

# Colophon

© 2023 Nathalie Gumbs & Alexander Grit | Noordboek

Design: Hermen Grasman Ontwerp

ISBN 978 94 6471 038 0  
NUR 801

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“ The method does not provide an immediate solution, but it does make you think more carefully about what you are doing. Where am I going? What do I want? ”

#### The mission of the Professorship Entrepreneurship in Transition

- Contributing to a society in which everyone counts, participates and is future-proof;
- Strengthening the entrepreneurial capacity of individuals, organisations and regions through research on entrepreneurial competencies;
- Developing models for the optimal development of these competencies.

## Foreword

As the authors of the book, we are delighted to present this activity book to you. It is intended for three target groups:

- 1 Critical friends
- 2 Teachers of vocational, professional and academic education
- 3 Workshop managers

The Professorship Entrepreneurship in Transition - a collaboration between Hanzehogeschool and Alfa-college - has conducted five years of research into the use and effects of the Critical Friend Method. We are extremely enthusiastic and pleased with the results obtained. In a short period, the method has been applied at a large number of workshops at a national and international level. In addition, it has become a best practice of Interreg Europe.

The strength of the system lies in the network. That is why it is important to regard 'critical friend' as a verb. You are not a critical friend on your own but only in relation to someone else. The French philosopher Nancy described many forms of being (-with). For us, this means being with others in a meaningful way.

Below are comments from some participants who used the method in text boxes. We would like to thank the participants of the method for their feedback.

As compilers of this how-to-do book, we wish you lots of *being* with critical friends.

We would like to thank Hermen Grasman, Maaïke de Jong, Patricia van der Schaaf, Paul Lynch, Eveline Vente, Ciska Henstra and O2Lab North for their contribution. Moreover, we would like to thank all the critical friends from the last five years who help us refine the method.

**Alexander Grit en Natalie Gumbs**

# Introduction

In this book, we will introduce you to a method and a way of thinking that fits the present time; a time of connection, discovery and self-determination. The Critical Friend Method connects people and ideas.

The Critical Friend Method gives you a new perspective on your challenge. In addition, the method invites you to take an entrepreneurial and investigative approach. The critical friend helps you gain insight into your challenges. But being a critical friend is also attractive for gaining insight into other people's worlds. Worlds that existed behind closed doors now become visible. In addition, as a critical friend, you learn to contribute objectively and constructively to someone else's problems. Working on each other's challenges creates a rewarding feeling.

**Anyone can become a critical friend simply by learning a few techniques. With practice, you will gradually become better.**

With the help of this book and training, you will learn:

- 1 How to become a critical friend.
- 2 How to positively shape your challenges using the Critical Friend Method.

This book consists of three parts; the first part is the Critical Friend Training, through which you become a recognised critical friend and learn how to use critical friends when faced with challenges. The second part shows how to integrate the method into manageable models in practice. The third part shows how to use the method sustainably within workshops/organisations.

**“I find non-solution thinking very refreshing and liberating. I had to think about it: how do I ask a question?”**

Society is on the move. The economy is increasingly interconnected. For different types of graduates, this means working together in crossovers, and in multidisciplinary teams. Graduates will function to a greater or lesser degree as connectors and change agents. The Critical Friend Method fits into this society on the move because society faces several challenging transitions: such as from analogue to digital and from linear to circular.

# 1

## The Critical Friend Method

In this chapter, we will elaborate on the Critical Friend Method. You will learn what the purpose of the Critical Friend Method is and the various roles embedded in the

method. Then we will proceed to work on the various steps of the Critical Friend Method. The Critical Friend Method in short:

Schematic representation of the Critical Friend Method.



Someone has a question/problem/challenge.



But it does not get solved on its own.



Engages in conversations with critical friends.



Ideas for the next step.

# “ Meeting and helping each other, that's what I like about the Critical Friend Method

## One conversation proved to be incredibly helpful

“Through the minor I was studying, I came into contact with Alexander Grit, co-developer of the Critical Friend Method. That's how I was introduced to the method. One of the students I have been a critical friend to is Dagmar. Dagmar wanted to write and publish a book but didn't know how to go about it. After asking enough questions, she discovered that she knew more than she thought.

## Someone gets on the right track

“I, myself, have learned to ask good questions and not to think in terms of solutions immediately. If someone sits in front of me with a problem, I instantly think: oh, you can try this or that. But the idea is to ask questions so that the person comes up with their own solutions. In Dagmar's case, for example, it was: ‘Suppose everything is possible; what ways are there to publish your book? Eventually, she discovered that publishing her book online is also possible. As a critical friend, I didn't push her in any direction. I just asked questions so that she could get on the right track herself.”

## Even if the question is not right, the person asking has achieved something

“Sometimes you discover during the interview that the question the person is asking is not the actual question, because there is much more to it than that. To make the method even more effective, it is a good idea to look at how the person asking the question can come up with the right question. Even if the question has not been answered, they have achieved something. Maybe not an answer to the question, but a better understanding of it or greater insight into it.”

