CFR; day two, the review based on the process described in this handbook.
review	overall process of the critical friend review (CFR)
host city	city which hosts and organises the CFR
host site	institution (school, kindergarten, etc.) where a project; activity or policy is reviewed
reviewee	person who works at the host site, and plays an active role during the interview and feedback session
reviewer	person who has a defined role such as moderator, secretary, observer, timekeeper or expert during the interview and feedback session
facilitator	person who is responsible for the overall process of the CFR group and helps the group understand their common objectives before the CFR. The facilitator assists group members formulate the main outcomes after the CFR. In doing so, the facilitator remains neutral, meaning he/she does not take a particular position in the discussion
moderator	<p>person who keeps the interview and discussion of each group focused on the questions, which were agreed upon beforehand. He or she motivates other reviewers to ask questions.</p> <p>The moderator makes a quick initial analysis of the main insights and advises the group or the expert after the interviews to help complete the SWOT analysis and the plus/delta analysis</p>
secretary	<p>person who takes the minutes of the interview. He/she prepares the questions to be asked during the interview.</p> <p>- the most important statements during the interview, i.e. the minutes of the interview; and - the most important statements after the feedback session in cooperation with the moderator (as basis for the written feedback to the host city and/ or the report).</p>
observer	person who pays attention to what is not said (gestures, body language etc.) and contributes to the overall discussions based on the observation
timekeeper	person who makes sure that all the reviewees get the same amount of time and gives clear signs when the interview time is running out
expert	person who writes the report after the review, which contains a description of the framework or context, the information of the reviews and the feedback sessions and additional theoretical information on the overall topic
SWOT	<p>SWOT analysis which is carried out only by the reviewers based on the results of the interviews with a focus on the objective</p> <p>Strengths are those things that are working well, weaknesses and opportunities are those things that have not worked well, but could potentially work in the future, and threats are things that threaten the range of opportunities for change</p>
plus/delta	analysis which includes the results of the SWOT analysis; strengths are summarised and listed on the plus side, and opportunities and weaknesses are written down on the delta side.

CRITICAL FRIEND REVIEW IN BRIEF

The CFR is divided into several phases, both for the reviewers (critical friends) and the reviewees (hosts).

1. Before the CFR site visit - preparation

- The host city decides on the topic and selects the host sites accordingly.
- The reviewers, as well as the reviewees, have to be prepared for the critical friend review.

2. During the CFR site visit - interviews

- The core activity of the review is the interviews, during which the reviewers individually talk to the reviewees. Each CFR site visit will include in several interviews. The interviews are based on a brief description prepared by the host city and the inquisitiveness of the reviewers.
- Right after each interview a quick initial analysis is carried out by the reviewers.

3. After the CFR site visit – analysis and feedback

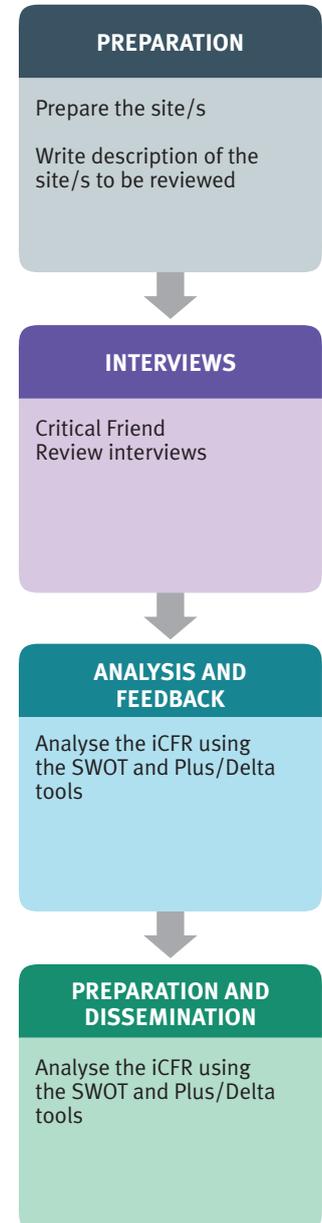
- Each group analyses its interviews using a SWOT analysis and a plus/delta analysis in which the strong elements and suggestions for improvement are listed, based on the experience and expertise of the reviewers.
- Based on the plus/delta analysis, the reviewers give immediate feedback to the reviewees.

