

SUMMARY PAPER 1



'Social Change from the Inside Out'

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Overview:

"In every community and organisation there are certain individuals whose uncommon behaviours or practices enable them to do better than their colleagues or neighbours with the same resources." How do we find out what these are and encourage and support others to do similarly?

Key ideas:

- Positive Deviance: doing better than expected in relation to some factor than other people with the same resources.
- TBU (True but Useless): a factor which, while true for one person, is not accessible to another and so therefore cannot help with more widespread transformation.
- The Four Ds: define, determine, discover, and develop.

Summary:

To introduce the idea of Positive Deviance, Jerry Sternin (JS) told four stories (from among many on the Positive Deviance website (www.positivedeviance.org)) of its use.

1. **Child under-nourishment in a Vietnamese village (1990)** in which the practices of extremely poor parents with well nourished children were uncovered and presented by local volunteers to others with the opportunity to develop similar practices, such as feeding children smaller amounts more frequently and collecting shrimps crabs and greens for the children from fields. The programme was extended to 2.2 million Vietnamese over the next five years.
2. **Female genital cutting** in which the 8% of parents who did not indulge in this 4,000 year old, cross-cultural practice in Egypt help to characterise their own behaviours so that others could emulate if they so wished. Five years later, hundreds of people were further engaged in ecumenical and open advocacy to end the practice. This action had uncovered and rid the community of a deep sense of hurt and betrayal around the practice.
3. **Trafficking of young Indonesian village girls into the sex trade by their families.** Villagers were encouraged to discover the behaviour of families whose girls were not sold into the sex trade and find ways to allow others to practice the same behaviours. For example a poor farmer, Pak Drama, plants cash crops to ripen at different times of the year so that he has good cash flow to lay for his girls' education. A number of actions have ensured that no new girls have been trafficked from the village since the initiative began.

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4. **MRSA in United States Hospitals.** MRSA causes approximately 100,000 deaths in the US every year. Working in a veterans' hospital in Pittsburgh, the PD approach was introduced to discover new ways to hinder its transmission based on the practice of all staff in the hospital.

Following these four stories, JS presented a summary of the concepts underpinning Positive Deviance.

- Uncommon practices exist “before our eyes” in every community or organisation. These practices help some do well with the same resources as others who do not.
- A Positive Deviance Enquiry enables the community to discover the practices of Positive Deviants.
- Only those practices accessible to all are kept: the rest are deemed “True but Useless” (for example “when I fall on hard times my rich uncle helps me out”) and are discarded, as not everyone can adopt them.
- It is easier and more effective to act into a new way of thinking than think into a new way of acting.
- The presence of positive deviants implies that it is possible to improve things today without waiting for all of the underlying causes to be tackled (although JS emphasised that underlying systemic factors need to be addressed too).

The four Ds of Positive Deviance are:

- Define the problem, and the desired outcome (a behaviour or status change) clearly and succinctly. It has to be observable and measurable.
- Determine if anybody (individual, organisation, etc) exhibits the desired behaviour or status.
- Discover, through PD enquiry, what strategies these people adopt to find better solutions than their counterparts.
- Develop and implement opportunities for others to PRACTICE these behaviours.

Each step is carried out by the community of interest itself, allowing PD solutions to emerge from understanding existing replicable aspects of solutions, rather than working in a predetermined codified way from problem to solution. The uncovering of existing solutions practiced by those “just like me” creates a climate where other solutions can emerge. It is the practice that is of interest, not the person per se.

The most important elements of this relationship between knowing and doing are:

- Self discovery of and by individuals, communities, teams, etc.
- Social proof based on what is known and seen to work. This acts as a catalyst to change.
- Opportunities to identify and practice these solutions for oneself and not simply being told what to do or how to do it by others.

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Positive Deviance works well when:

- adaptive behavioural and social change rather than technical challenges exist;
- an intractable problem is worth the risk of a new approach;
- Positive Deviants exist; and
- leaders and skilled facilitators are willing to champion the effort, and to create the space for Positive Deviance Enquiry.

The approach also raises some challenges. It requires a professional shift from outside 'expert help' to 'facilitator', comfort with uncertainty and lack of control over outcomes. It tends to be intensive in terms of time and human resources. This in turn raises important questions about the scalability of the technique. These issues are surmountable with an approach that is patient and considered with the promise to yield significant results.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.