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Valuing Outliers: Positive Deviance in Vietnam¹

Can a community find solutions to its problems without requiring a lot of outside resources? Positive deviance (PD) is an approach to social change that enables communities to discover the wisdom they already have, and then to act on it (Buscell, 2004; Sternin & Choo, 2000; Pascale & Sternin, 2005).

PD initially gained recognition in the work of Tufts University nutrition professor Marian Zeitlin in the 1980s, when she began focusing on why some children in poor communities were better nourished than others (Zeitlin, Ghassemi, & Mansour, 1990). Zeitlin's work privileged an assets-based approach, identifying what's going right in a community in order to amplify it, as opposed to focusing on what's going wrong in a community and fixing it.

Jerry Sternin, a visiting scholar at Tufts University, and his wife, Monique built on Zeitlin's ideas to organize various PD-centered social change interventions around the world (**Photo 6-1**). They institutionalized PD as an organizing for social change approach by showing how it could be operationalized in a community-setting (Buscell, 2004).



Photo 6-1. Jerry Sternin With a Vietnamese Community Elder Who Strongly Supported the Positive Deviance Nutrition Program in His Village.

In 1991, the Sternins faced what seemed like an insurmountable challenge in Vietnam. As Director of Save the Children in Vietnam, Jerry was asked by government

officials to create an effective, large-scale program to combat child malnutrition and to show results within six months. More than 65 percent of all children living in Vietnamese villages were malnourished at the time. The Vietnamese government realized that the results achieved by traditional supplemental feeding programs were rarely maintained after the programs ended. The Sternins had to come up with an approach that enabled the community to take control of their nutritional status. And quickly!

Building on Zeitlin's ideas of PD, the Sternins sought out poor families that had managed to avoid malnutrition without access to any special resources. These families were the positive deviants. They were "positive" because they were doing things right, and "deviants" because they engaged in behaviors that most others did not. The Sternins helped the community to discover that mothers in the PD families collected tiny shrimps and crabs from paddy fields, and added those with sweet potato greens to their children's meals. These foods were accessible to everyone, but most community members believed they were inappropriate for young children (Sternin & Choo, 2000). Also, these PD mothers were feeding their children three to four times a day, rather than the customary twice a day.

The Sternins created a program whereby community members could emulate the positive deviants in their midst. Mothers, whose children were malnourished, were asked to forage for shrimps, crabs, and sweet potato greens, and in the company of other mothers were taught to cook new recipes that their children ate right there. Within weeks, mothers could see their children becoming healthier (**Photo 6-2**). After the pilot project, which lasted two years, malnutrition had decreased by an amazing 85 percent in the communities where the PD approach was implemented. Over the next several years, the PD intervention became a nationwide program in Vietnam, helping over 2.2 million people, including over 500,000 children improve their nutritional status (Sternin & Choo, 2000; Sternin, Sternin, & Marsh, 1999).



Photo 6-2. Monique Sternin (Center) and Health Volunteers Create a Nutritious Meal Based on Foods Used by Positive Deviants in Quang Vong, Vietnam, 1995.

Positive deviance questions the role of outside expertise, believing that the wisdom to solve the problem lies inside. Social change experts, usually, make a living discerning the deficits in a community, prioritizing the problems, and then trying to implement outside solutions to change them. In the PD approach, the role of experts is to find positive deviants, identify the uncommon but effective things that positive deviants do, and then to make them visible and actionable (Pascale, Millemann, & Gioja, 2000). PD is led by internal change agents who present the social proof to their peers (Macklis, 2001). In PD, the role of the expert is mainly to facilitate a process that can help amplify this wisdom locally. In so doing, solutions and benefits can be sustained, since the solution resides locally.

The PD approach emphasizes hands-on learning and actionable behaviors². As Jerry Sternin notes: “It is easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting” (Sternin quoted in Sparks, 2004). So, the PD approach turns the well-known KAP (knowledge, attitude, practice) framework on its head. As opposed to subscribing to a framework that says increased knowledge changes attitudes, and attitudinal changes change practice; PD believes in changing practice. PD believes that people change when that change is distilled from concrete action steps.

Evaluations of PD initiatives show that PD works because the community owns the problem, as well as its solutions (Buscell, 2004; Dorsey, 2000; Sternin, 2003). Positive deviance is now being used to address such diverse issues as childhood anemia, the eradication of female genital mutilation, curbing the trafficking of girls, increasing school retention rates, and promoting higher levels of condom use among commercial sex workers (Sternin, 2003).

The positive deviance approach to organizing for social change is located at the intersection of theory, method, and praxis. Theoretically, it privileges local knowledge. Methodologically, PD does not treat deviance as an anomaly. In contrast to approaches that favor “regression to the mean,” PD valorizes outliers. PD’s praxis is humane. It believes in inside-out social change with the help of outside expertise and facilitation.

When author Singhal visited Jerry and Monique Sternin in their Cambridge home in January, 2005, they were making preparations to travel to Davos, Switzerland to conduct a Positive Deviance workshop at the World Economic Forum. When Singhal noted that PD was “going places”, Jerry winked and responded: “Yes, the world could do better with more deviance”.

What do you think?

¹ Author Singhal thanks Jerry and Monique Sternin for sharing their PD experiences from all over the world, and for digging up of photos from their PD intervention in Vietnam for use in this section.

² A positive deviance inquiry focuses on eliminating those client behaviors from the strategy mix that are true but useless (TBU). TBU is a sieve through which a facilitator passes the uncommon qualities of positive deviants to ensure that the identified practices can be practiced by everyone.

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