4. After the CFR – reporting and dissemination

- Based on the preparatory materials, the SWOT analysis and the plus/delta analysis and the feedback of both reviewers and reviewees, the host city writes up the results from the CFR (documentation) and shares it with the reviewees (host sites).
- The host city may carry out debriefings with the reviewees from each host site, and disseminate the findings to their local stakeholders.

It is beneficial for the host city to have a dedicated person to follow the process and put together a comprehensive report of the critical friend review if it has the resources. Extra effort can also be made to frame some conclusions with scientific literature to link the practice with quantitative and qualitative evidence. There are at least three target groups for such a report:

- For the **reviewees in the host city**, the report serves as the basis for developing actions for improvement
- For the **reviewers**, the report makes it easier to share knowledge with relevant colleagues in their organisation or city
- For **policymakers** at local, national and EU level, the report provides valuable insight in good practices at local level, enriched with feedback from experts and references to the relevant literature.



EUROCITIES and the city of Antwerp produced a short video on **'How to use a critical friends review'**
<https://bit.ly/2nghFgV>

MANAGING THE PROCESS OF THE CRITICAL FRIEND REVIEW

PREPARATION

HOST PREPARES SITE/S

Make sure everyone:
 - Understands the process
 - Has time reserved in their calendars for the visitors
 Remember to plan for refreshments during the visit

HOSTS WRITE BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Write a 1-2 page description of the site/s to be reviewed
 Send it to the participants at least one week before the visit

REVIEWERS PLAN QUESTIONS

Discuss together what questions you want to ask
 Remember to be both critical and friendly

REVIEWERS ESTABLISH ROLES AND TOOLS

Discuss and distribute the roles, for example: moderator, secretary and observer
 Present the SWOT and Plus/Delta-tools to all reviewers

1. Before the CFR site visit - preparation

1.1 Preparing the reviewees host site for the CFR

- The host city prepares a general information sheet.
- The host city selects the host sites based on the focus of the overall theme.
- The host city may choose an expert.
- When preparing the host sites for the CFR the host city should make sure that the reviewees understand the objectives and the process of the CFR.
- The reviewees have to be available during one full working day, and it might also be useful for them to participate in an event such as dinner the evening before the CFR.
- The host sites have to prepare a one to two page description about their site and the central theme of the CFR. The document will be sent to the reviewers at least one week before their visit. If the host city offers several site visits, the reviewers make a choice based on the brief descriptions.
- Please note: the review is based on questions from reviewers and not on presentations from the host.
- Short breaks and refreshments during the interviews are appreciated.

1.2 Preparing the reviewers for the CFR

The day before the site visits the groups of reviewers gather to plan the CFR. The reviewers discuss what is interesting to know and compile their questions. The roles of moderator, secretary, observers and timekeeper have to be discussed and distributed between the reviewers. The SWOT analysis template will be presented and used during the site visits.

Please note: a reflective approach during CFR is important and the reviewers should always remind themselves that they are to be both critical and friendly.

If the host city provides a welcome dinner for the reviewers on the evening before the CFR, it is recommended to invite reviewees from the host sites. This approach has proven to be effective at creating a friendly atmosphere during the CFR.



2. During the CFR site visit - interviews

- The interviews are carried out on the second day.
- The reviewers will be taken to the site by the host.
- The interviews take approximately two hours, depending on the number of reviewees.
- The moderator describes the process of the review, each reviewer's role, as well as the schedule to the reviewees.
- The moderator chairs the interviews and discussions between the interviews.
- The reviewers may make use of the SWOT analysis template which can be used to help with their note taking.
- The priority of the review is the mutual learning through discussions and questions with leaders, staff members and other stakeholders such as students at the host site. The interviews are mainly based on questions from the reviewers and not presentations from the reviewee (host sites).
- Both individual interviews and group discussions can be used for the review.
- A short walk around the site is appreciated.

