

POSITIVE DEVIANCE: A NEW PARADIGM FOR ADDRESSING TODAY'S PROBLEMS TODAY

Background

“Deviance”- a difference, departure or deviation from the norm; often negative, connoting unacceptable behavior. “Positive Deviance”- a departure, difference, or deviation from the norm resulting in a positive outcome.

In communities throughout the world, there are a few “deviant” individuals whose uncommon behaviors or practices enable them to outperform or find better solutions to pervasive problems than their neighbors with whom they share the same resource base. We call these individuals, “positive deviants”, and their behavior has led to a new development paradigm called “positive deviance”. Identifying these “positive deviants” can reveal hidden resources already present in the environment, from which it is possible to devise solutions that are cost-effective, sustainable, and internally “owned and managed.”

At first glance, there seems nothing particularly profound in the observation that “some people do better than others”. However, within the context of traditional community development theory, there is indeed something revolutionary about the identification of the “positive deviants”. For they provide proof that it is possible to find viable solutions *today* to complex problems *before* all the inter-related factors underlying the problem can be addressed.

In the development field, conventional wisdom holds the opposite to be true. “The inextricability of underlying causes of behavioral- change- related problems dictates that they must all be addressed *before* viable solutions can be found.” Although in many cases, the analysis may be “correct”, the immediacy of the problem for those whose lives and welfare are at risk, renders that “truth” TBU: true but useless!

The millions of children in the world today who are severely malnourished do not have the luxury of waiting until the issues of poverty, lack of access to adequate sources of water and sanitation, food distribution patterns, etc. can be addressed. They are at risk *today* of never achieving their physical and intellectual potential and in some cases of not surviving.

The presence, however, of a few very poor families in their communities with well nourished children, (positive deviants), provides us with proof that it is indeed possible today, despite poverty, inadequate water and sanitation, to have a well nourished child. Positive deviance, then, not only provides us with an *impetus* for action, but with an accompanying *strategy* as well.

A critical component of the definition of “positive deviants” is that PD individuals have exactly the same resource base as their non-positive deviant neighbors. Hence, whatever they are doing, whatever resources they are using to achieve their successful outcomes,

are by definition, accessible to their neighbors. By identifying the special beliefs and practices of the positive deviants and then making them accessible to the community, a *demonstrably successful* strategy is provided which can be acted upon *today*.

Knowledge about “positive deviance” is not currently well known in the international development community, but in the decade since it was first utilized, its track record has been noteworthy.

Using the PD approach in Viet Nam, more than 250 communities rehabilitated an estimated 50,000 malnourished children from 1991-1999. Of even greater significance, their younger siblings, many of whom were not yet born at the time of the nutrition program implementation, are benefiting from the same levels of enhanced nutritional status. Simply stated, positive deviance provided a tool for completely changing the conventional wisdom regarding nutrition practices in these communities.

A “positive deviance inquiry” identifies how a number of very poor families were able to adequately nourish their children, while their neighbors of the same economic status were unable to do so. It was discovered that in every such case, the mother (or caretaker) of the child was going out to the rice paddies and collecting tiny shrimps and crabs the size of one joint of one finger and adding these to the child's diet, along with the greens from sweet potato tops. Although readily available and free for the taking, the conventional wisdom held these foods to be inappropriate, or even dangerous, for young children. Along with the addition of the shrimps/crabs and greens, there were certain other positive deviant practices involving frequency of feeding and quality of care of the child. It was apparent that the use of these foods and practices constituted enough of a difference to produce a well-nourished child.

One important implication of these findings was that contrary to conventional wisdom, it was not necessary to first change people's economic situation in order to have healthy, well-nourished children. Indeed, local Health Volunteers noted that in contrast to the poor “positive deviants,” there were a number of children from relatively well off families in the commune that suffered from serious malnutrition. Through the positive deviance inquiry, then, the villagers came to understand that good nutrition is not necessarily correlated with wealth or income.

A request for help from the “Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Task Force” in Egypt provided the next opportunity to use PD methodologies. Over 95% of all women in Egypt are circumcised. This painful and potentially dangerous procedure is practiced in Cairo as well as in remote villages throughout the country. Young girls around the age of nine undergo “female genital mutilation”, often without the slightest understanding of what is happening to them or why.

