

# **“Being and Having a Critical Friend”**

## **The concept at work.**

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## **Introduction.**

This paper will address three discrete yet connected concepts. It will explore each concept then explain programmes that have been developed to minimise the impact of professional isolation and build leadership capability with being and having a critical friend the strand that ties them together.

## **Concept One - Professional Isolation.**

For the purpose for this paper professional isolation is defined as ‘the feeling of aloneness school leaders may experience brought about by personal, geographic and social factors and the very nature of the role.’ ‘School leaders’ refer to principals and/or senior or middle leadership teams in New Zealand primary and secondary schools.

While much is written on this concept in international literature, this paper will focus on two New Zealand based studies.

### Study One.

Cubbitt and Burt (2002) investigated the links between leadership style and occupational stress. In this study data were collected from a sample of 293 New Zealand primary schools, with a focus on the relationship between leadership style and stress. The authors predicted that loneliness would be a significant factor and therefore included it as a variable in their data collection and analysis process.

Their project was timely in that a revised structure for managing schools *Administering for Excellence* had been adopted in the policy document *Tomorrows Schools* and had been implemented and embedded in New Zealand schools. This change was reflected in the changed role of principals who became leaders of autonomous, self managing units with a Board of Trustees setting and managing the strategic direction of the school through its policies and governance role. For many principals this was a significant change of role, expectation and work load. Many principals through their unions and sector groups were reporting raised levels of stress. Cubbitt and Burt’s research was designed ‘to examine the relationship of leadership orientation and professional isolation (loneliness) to the work factors that primary principals perceive as stressful’. (p159)

This study identified the shift in requirements and the need for principals to balance the desire to be an educational leader with the necessity of school administration as a critical stress factor for principals. It asked whether the manner in which this is managed by principals is related to their leadership orientation? Leadership style was measured on two dimensions – task orientated and people orientated and it was predicted and proven that principal’s leadership style would influence the degree to which they found various occupational factors to be stressful. The issue of principal loneliness was also examined, with the prediction that loneliness would be a significant predictor of occupational stress.

The evidence from this study supported this prediction and drew a strong association between loneliness and stress. Other factors considered were staff dynamics, interpersonal relationships, work-load and levels of responsibility.

The study concluded that:

Primary principals were shown to be an occupational group working reasonably long hours and experiencing significant levels of emotional exhaustion in their positions. It is clear from this research that work over- load and professional isolation play a significant role in the development of occupational stress. Further research is needed to investigate causal links between professional isolation and occupational stress in order to develop a deeper understanding of the stressor-strain relationship. (167).

The need for further investigation into aspects of professional isolation in the New Zealand setting was highlighted in this study and contributed to the initiation of study two.

### Study Two

The second study set out to further understand the concept of professional isolation from an empirical base, clarify a definition, and explore the effect it may have on practice, the factors that contribute to and what might help minimise its impact. Leitch (2006).

In this study, data were collected via taped interviews with principals from a representative group relating to the northern region of the South Island of New Zealand. The sample equated to 37.5% of the schools in the region and included primary and secondary schools of different size, decile rating, geographic location, and male and female principals with varying years of principal experience. Findings from the analysis and synthesis of this data were organised into themes around impact and consequences of professional isolation and factors that may contribute to and help minimise its impact.

### Definition

The confirmed definition arising from this study was ‘The feeling of aloneness that school leaders may experience brought about by personal, geographic and social factors and the very nature of the role’.

### Impact on practice

Principals spoke of the impact to their practice in terms of personal and professional costs and their ability to perform in a leadership capacity. They spoke of reverting to management rather than leadership tasks and that the everyday demands of principalship became more difficult. They expressed a reluctance to take risks and be innovative when feeling professionally isolated. Personal stress levels became high with health issues following. The impact on their home, families and social life included taking school issues home with them, withdrawing from social interaction, preoccupation with things other than family and lack of awareness of other people’s issues.

### Contributing factors

According to the principals in this study, factors that contributed to the feelings of professional isolation were largely due to the very nature of the job – the demands

around the complexity of requirements, the expectations placed on the school leader from within and beyond the school, the degree of confidentiality required within the job and internal and external organisational factors.

