

The Power of Positive Deviance

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Review by Steve Blades

This is an inspiring book which takes a solution focused approach to intractable problems without mentioning SF at all! The book is based on the extensive experience of the authors over many years of using the Positive Deviance Approach. The term “positive deviance” is recognised as being an awkward, oxymoronic term but the concept is simple. Look for outliers who have succeeded against the odds. The premise is that (1) solutions to seemingly intractable problems already exist, (2) they have been discovered by members of the community itself, and (3) these individual positive deviants have succeeded despite sharing the same constraints and barriers as others. In SF terms these would be exceptions.

The bulk of the book is taken up with case studies explaining in detail how the approach has been used in extremely challenging situations around the world including fighting childhood malnutrition in Vietnam, reducing female circumcision in Egypt and hospital acquired infections in the United States. For example in Vietnam, rather than giving traditional nutritional advice, the team worked with the community to identify those children that were thriving in the midst of widespread malnutrition. The positive deviants were found to be having more frequent meals and the traditional meals of rice were being supplemented with small shrimps or crabs and the greens from sweet potato tops. The team then arranged sessions for the mothers of malnourished children to learn about and share in preparing meals with these variations. These are inspirational accounts, although perhaps a little difficult for most of us to quickly relate to our everyday situations.

A key feature of the approach is that it is not simply sharing best practice. It recognises that in many situations knowledge alone does not lead to change. The emphasis is on the need for the community to recognise there is a problem they wish to solve, define desired outcomes, identify the practices and behaviours that are producing better solutions and then to design and develop activities to share these through the involvement and engagement of the widest range possible of community members. This reminded me of the concept of there needing to be a “customer for change” and working really hard to engage the customers.

The book concludes with a basic field guide to the positive deviance approach, which can be downloaded from the website www.positivedeviance.org. This is a useful guide with many similarities to an SF approach. I would personally have found it useful if this had formed a larger proportion of the book.

Positive deviance is suggested as a possible approach when a concrete problem meets the following criteria:

- the problem is not exclusively technical and requires behavioural or/and social change
- the problem is intractable and other solutions haven’t worked
- positive deviants are thought to exist
- there is sponsorship and local leadership commitment to address the issue.

I would identify a much wider range of issues which SF can be used to address, so it is probably best to view positive deviance as a particular form of SF intervention. It is clear that the positive deviance approach as presented here takes a considerable amount of time to implement. That is acknowledged in the case study about healthcare infections in which process lessons for accelerating progress such as quickly drilling down and identifying actions are described. However, it is interesting that many of the examples used in the book and referenced on the website, with the exceptions

of those in the United States, come from the Third World and the overall impression is of a slow process.

When we look at the western world we too have many problems that require behavioural or social change. The Positive Deviance approach seems to me to have much to offer in responding to these challenges, as does the SF approach with which it has so much in common. Chip and Dan Heath in their book “Switch, how to change things when change is hard” recognise the similarities. They talk about finding the bright spots and use the same example of malnutrition in Vietnam alongside a description of SF working. Different language for similar approaches, but it would be a tragedy if the potential of either was discarded in the pace of western life by a concern that they took too long.

One of the challenges in promoting these approaches is helping people to recognise that they do not do it already. *“Of course I focus on solutions or look for what works already”* might be common responses. But these are assumptions based on simplistic interpretations which may prevent a dialogue about how SF and the search for positive deviants can be used to tackle complex issues without a simple resort to promoting best practice.

The case study in the book of the pharmaceutical company, Merck, shows the failure to embed the approach in Mexico after early success. The prime reason for this was the lack of high level leadership and sponsorship. As the public sector in the UK struggles with re-organisation and financial stringency in the face of myriad complex issues, my search for positive deviants will begin by searching for those leaders who have successfully introduced and embedded an SF approach into large organisations. It is a search for those exceptions who have grasped the potential that is so dramatically conveyed within this book to lead communities in difficult circumstances.

Reference

Heath, C. and Heath, D. (2010). *Switch, How to Change Things when Change is Hard*. London: Random House

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