## You learn to listen better rather than just giving

“Would I recommend being a critical friend? Yes. You get a larger network; you learn to listen better rather than just give. And you learn to be critical. I think it is a great method because it truly brings people together and gives them food for thought. Sometimes you come up with things you hadn't thought of at all, especially when you talk to people from other fields. And it's nice when you realise that you know more than you thought.”

## Finding something you were not looking for

“The nice thing about it is that sometimes you find things you weren't looking for (also known as serendipity). You are someone's critical friend and you go and help them. In this way, you come into contact with different people, including people you wouldn't seek out normally. With this method, you really can help someone else. Meeting and helping each other, that's what I like about the Critical Friend Method.

Dagmar's book now has over 834,000 reads on the social storytelling platform Watt.

## Anna Peterzon Critical Friend Method Coach

**Anna was an Industrial Product Design student and a regular 'critical friend'. Anna talks about her experience with the Critical Friend Method.**

# The Power of the Method

**From the various evaluations of students applying the Critical Friend Method, we have learned that the method's strength is breaking patterns.**

- 1 Formulate positively.** People tend to think in terms of problems, and the Critical Friend Method breaks this pattern. By formulating challenges positively, you change a problem into something positive. You then draw strength and energy from the positive wording to meet the challenge.
- 2 Stepping out of your comfort zone.** Another bubble we easily get stuck in is that of our trusted circle of family and networks. The Critical Friend Method forces you to ask for feedback from people who are further away from you than your network and family. While that might normally seem scary, the Critical Friend Method gives you the push you need to step out of that comfort zone.
- 3 Questions.** The biggest challenge for new critical friends is to avoid solutions. Because that is an all too familiar response: does someone have a problem? If so, we will come up with solutions. But the critical friend does just the opposite. We *don't come up* with solutions. Instead, we ask questions to help the person understand.

## Applications in daily life

The Critical Friend Method is more than a method for promoting an innovative attitude. Studies show that students also like to apply the method in their daily lives, even after the training has ended. When the penny drops that positive reforms can also be applied outside the programme, you then see that students like to take these new aspects with them into the rest of their studies or career. The Critical Friend Method, therefore, becomes more than just training you apply during a study project. It becomes a new way of thinking, offers a new perspective and breaks patterns.

# Roles in the Critical Friend Method

The Critical Friend Method has several roles that are filled during the method. These are the following roles:

- The challenged;
- The critical friends;
- The coach;
- The trainer.

## The challenged

The challenged is the person or group with a question or problem that is presented to the critical friends. In the Critical Friend Method, we also call this question or problem the challenge. The challenged is leading. The following points are essential to perform the role of the challenged well:

- **Willingness to take self-direction.** It is all about your challenge. That is why it is important that you take charge of your own development. Self-management means that you give direction to your development and that you are and remain responsible for this.
- **Be open to feedback.** By presenting your challenge to critical friends, you will receive a lot of feedback. This can be positive, but also constructive. As the challenged, you are open to all forms of feedback.
- **Wanting a successful outcome.** It is about formulating an outcome of a challenge. A challenge where a solution is needed. As the challenged your mission is to find that solution. And to find that solution, you must want the challenge to be successfully resolved.

- **Execution and prioritisation.** In the leading role as the challenged, it is also natural that you are responsible for implementation and prioritisation. You want to bring your challenge to a successful conclusion. You choose to present your challenge to critical friends and you are therefore also responsible for taking the lead.

“As the challenged, it is very nice that questions are asked that you would not have asked yourself. There are more visions of your problem than you can imagine.”

## The critical friends

The critical friends are the persons to whom the challenged presents the challenge and who ask questions about it to the challenged one. The critical friends are not responsible for the solution. The challenged always stays responsible for the challenge. Critical friends help you solve the challenge by asking critical questions. As a critical friend, you have the following tasks:

- **Travelling along.** As a critical friend, you travel with the challenged. You do not take over the responsibility, but support the challenged to come up with a solution themselves.
- **Be honest.** To do this, you have to be honest.
- **Helping.** You genuinely want to help the challenged person and are prepared to put energy into this.
- **Give constructive feedback.** The feedback you give is constructive. Feedback may not always be what the challenged person wants or expects to hear, but it is always intended to help the challenged person move forward.
- **Challenge.** As a critical friend, you challenge the challenged to step outside their comfort zone and break through fixed thinking patterns.
- **Listening,** summarising and questioning. To help the challenged, as a critical friend you can listen, summarise and ask questions.

“It is nice to be able to question other groups and to be questioned: a mirror is held up to you.”

## The coach

The coach coordinates the critical friend circle and ensures that the process runs smoothly.