### Minimising the impact

Factors that principals said helped support them through this period of professional isolation included the personal skills and attributes they have or learn and the moral and ethical base from which they operate. Readiness to seek and accept support before crisis time was seen as critical and the most commonly mentioned factor was 'being and staying networked.' Principals commented that it was too late to accept support via a network or a significant other once in crisis mode saying these support structures needed to be in place and available before they were needed .

The sample group in this study applies to one geographic region and the information gained from it concurs with and adds to that from the Cubbitt and Burt study and is focussed on the New Zealand context.

## **Concept two - Building Leadership Capability**

### Impact on learning

In their publication of review and synthesis of research entitled 'How leadership influences student learning' Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) claim that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all the school related factors that contribute to what and how students learn at school. They urge that "We need to be developing leaders with large repertoires of practices and the capacity to chose from that repertoire as needed, not leaders trained in the delivery of one 'ideal' set of practices." (p 10) They claim that by setting directions, developing people and making the organisational structures work, leaders will have a significant impact on student learning.

Mulford and Silins (2003) also write of the need to establish in schools a distributed and transformational leadership model. They report on an Australian study in secondary schools – 'The leadership for organisational learning and student outcomes' (LOLSO) which addresses the need to extend present understandings of school reform initiatives that aim to change school practices with the intention of supporting enhanced student learning. The study exposes four implications for schools. The first is that leadership that makes a difference is both position-based (head teacher) and distributive (administrative team and teachers) and while the influences on student learning are indirect they are significant. The second implication is that successful school reform is all about development and, therefore, learning. Effective leadership moves from a 'telling' to 'selling' to 'participating' to 'delegating' style. The third implication from this study is that the context for leadership and school reform must be taken into account. Variables such as socio-economic status, home environment and school size have a clear interactive effect on leadership, the school and student outcomes. The fourth implication is the need to broaden what counts for effective education beyond academic achievement. Factors such as self concept which are proven indicators of success in later life need to be incorporated into success criteria for students while they are at school.

### Professional development for leadership

Waters and Grubb (2004) define McRel's knowledge taxonomy and the four types of knowledge that define a leadership framework. They suggest that professional development programmes for leaders should focus on all four types of knowledge – contextual, experiential, declarative and procedural. Given this knowledge, leaders will make evidence informed decisions and be sustained through their role. School leaders need professional support to develop these understandings.

Robinson (2004) writes of a shift in leadership practice from generic to educational related practices and a move from heroic to distributed leadership. She highlights the need for school leaders to engage in professional development that will help them understand and adapt to these concepts. Those new to principalship as well as more experienced principals, benefit from learning about and understanding of how patterns of leadership should be adapted in response to the school type and context. School leaders moving from one context to another need support in developing these understandings and mentoring as they work through these changes.

These studies, and many others, indicate that leadership is the factor that largely determines the 'success' of a school and has a direct impact on the teaching and learning within the school. Building leadership capability is too important to be left to chance.

### Micro skills

Underpinning these larger concepts of leadership patterns are the skills and strategies which sit within and around the macro understandings. These skills must be learned and practiced by school leaders in order to operate successfully and they need quality professional support and coaching to enable this skills base to develop.

An example of such practice would be making evidence informed decisions. Earl and Katz (2006) write of data being a compelling force in improving schools. But using data is a relatively new activity in education that is not always a comfortable one for educators. They acknowledge that -

There was a time in education when decisions were based on the best judgments of the people in authority. It was assumed that school leaders, as professionals in the field, had both the responsibility and the right to make decisions about students, schools and even about education more broadly. In the past several decades, a great deal has changed. Education, like many other fields, is awash with data. Like many others in society, educators are trying to come to grips with this vast deluge of new and unfiltered information and to find ways to transform data into information, then into knowledge, and ultimately into constructive action. (p.2)

School leaders need to become confident and competent in working with interpreting and using data. Having the capacity for leading schools in a data rich world requires that leaders develop an inquiry habit of mind, become data literate, and create a culture of inquiry. These skills are best learned and practiced in a collaborative way.