3. After the CFR site visit - analysis and feedback

After the site visits the reviewers come together, first in groups and then in a plenary session, to analyse the findings from the reviews and give feedback to the reviewees. The analysis session as well as the feedback session is facilitated by an appointed facilitator and takes approximately 90 minutes.

This session aims to:

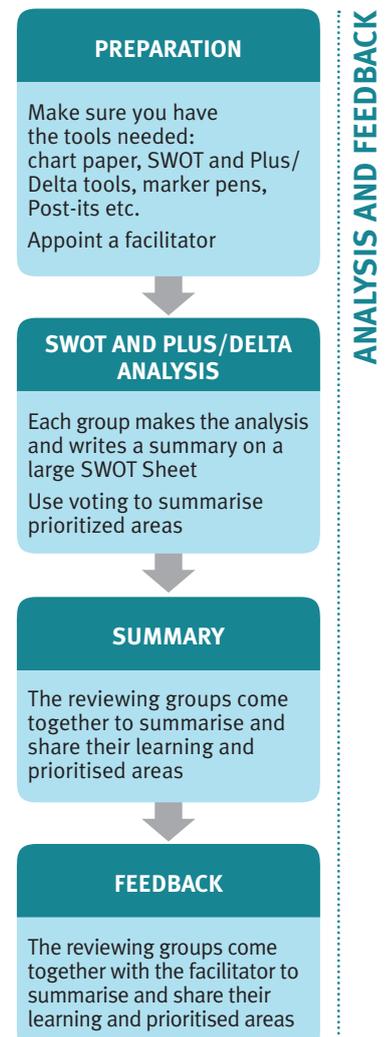
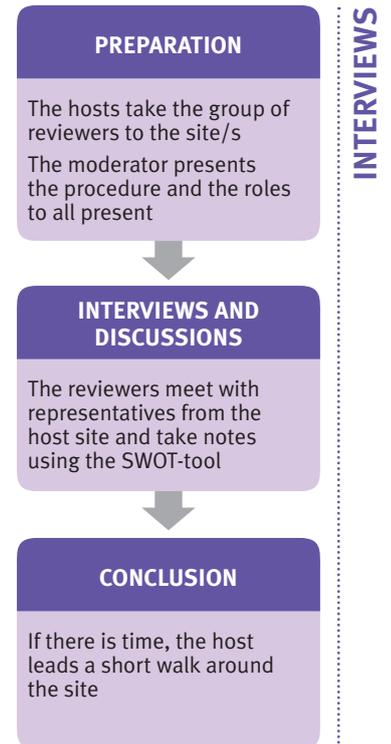
- identify areas of strength and areas of development for the host site.
- create a mutual learning process between the reviewers.

Tools required for this session are:

- Flipchart paper
- SWOT analysis template in size A1; see appendix 1
- plus/delta analysis template in size A1; see appendix 3
- Markers
- Post-it notes in assorted colours
- Sticky tape (or similar) to allow summary information to be pinned up and shared
- Coloured star stickers (or similar) to allow group members to vote for their most preferred issues; provide five to 10 stars to each person

3.1 CFR analysis session (SWOT and plus/delta analysis)

- The SWOT analysis leads to a summary of key areas on large sheets in each group; see appendix 1.
- The plus/delta analysis leads to a summary of key areas on large sheets in each group; see appendix 3.
- The facilitator explains the process of the SWOT- and the plus/delta analysis beforehand; see appendix 4.
- Each reviewers' group will be led by their moderator through the process.
- They fill in the SWOT analysis and the plus/delta analysis templates.
- Voting can be used to summarise the areas with the highest priority as indicated by the coloured star stickers.