The practice is tightly interwoven in the fabric of Egyptian life and as such is strongly resistant to change. With a 95% prevalence rate, the task for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the few religious leaders advocating against the practice

seemed insurmountable. How does one succeed in changing a tradition which 95% of the people practice?

Positive Deviance turned the question around. “How has it been possible for 5% of women who are not circumcised to escape the social and religious pressures to undergo the procedure to which their neighbors of the same religious, social and economic status have succumbed?”

Using a Positive Deviance Inquiry, local NGOs and their community partners discovered the positive factors which enabled the PDs - in this case families who had not circumcised their daughters and husbands who had willingly married uncircumcised women - to go against the prevailing social norms. Although less than two years since the project inception, the PD approach has already resulted in numbers of confirmed averted female circumcisions. Perhaps of equal importance, it has provided an empowering new perspective on the problem and solutions for those advocating its eradication.

In Egypt the enlisting of positive deviants as advocates against the practice of FGM was extremely successful. The willingness and in many cases eagerness of individuals in the community who were not circumcised to talk about the practice reverberated throughout their communities. Having enlightened Sheiks and medical doctors campaign against FGM was not nearly as compelling as learning from friends and neighbors that it was possible in that community to be a “virtuous woman” without undergoing the procedure.

The positive deviants (fathers, mothers, and husbands of uncircumcised women) shared the very personal factors, which motivated and enabled them to withstand the pressures to conform. The specific Arabic words and phrases which they used in describing their experience were later utilized by local advocacy workers with great impact.

Positive Deviance provides an excellent tool for advocacy regardless of subject matter, as long as the ultimate goal relates to behavioral change. In another example, groups advocating for the use of condoms among commercial sex workers to reduce the incidence of HIV, have found the PD approach very promising. The reality is that in many brothels where condoms are the exception rather than the rule, some commercial sex workers (the positive deviants) are consistently successful in getting their clients to use condoms: a potentially life saving behavior.

The use of PD provides two distinctive advantages for those working in advocacy. First, by discovering and sharing the actual successful practices and behaviors utilized by the positive deviants, advocates can make those behaviors accessible to others. The second is the enlistment of the PDs themselves as advocates. For example, commercial sex workers who are identified and recognized as positive deviants are often eager to share their “safe sex” strategies with their colleagues. The enlistment of positive deviants as advocates is a powerful tool in promoting the desired behavior; they have “been there”, they “speak the language” and are therefore much more credible than “outsiders”.

An international non-governmental organization (INGO) working in Myanmar in communities where alcoholism was rampant used the PD approach to learn how it was possible for a few unemployed villagers to escape the addiction. Alcoholism had been identified by members of the community, particularly women, as a major barrier to improving health and welfare of marginal families.

The positive deviants shared their successful coping mechanisms thus enabling the INGO workers to understand the dynamics of alcoholic abstinence and rehabilitation among demoralized unemployed villagers. Of greater significance, several of the PDs volunteered to work with alcoholics in the community, expressing their belief that they would be more effective, credible advocates than the INGO workers.

Positive Deviance and Sustainability

Sustainability presents one of the greatest challenges for organizations working in the field of development. Improvements in the lives of individuals and communities during a period of collaboration with outside players are common. Continuation of those benefits *after* the external players have left is the exception.

Traditional development efforts are often “needs based”. The point of departure is frequently an assessment of community needs which are often met through the provision of *external* resources. During the program implementation the community has access to the needed resource through their development partners. After the program has “finished”, however, and the external implementing partner has departed, the villagers often return to their pre-program status.

Positive deviance provides a radically different approach. The “needed resource”, it posits, “already exists within the community”. PD is the tool to help the villagers to find it. Hence, the answer to the community’s problems can be found today *within* the community. Not only does this approach ensure that the critical resources are “owned” by the community, but that the problems’ solution is discovered and “owned” by them as well. The sense of ownership is a formidable factor in the sustainability of community development efforts.

Positive deviance is an unusually respectful development approach. Rather than focusing on community weaknesses inherent in the questions; “What is wrong here? What do you need? How can we help you?”, PD asks “What are your resources? What is going right here? How can *you* utilize *your* resources to solve *your* problems?”. The very core of PD is the belief in the wisdom and untapped resources inherent in the community.