Listening skills is another example of a discrete and important skill needing to be learned and practised. Wesley (2004) writes “Developing the ability to listen is a valuable skill for principals – empathetic listening changes the dynamic of control and opens up new possibilities”. Leaders frequently find themselves in the role of telling, finding solutions and offering answers. Learning to listen and how to be wholly present for colleagues, parents and authorities may not come naturally to all principals and might need to be nurtured.

#### Collaboration.

Addressing the importance of collaboration in strengthen professional development, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Karhanek (2004) write of ‘the need to begin to systematically harness the power of collective intelligence that lies within and beyond the individual school in order to solve problems and build the ongoing capacity for recognising and implementing wise practice.’ They describe collaboration in terms of people working interdependently to achieve common goals. People working in this way learn from each other and create a momentum towards continuous improvement. Creating and fostering learning communities is the most effective way of enabling deep and sustained learning. This collaboration can occur within and between schools.

Leitch et al (2005) conducted a study into professional networks and how they support leadership development. The outcomes of this study affirmed the initial hypothesis that networks form for different purposes and serve different purposes all of which are important. The study identified four models of networks:–

Model 1 – social - for example phone, email or personal exchanges on a collegial base.

Model 2 - groups with a specific focus – for example unions, sports teams, cluster groups.

Model 3 - groups that form with a particular focus- for example a particular role such as middle/senior leadership or curriculum responsibility or focus.

Model 4- networks that focus on building leadership capability - such as professional learning groups.

The study explored the levels of learning relating to each model and affirmed that deep, sustained learning occurs at a level that would directly impact on the educative purpose and practice in schools in model 4. The level of commitment of the group members as well as the content and facilitation required for this model to be successful is high. Collaboration within and beyond the group meetings was seen to be important and effective in building and sustaining learning communities.

The importance of collaboration in building leadership capability cannot be overlooked.

### **Concept three - the Critical Friend**

What is meant by the term “critical friend”? Because it is a dynamic, evolving, responsive, ambiguous and relationship – based concept it is difficult to define.

Costa and Kallick (1993) have described a critical friend as

A trusted other who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes 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. (p50).

They draw the comparison between the schooling sector where the art of criticism is not embedded and other sectors such as the theatre and literature where critique is seen as habitual and part of growth.

Swaffield (2003) refers to visual and auditory analogies such as 'a professional sounding board' and 'someone who offers a fresh pair of eyes and a detached viewpoint', 'a listening ear' 'the reflective mirror' to come to an explanation. Swaffield writes:

So by attending to the descriptions found in literature we build up a picture of a friend as someone who not only sees the school from a different perspective from those within the school, but also assists them to bring the familiar into focus. The critical friend's viewpoint has credibility if it is informed by an understanding of the situation, developed through listening as well as observation. (p5).

The concept of critique is explored in Swaffield's writing and explained as aspect of investigation that falls into Bloom's highest order of thinking.

#### What does the critical friend do?

Rather than seek to define the concept precisely, understanding develops as one examines what a critical friend does. A critical friend will sometimes offer support. They may empathise, affirm, endorse, sustain, comfort, approve or reassure. A critical friend may sometimes offer challenge. They may critique, prompt, clarify, debate, redefine, motivate or initiate actions. The chosen response will depend on factors such as timing, the context, the degree of urgency, the situation and the perceived need as well as the depth of the relationship that has been built within the partnership. As the process continues to deepen each person develops a sense of shared responsibility, dual commitment, equality and understanding of roles and a skills base builds enabling appropriate responses. Another factor for consideration is the phases the interaction may move through – from initiation to negotiation, action and withdrawal. These five factors of support, challenge, relationship, timing and phases interact and intertwine to make the process a living, dynamic ever-changing and challenging concept.

#### What makes the relationship work?

A synthesis of experiencing the concept in practice, monitoring of the process at work and literature would suggest that five categories underpin the work, conduct and characteristics of a critical friend. The first of these is an understanding of the role. Each person acknowledges the need to work between roles of being the critic, challenger, listener and/or catalyst for change. The critical friend must develop skills of questioning, prompting and responding, build up a knowledge of and empathy for their colleague's situation and seek to enhance their personal and interpersonal skills

in order to interpret and synthesise direct and indirect messages offered by the other. Personal attitudes, beliefs and values contribute to the quality of the interactions.

