

Bringing steadiness in uncertain times: strategies for being an academic's 'critical friend' in the post REF period

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Post REF 2014, academics are required to deliver ever more 'excellent' and 'impactful' research. Shifts in publishing requirements (e.g. Open Access) and increased competition for prestigious funding place further pressures on the research community. As a result research management professionals face increasing challenges to support academics in this pressured and uncertain environment.

Acting as a 'critical friend', research managers can help **navigate** academics through the unsteadiness and produce high quality research with impact. Experience of adopting this approach at **Coventry University** has led to **stronger academic engagement, early dialogue about upcoming bids and higher quality proposals**. This poster outlines the strategies and skills for successful critical friendship, shifting from a service role to a partner in the production of research.

1: Support without hand-holding

- ✓ Be realistic about needs, time and what's achievable
- ✓ Discuss and establish acceptance for being a 'critical friend'; set the context in which to offer constructive feedback
- ✓ Be clear on the role you're playing (e.g. lay reviewer)
- ✓ Offer tools and feedback rather than prescribing solutions.
- ✓ Encourage an open environment where new ideas and perspectives will more easily develop

Skill development: Mentoring and coaching techniques, assertiveness, self reflection

2: Be a confident expert

- ✓ Be the non-subject expert (e.g. funder strategies, rules and priorities)
- ✓ Recognise that lay expertise is as important as subject expertise.
- ✓ Develop an authentic critical style
- ✓ Be an informed partner in the research process

Skill development: Build confidence through experience, shadowing others and reflecting on successes and failures

3: Understand and balance competing goals

- ✓ Understand the goals of the funder; the academic and the University.
- ✓ Recognise and address the tensions between these.
- ✓ Act as an intermediary to balance competing priorities
- ✓ Reframe and align goals to establish the best route forward

Skill development: Listening, reflecting and negotiating to help mediate conflicting goals

4: Support impact: Get them to the 'Why'

- ✓ Enable academics to position the work in a broader context and establish the contribution it makes
- ✓ Offer expert insight into associated funder impact goals
- ✓ Assess the viability of planned impact pathways, drawing on project management and partnership relation skills

Skill development: Questioning and clarification techniques, project management, partnership building/client relationship skills

5: Judge the type of friend needed

- ✓ All academics are different: determine the scale of support needs of each. Some will only need a map, some directions, and some will need driving.
- ✓ Discuss scope and boundaries of critique they need
- ✓ Apportion your time and resources accordingly
- ✓ Seek to empower and upskill colleagues
- ✓ Develop trust with each academic

Skill development: Appraisal skills, discussion and negotiation, clarity on own skills, training and development skills

6: Be a strong and committed friend

- ✓ Engage with academics early to build trust and common goals
- ✓ Be flexible, tailoring support to academics and projects.
- ✓ Be flexible to changing needs across a project lifetime.
- ✓ Deliver on all promises
- ✓ Offer supportive critique which positively steers the research, even when not positively received

Skill development: Time management, resource planning, client relations

Summary

Reflecting and modifying existing practice enhances research management- academic relations which in turn enhances the overall quality of research. Critical commentary is valuable, but a range of person-centred skills can help research managers negotiate such potentially challenging situations. Critical friend strategies can easily be adopted and translated with minimal resources and strategic leads can support both experienced and new staff to develop such reflective skills.