- **Showing initiative.** As a coach, you introduce each step of the Critical Friend Method and structure the transition to the next step. The Critical Friend Method consists of different steps which can sometimes be quite complicated. It's the coach's job to guide everyone by announcing each step and structuring the transition.
- **Time management.** The coach monitors time and keeps the process on schedule.
- **Provide support.** The coach ensures everyone understands the guidelines and gets the most out of the experience. The coach communicates the guidelines and intervenes when the conversation strays.

## The Critical Friend Trainer

The Critical Friend Trainer is the person who trains the critical friends and the challenged. The trainer has completed the Critical Friend Training himself and has also completed the special training course for Trainers of Critical Friends.

This book focuses on both the challenged and the critical friends. With the Critical Friend Method, you learn how to best act in the role of the challenged and how best to fulfil the role of the critical friend. After reading this book, you will be able to shape your challenge as a challenged using the Critical Friend Method, and you will be able to help a challenged with a challenge as a critical friend.

# “You get to see new sides of the problem while the thinking is taken away

During his internship, Tim Zoethout (21) received training on the Critical Friend Method. “Afterwards, the supervisor told me they were looking for new trainers. I immediately raised my hand and became one of the first trainers of the Critical Friend Method. A training course takes about three hours, and afterwards the reactions are very positive, which makes it cool to work on this!”

As Tim is one of the first trainers to be trained, he has contributed a lot to the training himself. “I joined when the Critical Friend Method was still in its infancy. After each training session, we evaluate the session and use this information to improve the training. The training is fun: we start with an introduction and explanation of the Critical Friend Method. Then we get down to practising the method as quickly as possible.”

## Conversation

The most important element of the training is the conversation, according to Tim: “The students have already formulated a challenge for themselves. This can be a project or something from daily life that they encounter. We practice with this challenge. By talking to experts or friends, students discover new steps in the problem. Of course, there are various ways of arriving at solutions, but in the Critical Friend Method, we don’t want to focus on the solution.”

## No longer individualistic

As a trainer of the Critical Friend Method, Tim hopes that the students will develop a less individualistic way of thinking. “You notice that our society increasingly looks up to an American mentality: that you must be able to achieve everything on your own. But the most important thing I have learned is that you are never alone. The Critical Friend Method breaks through that paradigm. Because they learn that they don’t have to discover the next step on their own, and they immediately realise that it’s good to have people around them to help them. During the training, you see the penny drop when they get a question they hadn’t thought of at all. They sit up straight again with a glimmer in their eyes. A hopeless situation immediately changes into a new insight that they can get to work on right away.”

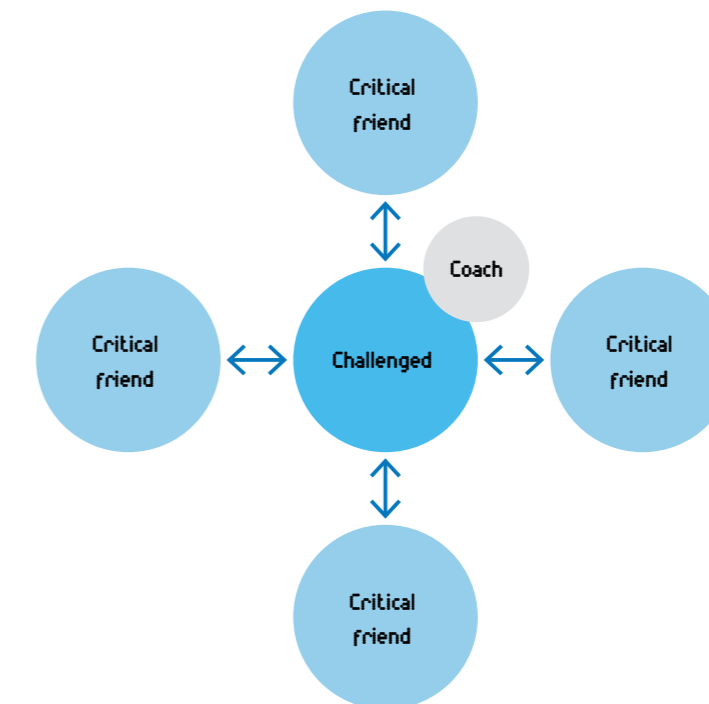
## In practice

What appeals to Tim about the training is that he learns so much from it himself. “Whenever I have a problem, I ask my friends. But also friends of friends! This different way of looking at things offers so much perspective. I have also learned to let someone else talk and listen better. I don’t ask pointless questions anymore; I always try to give people new insights with my questions. The training is not only for entrepreneurs, but can also be applied in daily life. These are techniques that we know deep inside but have not yet developed properly. By following the training and practising the methods, you make a much greater impact.”

**Tim Zoethout - Trainer of the Critical Friend Method**

## The critical friend circle

As a critical friend, you become part of a critical friend circle. After all, you are not a critical friend on your own. In a critical friend circle, the roles of a critical friend, coach and challenged come together.



A critical friend circle is a group of critical friends with a challenged in the middle