When might the relationship not work? The process will be a risk if and when the roles have not been clarified and understood and the responses continue not to meet the needs of the other. If all that is gained from the interaction is platitudes and consolations, no one gains from the experience. The skilled critical friend accepts the complexity of the role and adapts their responses to the situation, learning from it themselves as well as helping their colleague.

If the skills base of either within the partnership is low and does not improve with practice, the process will lack depth and meaning. Continuous development of known skills and learning of new ones such as higher order questioning and active listening serves to enhance the process and enables the transfer and application of those skills to other contexts and situations.

The concept may not work if there is a sense of low trust between the partners. Bryke and Schneider (2002) in writing of relational trust reinforce the need for respect, competence, integrity and personal regard for others as essential factors in building a high trust culture. It takes time and involvement for this degree of trust to develop in a partnership especially if the relationship is new. Therefore both partners need to have a shared commitment to the process and ensure frequent, meaningful exchanges or the process is at risk of degenerating as relationships may not build to a high trust level and the skills level will not advance.

Timperley and Robinson (2002) write of the importance of task and purpose in the forming and sustaining of relationships, suggesting that in the absence of task there is little motivation for participants to act in partnership. If task and purpose is missing or unclear in the interaction between critical friends there is the potential for the exchange to be at a surface or incidental level and not contribute to deep learning or sustained change to practice.

At times there may be a conflict of needs between the partners resulting in the inability to respond in the manner needed by each other. If one person in the relationship is in a vulnerable position themselves they may not be able to provide the support or challenge for their partner. Recognition of and sensitivity to ones own personal space and that of the partner is necessary.

Confusion and misinterpretation of the critical friend concept is common and has the potential for misinformed practice. Within any chosen definition and observation of the concept at work, discrete elements are apparent. At any time in the process there may be elements of coaching or counselling, mentoring or facilitating, advising or supervision and collegial support of a formal or informal nature. But the critical friend concept is bigger, deeper, richer and potentially more vibrant than any one of those individual roles. The concept also appears to be fraught with contradiction - sometimes the critical friend will be acting as critic while being a friend - at times offering support but also challenging - maybe soothing but aware of the need to provoke. This may appear to be impossible but it is the richness of this ever-changing, challenging, dynamic relationship and complexity that makes it so effective.

### **The concept at work**

How and where is the critical friend concept applied and seen to be effective and valuable?

#### Reflective practice.

Stewart (2002) writes:-

Responsible educational leaders are constantly matching performance and belief, and as a consequence adjusting their own behaviour to better achieve the desired outcomes. Reflective critique, catalogued within a portfolio process can both clarify the process for the participant and provide substantive evidence of thinking and acting for a third party.

Barth (2001) also writes about the importance of reflective practice and refers to the importance of a significant other in the reflective process. The building of a critical friend relationship is an integral part of deepening the process. The value of seeing a critical incident or significant moment through a different lens cannot be dismissed.

Effective models of reflective practice will include the step of 'comments from a colleague' and this exchange if structured and meaningful will strengthen the process of reflecting forward to determine "how might I do things differently next time?"

#### School Improvement

Swaffield (2002) has researched the role of the link adviser and head-teacher and asks what makes for positive and productive relationships between head-teachers and Local Education Advisers acting as critical friends and if indeed it was possible to fulfil this complex role of being an adviser and a critic. The conclusion from this study is that despite the difficulties and complexities of the role if advisers and head teachers are given the skills with which to engage in the process it may not be 'mission impossible' and would lead to enhanced practice and school improvement.

Swaffield and MacBeath (2005) write of the role of the 'critical friend' in school self evaluation and focus their paper around the developing clarity of understandings of the relationship between critical friends and school self-evaluation in order for it to be effective and valuable and to remain divorced from political agendas. They define school self evaluation as 'something that schools do to themselves, by themselves and for themselves.' (p239). The paper explores the assumptions that 'schools are more likely to improve when they enjoy external support' and debate the complexities of a critical friend relationship that may be imposed or self selected. They write 'Whether invited, proposed or imposed, critical friends come with a remit, a focus, or in some cases only a set of under elaborated assumptions about what they are there to do and where the boundaries of their intervention lie.' (p240). They suggest that given clarity of expectations and role support from a critical friend is of benefit to school improvement.