3.2 CFR feedback session

Plenary session

- After the analysis session, the reviewees from the reviewed sites in the host city are invited for a coffee break, where they participate in a session to share and discuss the findings from the respective reviewing groups.
- The facilitator explains the method and what happened after the group left the site, reminding participants how ‘critical friends’ should act and give feedback.
- The facilitator explains what will happen now in each group: discussing results, clarifying misunderstandings and so forth.
- The facilitator explains the purpose of the plus/delta analysis.

Group sessions – according to the sites visited

- The reviewers split into groups, and each group is chaired by their moderator.
- The reviewers present the findings of their plus/delta analysis to the reviewees, focussing on the main messages and mentioning other important views.
- After the presentation, there is time to discuss and to talk about the results and what the reviewees and host sites can do as following steps; see appendix 5.
- The facilitator collects the results from the moderated groups, who are prepared to present their findings in the final plenary session.

3.3 CFR lessons learned (plenary session)

During the final plenary session all reviewers and reviewees come together for reflections and mutual learning. All reviewer groups summarise and share their prioritised areas and lessons learned with all other reviewers, the host city and the reviewees.

- This session is conducted by the nominated facilitator.
- Each group consisting of one reviewer and one or two reviewees, presents their lessons learned and areas for development.
- The reviewees should be prepared to provide an initial response or share their feelings on the reviewers’ feedback based on the plus/delta analysis.

REPORTING AND DISSEMINATION

DOCUMENTATION

The host city writes up fair the results of the CFR
If possible the host city writes a comprehensive report

DISTRIBUTION

Make sure all the participants, both from the hosting site/s and the participants of the CFR, receive the documentation

FOLLOW UP

The host city should follow up the CFR after a few weeks

4. After the CFR – reporting and dissemination

All SWOT and plus/delta sheets need to be documented. The host city is responsible for writing up the results and sharing them with:

- the reviewees (host sites) for their learning and development,
- the reviewers, and
- other (local) stakeholders.

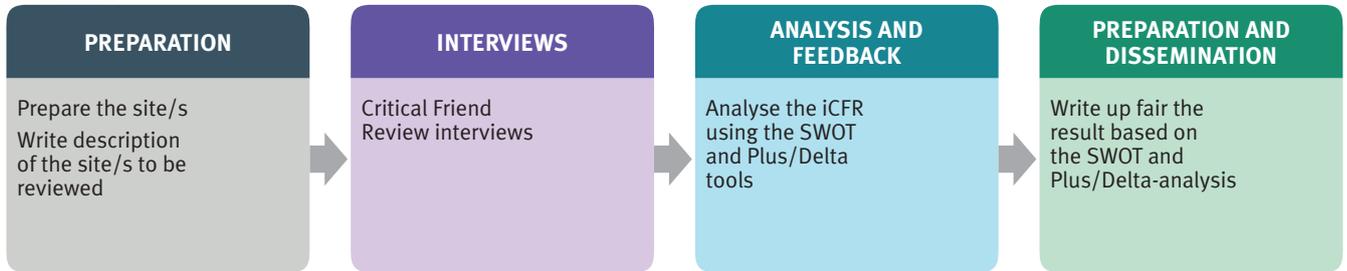
It is recommended that the host city follow up the CFR with the reviewee host sites after several weeks. The reviewers may also share the documentation as well as the report with their local, regional or national stakeholders.

