

The Power of Positive Deviance: How unlikely innovators solve the world's toughest problems

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Review by Tim Newton

The idea of “Positive Deviance” (PD) was first put forward in a book entitled “Positive Deviance in Nutrition” by Tufts University nutrition professor, Marian Zeitlin (1990), proposing that childhood malnutrition could be tackled at the community level by identifying what was going right in the community in order to promote it, as opposed to focusing on what was going wrong in the community and fixing it.

This book, *The Power of Positive Deviance*, is an account of how Jerry and Monique Sternin have put the concept of PD into action, and so is perhaps the key text of the PD movement. (see <http://www.positivedeviance.org/>)

PD is an approach for change with groups or communities when behavioral and social change is needed to address messy and seemingly intractable problems. The term ‘positive deviance’ is a metaphor derived from statistical analysis – performance that deviates in a positive manner from the mean in a normal distribution ‘bell curve’ becomes behaviour that deviates positively from cultural norms and expectations, without being afforded due significance. The seeds of a solution already exist within a community rather than in the mind of the field worker or the academic journal, and the PD field worker’s role is to facilitate a group or community in discovering how to make better use of their own resources.

The book provides the reader with practical lessons through five case studies with a chapter each, and some smaller inset case examples. And these include some formidable challenges – child malnutrition in Vietnam, female genital mutilation

(FGM) in Egypt, MRSA transmission in a Pennsylvania hospital, social re-integration of girl soldiers in Uganda, and infant mortality in rural Pakistan. Illustrating wider applications, there is also a chapter on the piloting of PD within a multi-national pharmaceutical company to improve sales. This is not, however, an instruction manual as such; The SF practitioner will find much to identify with amongst the principles of PD. There is a process which is roughly described as engage the community, define the problem, establish baseline conditions, document current practices, discover PD behaviours and strategies, and disseminate these through the community. However, PD is described as being more akin to improvisational theatre rather than a formal model or ten step process, and the PD fieldworker's role in all of these stages is to facilitate and support community leaders and volunteers doing this themselves. At every point positive use is made of the community's own resources, norms and practices, always respecting customs, traditions and territory. The facilitator brings expertise about engagement and facilitation, but otherwise offers no advice and brings in no external solution. The community owns the entire process.

PD fieldworkers promote extensive use of group conversations (rather than formal 'focus groups') in whatever situation and contexts are appropriate for that culture. The realities and the challenges of PD fieldwork are vividly brought to life throughout: group conversations under a tree on the edge of a vast sprawling refugee camp; meeting eighteen Indonesian transvestites deep in a Jakarta slum; compressing what might have been four weeks of exploratory conversations into a series of 30 minute hospital 'action and discovery sessions.' The PD field worker is always looking to promote community engagement in its own terms, and never to take the role of the expert; their questions aim to engage and stimulate new thinking rather than to gather assessment information.

Differences that make up PD are often very small or in unexpected places, and so may take time and effort to identify. The authors describe a child nutrition project in the high Alti-Plano of Bolivia, where an NGO (non-governmental

organisation) sponsor and community volunteers insisted that all children were fed the same diet in a traditional fashion, soup from a large kettle hung on tripods over an earthenware brick fire. Only after repeated observations was it noticed that parents of better nourished children stirred the contents of the kettle and served their children more solids – vegetables, fish – from the bottom of the kettle, whereas other families skimmed liquid from the top of the soup to give to their (less well nourished) children.

The PD approach assumes that the positive differences are localised to the particular circumstances such as a village or a community, as behaviours are embedded in uniquely complex sets of relationships, traditions and environments. A solution in one location cannot be generalised across populations or imported directly into another community – the ‘best practice’ role-out invariably evokes the ‘immune rejection response’. As with the SF approach, every case is different.

It is also assumed that positive differences discovered within a community are learnable by the rest of that community, so long as the community’s own leadership and volunteers own the design and delivery of the dissemination of the new behaviours.

An infant mortality project in Pakistan designed separate workshops for men and women around safe delivery of babies. The men’s group illustrated the need to use a clean razorblade to cut a baby’s umbilical cord by cutting through an onion with a razorblade covered with black felt-tip pen ink, to show how a dirty blade could spread infection. Men encouraged each other to buy and keep clean razorblades in their house for midwives to make use of.

The Pakistan project example also illustrated importance of noticing unintended consequences and the power of PD to create emergent changes beyond the original ‘problem’. Engaging women’s groups and men’s groups in a common endeavour to save the lives of their children led to improved communication and social support, eventually leading to better communication and shared responsibility between married couples.

The Power of Positive Deviance is a fascinating book for the SF practitioner as the parallels between SF and PD are numerous and obvious, yet PD offers a slightly different flavour in that it is working with community change and doing so with remarkable cultural sensitivity. One can also imagine that the PD fieldworker could make great use of SF tools on a daily basis.

Reference

Zeitlin, M. Z. (1990). *Positive deviance in child nutrition — with emphasis on psychosocial and behavioural aspects and implications for development*. United Nations University.