#### Supervision programmes

Dillanski (2004) writes of supervision programmes for beginner teachers and the importance of a significant other. The report explores the importance and effectiveness of quality supervision programmes and the role of the critical friend in these programmes. The report highlights the importance of co-operative development

that is described as ‘a process of fostering teacher growth through systematic collaboration with peers’. Dillanski refers to Costa and Kallick (1993) and their belief that a critical friend enhances the co-operative supervisory role.

It would appear then that the potential for use of the concept of critical friend is varied and diverse and an appropriate strategy for inclusion in a variety of contexts.

### **The concept at work in the New Zealand context.**

The programmes described below are a synthesis of the three concepts explored in this paper – building leadership capability, minimising professional isolation and the role of the critical friend. Being and having a critical friend is the tread that binds them together.

#### Critical friend

A definition that best captures the essence of critical friend as applied in the context described below is - A trusted other who is available and skilled at evaluating analysing, supporting and challenging a professional colleague and who invites the same for themselves. In this context the role of being and having a critical friend conveys a sense and responsibility for the duality of the role, a relationship of equality and continuous commitment to one’s colleague who has either been self selected or negotiated as part of a functioning relationship for the designated purpose.

#### The context.

The Centre for Educational Management (CEL) is part of Support Services of the College of Education, Christchurch, New Zealand. Leadership and Management Advisers are contracted by the Ministry of Education to provide professional support for school leaders. Teams of Leadership and Management Advisers are attached to different institutions across New Zealand. They work with first time and experienced principals, middle and senior leaders, classroom teachers and Boards of Trustees in both primary and secondary schools across their dedicated region. The CEL team operates across the northern region of the South Island of New Zealand. While there is a degree of autonomy in the way each team of Leadership and Management Advisers work, there is also direction from the Ministry of Education. A leadership framework has been developed in collaboration between advisers and the ministry and it is expected that in their work, advisers will be promoting the theoretical underpinning of this framework. The key elements of the framework are evidenced-informed decision making, contextual knowledge, leading and managing change, relationship building and systems management. Advisers are directed to work with schools at risk, first time principals, aspiring principals and principals and leadership teams who are leading school improvement. The focus for leadership and management advisers is on building leadership capability across the sector.

Based on these expectations and in response to a growing recognition of the concepts of professional isolation, the importance of networking, facilitating deep sustained learning and the potential benefits of the critical friend concept, a self review of the way in which the CEL leadership and management advisers work resulted in the development of a new approach and new programmes.

### The process of change

Initially it was important to study further and to ensure a collective and deep understanding within CEL members of all the concepts that would be inherent in these programmes. This was developed through shared reading, debate and professional dialogue as well as ongoing reading and personal contact with key writers and other professionals familiar with the concept.

CEL members also drew on their previous studies into reflective practice and the importance of keeping a reflective journal, the impact of professional readings as an effective development strategy and the power of co-construction in setting and achieving personal and professional goals. An earlier study (2003) had provided clear guidelines to the expectations school leaders had of their Leadership and Management Advisers across the region and confirmed that leaders were looking for informed, well presented professional input as well as quality facilitation and management of professional development opportunities.

In 2004, a review of the professional appraisal process for advisers in the CEL team was undertaken. A process which came to be known as Self Negotiated Action Plan (SNAP) was trialled in the team and then implemented in selected schools. This approach to appraisal strengthened the developmental aspect of appraisal and reduced the suspicion of the compliance aspect. It was designed to give participants a greater degree of ownership and responsibility for their performance and development and applied best practice to the concept of self improvement. In this process, groups are formed of 4 to 6 advisers who meet as a professional learning community and critical friends are selected from within the group. The groups meet every 4 – 6 weeks. At these meetings, professional dialogue at an in depth level focussing on teaching and learning is triggered by professional readings, observation and reflection of practice, and sharing of critical incidents. Individual goal setting is followed up by peer interaction between critical friends between meetings. Tasks include supporting and challenging their peer in meeting the goals, validation of outcomes and discussion around selected aspects of practice. Key concepts within this process include being and having a critical friend, the keeping of a reflective journal, sharing of issues and successes. This leads to a greater degree of collaboration, understanding of each other and professional challenge. The programme was piloted with a rigorous strand of research alongside it. It is now operating successfully in many schools, the CEL team and throughout Christchurch College of Education Support Services. Understandings around the key concepts deepened through this initiative.