APPENDIX

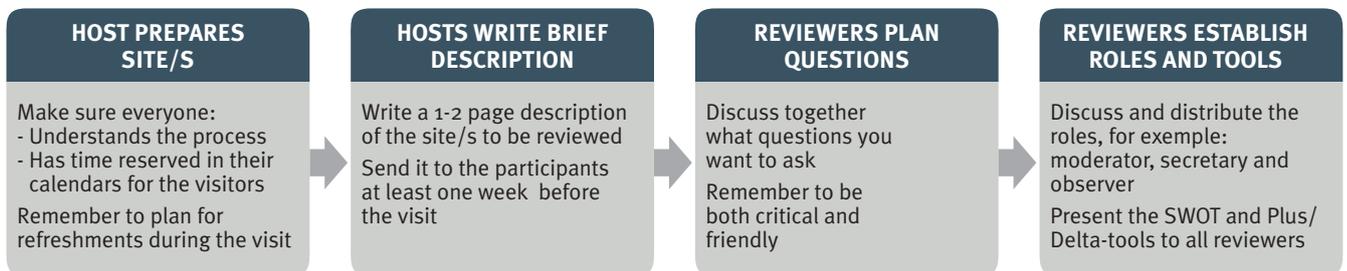
1. PROCESS MAP OF CRITICAL FRIEND REVIEW
2. TEMPLATE 'SWOT ANALYSIS' INCLUDING INSTRUCTIONS
3. TEMPLATE 'PLUS/DELTA ANALYSIS' INCLUDING INSTRUCTIONS
4. PREPARATION OF THE INTERVIEWS FOR THE SWOT ANALYSIS
5. PREPARATION OF THE INTERVIEWS FOR THE PLUS/DELTA ANALYSIS
6. ADDITIONAL CRITICAL FRIEND INFORMATION
7. REFERENCES



APPENDIX 1 Process map of critical friend review



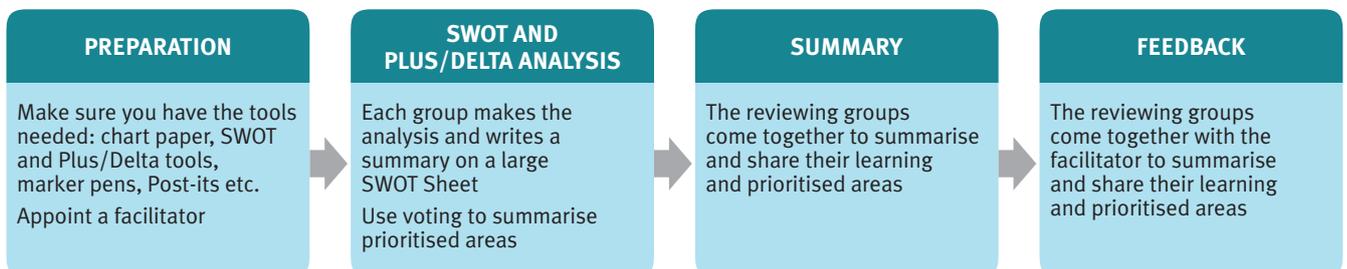
STEP 1: PREPARATION



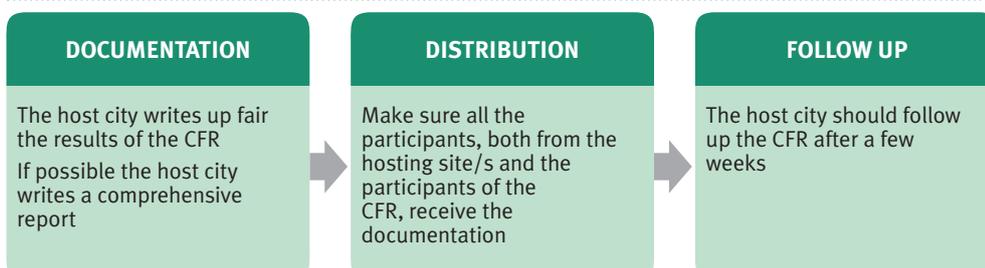
STEP 2: INTERVIEWS



STEP 3: ANALYSIS AND FEEDBACK



STEP 4: REPORTING AND DISSEMINATION



APPENDIX 2 Template 'SWOT analysis'

STRENGTHS

WEAKNESSES

OPPORTUNITIES

THREATS

APPENDIX 3 Template 'plus/delta analysis'

+ PLUS

WHAT IS GOOD AND SHOULD
BE KEPT / REINFORCED?

Δ DELTA

WHAT CAN BE IMPROVED?

APPENDIX 4 Preparation of the interviews for the SWOT analysis

Before the interviews, the reviewers prepare questions which are based on the central questions and address the overall theme.

To ensure the SWOT analysis provides useful outcomes, questions should generate meaningful information for each category (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats).

