

POSITIVE DEVIANCE

By

Iain R. Graydon

Purpose of this session

- To give you an understanding of positive deviance and why we should be interested in it.
- To show you how to spot positive deviants
- To detail the strategy deployed in PD
- To help you understand where positive deviance may be useful and where it may not
- To give some examples of positive deviance
- To provoke discussion about how we might usefully use this concept

What is Positive Deviance?

- It has been employed and developed by Jerry Sternin, a former Dean of Harvard Business School
- While its roots go back as far as 1967 Sternin built on the work done in the 1980s by Marian Zeitlin of Tufts University
- It is based on the premise that real change comes from the inside and not from some external change agent!

Sternin's Approach

- Sternin worked for Save the Children and was asked to help starving children in Vietnam where 60-70% of under 5s were malnourished
- He was given 6 months and very little help
- He asked if any children from poor families were well nourished (**key question**)
- These people were his positive deviants. They were clearly doing something different to the norm ...
- ... despite having the same resources!
- He identified what they were doing differently

Deviant Behaviours

The positive deviants were:

- Collecting tiny shrimps and crabs from the rice fields and added these, along with the greens from the tops of sweet potatoes, to the kids meals.
- They fed their children small portions many times a day (there's only so much rice that a starving child's stomach will hold)
- They fed their children even when they had diarrhoea
- They made sure their children actually ate (family meal)
- All these behaviours were contrary to the community view and conventional wisdom.

Sternin's Approach

- His challenge then lay in persuading the community to adopt the behaviours and strategies of the positive deviants.
- He got them to share this by inviting the community to cook and eat with the positive deviant families. (Don't tell)
- He also provided feedback through weighing the children at the beginning and end of fixed periods so the parents were able to see the benefits for themselves.
- The response was astonishing! By the end of a the year he had lifted 90% (of 1000 children) out of malnutrition! The effect was also long-lasting!

The 4 Ds

Positive Deviants are not always easy to spot. The 4Ds provides an approach to uncovering them:

1. Define the problem you want to solve:

Define the problem, its perceived causes and related current practices (situation analysis)

Define what a successful outcome would look like (described as a behavioural or status outcome)

2. Determine if there are any individuals who already exhibit the desired behaviour (PD identification)

The 4 Ds

3. Discover what uncommon practices or strategies these deviants use to outperform others in their “community”
4. Design and implement an intervention that enables others in the target community to grasp and practice the positive deviant behaviour (focus on “doing” rather than transfer of knowledge)

The PD strategy in detail

1. Don't presume that you have the answer

Listen, don't talk. Understand the 'culture'. Seek help.

2. Don't think of it as a dinner party

Don't mix and match. Involve everyone in the challenge. Create a common identity. Solutions have to be repeatable. The definition of the community must be acceptable to all (or you are 'going outside' the community)

3. Let them do it themselves

Raise questions but let them discover on their own. Highlight superior results

The PD strategy in detail

4. Identify conventional wisdom

Understand the norm and accepted behaviour

5. Identify and analyse the deviants

What makes them successful? Chart normal behaviours (Step 4) & the deviants will emerge naturally. Step 4 also reveals that deviants have found a better way. Analyse and list the deviant behaviours.

6. Let the deviants adopt deviations of their own

Don't tell people about the deviant behaviours (Critical!). Don't teach new knowledge; encourage new behaviour. Offer incentives to practice the new behaviour. Persevere until the new behaviours become habits.

Sharing with the Community

- Once you find deviant behaviours, don't tell people about them! Let them find out for themselves (Ownership). In Sternin's case:
- A health volunteer invited 8 – 10 mothers into her home for medicinal food training.
- To gain entry, they had to bring some shrimps, crabs and sweet-potato greens. (behaviour)
- After two weeks the “training” was over.
- Most mothers continued to collect the shrimps, etc. (practice makes permanent)

The PD strategy in detail

7. Track results and publicise them

Post the results and how they were achieved. Celebrate success. Periodically return and observe changes. Chip away at conventional wisdom.

8. Repeat steps one through seven

Make the process cyclical. Find the best of the best. This leads to evolving deviations.

Key Points

- **The Premise:** In every community there are certain individuals whose **uncommon practices/behaviours** enable them to find **better solutions** to problems than their neighbours who have access to the **same resources**
- **Key Question:** What enables some members of the community (the “Positive Deviants”) to find better solutions to pervasive problems than their neighbours who have access to the same resources?
- **Accessibility sieve:** Only those behaviours/strategies accessible to all are kept. The rest are “TBU,” True but Useless (i.e. not accessible to all) and are discarded

Key Points

“It’s easier to **ACT** your way into a new way
of THINKING, than to
THINK your way into a new way of
ACTING”

TRADITIONAL VS POSITIVE DEVIANCE PROBLEM SOLVING APPROACH

TRADITIONAL

Externally Fueled (by “experts” or internal authority)

Top-down, Outside-in

Deficit Based “What’s wrong here?”

Begins with analysis of underlying causes of **PROBLEM**

Solution Space **limited** by *perceived* problem parameters

Triggers Immune System “defense response”

POSITIVE DEVIANCE

Internally Fueled (by “people like us”, same culture and resources)

Down-up, Inside-out

Asset Based “What’s right here?”

Begins with analysis of demonstrably successful **SOLUTIONS**

Solution Space **enlarged** through discovery of *actual* parameters

Bypasses Immune System (solution shares same “DNA” as host)

Corporate Example - Merck

- The Latin American division of Merck, the pharmaceutical giant, found that sales of an osteoporosis drug were flat.
- But one unit far outsold all of the other groups.
- Conventional wisdom said that the more sales reps you had and the more calls you made, the more you would sell, but...
- The deviant unit had fewer salesmen and made one third fewer customer visits.
- Instead they were spending more time building relationships with doctors, explaining the science and who would benefit from it, and educating them on the benefits.
- These deviants were encouraged to share their methods and results with their peers with some success.

Received Wisdom

- Examine best practice.
- But this means importing a new way of doing things from the outside.
- However, like an organ transplant the “host” may (and often does) reject the “organ”

Questions & Issues

- How might we persuade people of the worth of PD?
- How can we persuade leaders (executives) to cede power so that the community has ownership?
- Why should we as consultants do it? What's in it for us?
- Where might we apply PD?
- Are there situations where we can't apply PD?

CONTACT

If you want to discuss this further with me then you can contact me on the following:

Office: 01786 871299

Mobile: 07711 704287

Email: ir.graydon@tiscali.co.uk