In 2005 a synthesis of understandings around the importance and potential of the role of the critical friend in minimising the impact of professional isolation and building leadership capabilities in school leaders, lead to the design and piloting of a programme that met the needs and expectations of school leaders and incorporated key aspects of wise practice. This programme is now known as “Building Leadership Capability through Professional Partnerships” and is operating across the CEL region, facilitated by Leadership and Management Advisers.

### The programme

The basic shape and content of the programme was designed and piloted and is constantly under review to ensure it meets the needs of participants. There is a degree of consistency in the programme as it is implemented with different groups although

the content of the coaching sessions is designed to meet different contexts. The groups include principals from different schools (Model A), communities of smaller rural schools with teaching principals (Model B), leadership teams within and between schools (Model C) and groups of potential principals and aspiring leaders (Model D).

The programme is designed to meet the levels of learning, commitment from the group members, enhanced collaboration and quality of content and expert facilitation as defined in the study of professional networks. Leitch et al (2005). The core components of the programme are reflective practice and keeping a reflective journal, coaching in leadership against the leadership framework, guided professional readings, goal setting, and planned intersession tasks and developing the skills that enhance the role of critical friend. Critical friends are selected from within the group and a focus on what it means to be and have a critical friend is ongoing. At the introductory session for each group this aspect is supported by professional reading around the concept and case studies that explore the potential value of the concept. At each of the following sessions the concept is reviewed and further coaching given. Group participants are asked to monitor the effectiveness of the responses they receive from their critical friend as a way of strengthening practice. Interaction between critical friends occurs as part of each session as well as between the sessions. For this relationship to be effective, several factors are recognised. Compatibility within the partnership is important and must be given time to establish. It may take two years for the understandings of the concept, the sense of trust and empathy for each other's context to develop and frequency of contact is necessary. Consistency of group membership and their sense of commitment to the group are essential. The role of the facilitator in coaching and supporting skills development as well as organisation of the group meetings is critical.

Each session follows a set format of:-

- Acceptance of an agreed group protocol defining professional trust, integrity, confidentiality and equality.
- Impact report – what has changed to practice since last session?
- Critical reflection – the sharing of a critical incident or significant moment.
- Coaching in the skills and practices of leadership.
- Learning and practising skills of critical friendship.
- Guided professional reading.
- Goal setting.
- Planned intersession exchange tasks with a critical friend.
- Follow- up visits from the adviser.

Groups meet once or twice a term with a Leadership and Management Adviser as the facilitator. The keeping and sharing of reflective journals is an expectation and follows a clearly understood format that includes comments from a colleague. It is also an expectation that skills and strategies learned in the coaching sessions will be applied within the school setting and will be shared with others back in the school setting.

#### Model A - Principals.

Groups are formed of between 4 and 8 participants and consideration is given to the composition of the groups. Participants in each group are not necessarily from the

same school size or type or geographic location nor do they share length of experience in the role. What has proven to be of significance is compatibility of personalities, operating styles and philosophy base. The adviser relies on their knowledge of the participants when forming the groups and members are consulted for their consent and opinions. In some instances the pairing of critical friends within the group is achieved by self selection and in some instances the adviser may suggest the combination. Participants may know each other well or be relative strangers. This appears to have little significance to the success of the pairings as long as there is a developing sense of professional trust and the concept is well understood. The groups often meet in the various schools, rotating the venue for each session and visit each others schools for the critical friend interactions. Participants acknowledge that unless this is made to happen it stays as a good idea and they seldom step inside their colleagues schools. They reinforce the value in gaining familiarity of their colleagues' places of work as this helps towards understanding and empathy when fulfilling their mutual role of critical friend. The facilitated meetings are usually of half day duration and in many cases the group continues into the afternoon on topics of their own choosing and sharing of good practice or common developments. The content focus for these groups is around advancing their capabilities around the leadership framework, enhancing their skills base and keeping current through professional readings and sharing of wise practice. A collaborative approach to initiating and developing new initiatives, for example electronic student management systems, often results from these discussions. Critical friend interaction and support often extends beyond the context of the programme.