At the beginning of the interviews, the reviewers introduce themselves (name, city and function) to each of the host city reviewees.

During the interviews, the reviewers take notes, making use of the SWOT analysis document (appendix 1). The notes and document will be useful at a later stage when the results of the interviews are discussed within the framework of the plus/delta analysis in order to give constructive feedback to the host city and the interviewees.

The SWOT analysis can be “useful when qualitatively assessing, for example, the services provided by the project/programme/organisation, relationships between stakeholders and the organisations of the implementing partners, local groups and the project team itself” (IFAD, 2002).

This analysis is useful in various evaluation tasks to collect data, retrieve monitoring information and to conduct an initial analysis in the scoping phase while ‘describing’ a programme. It allows participants to assess a problem in depth and to focus on evaluative questions. During the CFR, the SWOT analysis is carried out only by the reviewers based on the results of the interviews.

1. First, it is important to be clear on what the objective (overall theme, central and specific questions) is, and which team or organisation (contextual information) is being analysed. Once these are clarified and agreed upon, begin with a brainstorm of ideas, and then hone them down and clarify them afterwards in discussion

2. Strengths and weaknesses describe “where the project or organisation is now: the existing resources that can be used immediately and current problems that won’t go away. It can help identify where new resources, skills or allies will be needed” (Start & Hovland, 2004). **Strengths** are “those things that are working well in a project or situation. The aspects people are proud to talk about” (IFAD, 2002) and which differentiate the project/programme/organisation from others. **Weaknesses** are “those things that have not worked well or that the project/programme/organisation is less efficient in than others” (IFAD, 2002).

3. Opportunities and Threats describe “what is going on outside the organisation, or areas which are not yet affecting the strategy but could do” (Start & Hovland, 2004). Opportunities include “ideas on how to overcome weaknesses and build on strengths” (IFAD, 2002) within the environment the project/programme/organisation operates in. Threats are “things that constrain or threaten the range of opportunities for change” in the project/programme/organisation environment.

The results of the SWOT analysis are included in the plus/delta analysis: **strengths** are summarised and described with umbrella terms and listed on the plus side. The **opportunities** and **weaknesses** are structured in the same way and are written down on the delta side.

APPENDIX 5 Preparation of the interviews for the plus/delta analysis

The plus/delta analysis is a quick, simple retrospective which enables continuous improvement and shows respect for hosts (reviewees) by discussing the value of their work or project or their ability to address their central questions.

Using this qualitative evaluation tool appropriately will help develop and sustain the performance of the hosts (reviewees) and potentially that of the reviewers.

The plus/delta analysis can be particularly helpful as a coaching tool when the performance (for instance within a project) decreases – it will help recalibrate the team around their objectives and potentially help them identify new objectives.

Pluses (strengths)

- Identify the things that are working first
- These might be the items the reviewees want to maintain and build upon
- These are also the things that are working for the team

Deltas (opportunities for improvement or weaknesses)

- These are opportunities for improvement, things that can be improved or changed so that team may be more effective
- Deltas should be action oriented and begin with a verb
- Deltas should be specific
- Deltas should be within the realm of possibility
- Deltas should be reviewed and acted upon as soon as possible (recommendation for hosts/ reviewees)

Role of the facilitator/ moderator

1. Explain to the reviewers what the plus/delta analysis is and refer to the items collected during the SWOT analysis:
 - Plus: what brought value and why should it be repeated – what is good (strengths)?
 - Delta: what can be changed or added to bring more value and how can it be done better – what can be improved? It should be focused on the processes and structures rather than on people. The facilitator should be prepared to re-emphasise the objectives of the review (overall theme and questions).
2. Draw a line down the middle of a flip chart or whiteboard, label the top with ‘plus’ and ‘delta’; see template ‘plus/delta analysis’.
3. Ask the reviewers for pluses and deltas. They should start their comments by stating whether it is a plus or a delta.
 - Some groups go around the table so that everyone provides a plus and a delta, others let the group organically respond. If the room remains quiet, wait for a few minutes. You may eventually need to call on some participants to get the exercise started.
 - Encourage all participants to speak up and encourage both deltas and pluses. The intent is to both make improvements and sustain what is working well.
 - Pay attention to the mood of the group. The group must be open and feel safe to speak up.
 - Ask in terms of “Who has another plus or delta?” or “What else?” until it is time to close the session. Then shift the question to “Is there anything else?”
 - Capture these actions on the flip chart. If an action has too many words or is not easy to write, ask the person who said it to rephrase it in a few words.