#### Model B - Communities of Schools

In this model, each group consists of three or four smaller schools, with principals who have a teaching component to their job, and at least one other teacher from their school. The group will therefore consist of three or four teaching principals and three or four classroom teachers. The content for these groups is similar to that of the leadership teams (model C) and recognises that in these schools the principal is closer to the curriculum and classroom than their colleagues in larger schools and smaller schools rely on all teaching staff to work in close collaboration and with shared commitment to the direction of the school. In this model critical friends may be formed within the individual school or between the schools, their role is the same – to support and challenge each other.

#### Model C - Leadership Teams

In this model leadership teams from within the school, including the principal meet as a professional learning group with the focus on developing the concept of shared and distributed leadership within their school. The coaching sessions focus on learning and practising skills around relationship building, leading change, contextual knowledge and systems management (the leadership framework) as a team. The particular focus for 2006 is evidenced informed decision making based on effective use of student achievement data. In this model reflection is enhanced through the storytelling technique – teachers finding and telling stories about how teacher practice has influenced student learning.

#### Model D - Aspiring Principals

In this programme, middle and senior leaders in schools either self select or are nominated by a principal as potential or aspiring principals. They meet as a group

once each school term with an adviser as their facilitator. The core components of the programme are similar to other models with the content focussing on the skills and attributes needed for principalship. An essential component of this programme is the mentoring and ongoing support from a principal as well as their critical friend chosen from within the group. Follow up visits from the adviser to each participant ensures the goals set and their personal action plans are advanced in a meaningful way. The adviser also coaches and supports the mentoring principal.

In each of these programmes there is the opportunity for participants to link development goals and the process to their appraisal. Not all participants choose to do so but when this is the case an extra step is put in place with meetings with the Board of Trustees Chair or representatives, the principal and adviser. Goals set during the process are linked to the professional standards and contribute to the compliance aspect of the appraisal process.

### Monitoring effectiveness

How can CEL be assured that the programmes are successful? Firstly the programme as a whole and the groups that are formed are constantly under self and peer review. The facilitators meet regularly to critique the content, facilitation and effectiveness of the process. Adjustments are made as required. Where possible an adviser colleague acts as a critical friend and sits in on sessions as an independent observer collecting data against indicators of success. Facilitators are open to challenge and critique from a range of sources including invited 'experts' and maintain a culture of reflective critique to their work.

Other forms of review include group members undertaking and sharing their mid and end of year review of the process. An external view of the process is provided from the Education Review Office when it audits individual schools and their processes including professional development and appraisal systems and practices. Another source of information comes from unsolicited comments from individual participants. Comments such as "It's the best form of professional development I have had for a long time" and "The benefits of the critical friend aspect lasts way beyond the sessions" and "We all know these things need to happen – like supporting each other and getting into other schools – but unless someone or something makes it happen, it doesn't!" are assuring that the process is effective.

### **Conclusion**

The theme for this conference is *Theory to Practice*. This paper addresses three pieces of theory – Building Leadership Capability, Professional Isolation and The Role of the Critical Friend. It shows how these three discrete theories have been combined into the practice of *Building Leadership Capability through Professional Partnerships programmes* that operate in a New Zealand setting.

The role of school leadership is complex and too important to ignore. It cannot be assumed that leaders have the innate capacity and skills to lead effectively. Professional support and development is an essential element in building leadership capability for leaders in an increasingly demanding role.

Many principals experience the feeling of professional isolation at some time in their career and often it catches them by surprise. Effective and supportive networks are essential in helping leaders deal with the impact of this factor. These networks and support structures need to be set in place before the need is apparent. An essential part of the Leadership and Management Adviser role is to facilitate and manage these support structures.

The title of this paper is *Being and Having a Critical Friend*. This paper explores how the role of the critical friend, used and supported appropriately, is the thread that weaves through practice giving it depth, rigour and sustainability.

The role of a 'significant other' in supporting and challenging educational leaders is significant. With training, skilled facilitation and a secure framework "*Being and Having a Critical Friend*" supports the development of high quality leadership and minimises the impact of professional isolation.

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