APPENDIX 6 Additional critical friend information

The supplemental information comes from the publication *Principal class performance and development – support materials, critical friend toolkit*.

What is a 'critical friend'?

A critical friend can be defined as “a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person’s work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to [fully] understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work” (Costa & Kallick, 1993).

The role of the critical friend is therefore a strategic one and can be important in helping hosts improve. It is essentially a role of supporting and challenging one another.

Critical friendship has also been described as less formal than mentoring or coaching and probably best described as “a professional relationship based on mutual regard and the willingness to question and challenge” (NCSL, 2005).

What makes a good critical friend?

An effective critical friend is someone who:

- you trust and respect
- you have a strong relationship with, or believe you could develop a relationship with
- provides honest and critical feedback
- is a skilled observer and listener
- is able to ask provocative/stretch questions
- provides balance between support and challenge
- understands you and/or the institutional context very well or takes the time to develop this understanding
- provides a different perspective/new eyes
- provides critique utilising higher order thinking
- is available.

Critical friends do not:

- assume a directive role
- offer solutions to problems or provide “quick fixes”
- rush to judge
- pretend to know the visited institution better than those in the institution

- impose agendas of their own
- undermine the authority of others.

Working with your critical friend

In working with your critical friend, individuals need to be mindful that:

- confidentiality is essential
- the ‘critical’ aspect relates to the task and the ‘friend’ aspect relates to the individuals as a person
- comments should be seen as professional challenges rather than criticisms
- expectations of each other with regard to availability, commitment to the process, reliability and how progress will be evaluated need to be discussed and agreed
- friends need to own the agenda and take responsibility for preparation and follow-up
- openness to discussions about performance is essential.

Benefits of effective feedback

- Effective feedback does many things, including:
- honouring competence and reinforcing desired behaviours
- helping align expectations and priorities
- filling gaps in knowledge
- enabling people to know where to take corrective action
- alleviating the fear of the unknown

A few simple guidelines for giving effective feedback

Prepare

- Consider the city’s education and the background of the schools and educational institutions visited to tailor feedback to the objectives of the visit
- Determine the best time and place
- Get the information you need
- Determine how to support yourself

Present

- Provide background that led to your feedback (why a certain point of feedback is given) to the schools and institutions reviewed, as well as to the host city
- Offer specific examples
- Explain the impact on the school that is being reviewed and you personally

Listen

- Hear the other person's point of view
- Listen with open ears

Engage in dialogue

- Hold a conversation
- Listen to each other

Plan for action

- Search for solutions that all can agree to

Acknowledge

- Thank the person and acknowledge what you have accomplished together.

Techniques for giving effective feedback

- Be aware of your motive – your only motive should be to be helpful
- Focus on the behaviour, not the person
- Speak for yourself only
- Use “I” not “you”
- Restrict your feedback to things you know for certain

- Focus on descriptions, not judgement
- Choose an appropriate time and place
- Focus on recent behaviour – don't hark back to the past
- Feedback should be lean and precise
- Ensure the other person understands the feedback, accepts it and is able to do something with it
- Always end feedback with a request for future action

Techniques for receiving effective feedback

- Place clear boundaries around the feedback
- Listen carefully to all that is said
- Listen beneath the words
- Ask open questions for clarity
- Explore gently
- Acknowledge the feedback
- Acknowledge the valid points
- Don't defend yourself
- Take time to sort out what you have heard and what you want to do with it
- Express your thanks

APPENDIX 7 References

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