

# Independent.co.uk

## The power of positive deviance

By Richard Pascale

Tuesday, 17 August 2010

In Northern Vietnam in 1990, upwards of two-thirds of all children between the ages of one and four were malnourished. In the aftermath of the war, a meltdown of the Soviet economy and conflict between Vietnam and China had brought the decades-long arrangement of subsidised cereal imports from those former allies to an abrupt halt.

The government in Hanoi had invited Save the Children to help. The Ministry of Health was very clear: "Find a solution that is sustainable with local resources." A daunting assignment, since experts on malnutrition throughout the world were adamant that the problem could only be addressed by a systematic approach on many fronts--village economy, health care practices, access to clean water and medicine, child-rearing traditions, and so forth. All of this required an infusion of external resources.

The outcome was fine as long as the resources lasted. Once removed, nutritional status receded to the previous baseline. Casting about for an unorthodox solution that circumvented the resource constraints, an initiative in three pilot hamlets engaged mothers in weighing their children. Surprisingly, some children from very poor families were well-nourished. This led villagers on a quest to determine what these families were doing. They discovered that the "positive deviant" households were gathering freely available shrimps and crabs from the rice paddies each day and feeding them to the children along with widely accessible greens. These nutrients, along with hand-washing and more frequent feedings each day, were the difference that made the difference.

Positive deviance? It is an awkward, oxymoronic term, but the concept is simple: look for outliers who succeed against all odds. Such individuals are outliers in the statistical sense - exceptions, people whose outcomes deviate in a positive way from the norm. As with the families in Vietnam, in most cases such people do not know he or she is doing anything unusual. Yet once the unique solution is discovered and understood, it can be adopted by the wider community and transform many lives.

From the positive deviance perspective, *individual difference* is regarded as a community resource. Community engagement is essential to discovering noteworthy variants in their midst and adapting their practices and strategies.

Over the past couple of decades, the translation of this idea into practice has altered the lives of millions of people on the planet. Specifically, the process has been used in 31 nations in Africa, ten in Asia, five in Latin America, and in dozens of applications across the U.S. and Canada. Adaptations range from reducing gang violence in inner city schools in New Jersey and Pennsylvania to increasing the success rate of black entrepreneurs in South Africa.

If two corporate applications to date are any judge, the approach has great potential in the business context, too. The two examples are Merck's pharmaceutical business in Mexico and Goldman Sachs' U.S. force of wealth advisers. While these pilot efforts took place within sub-units in large global enterprises, the divisions that experimented with positive deviance share similarities with many small companies insofar as the initiatives involved several hundred employees and a few dozen managers. Merck Mexico's use of the approach catapulted the unit from last place to the top among 41 Merck operations in Latin America. It has remained a top performer for the past five years. At Goldman Sachs, learning from "positive deviants" among its 300 wealth advisers, [and disseminating their successful practices among community of peers (not top down)], has become the "new normal".

But it is also important that those in authority (e.g., village chiefs, funding NGOs, CEOs, etc.) be committed to giving the process a try. It is a bottom-up approach that entails a leap of faith that, first, those in the ranks below include some with winning strategies and practices and, second, that when the community (not the experts or those in authority) discovers this wisdom in their midst they will adapt it without the usual exceptionalism that thwarts top-down "best practices" initiatives.

As has been noted, positive deviants often don't realise they are doing anything unusual noteworthy. Living alongside peers, they flourish while others struggle. Also invisible in plain sight is the community's latent potential to self-organize, tap its own wisdom, and address problems long regarded with fatalistic acceptance. Once the community has discovered and leveraged existing solutions by drawing on its own resources, adaptive capacity extends beyond addressing the initial problem at hand. It enables those involved to take control of their destiny and address future challenges.

The pragmatic Mocua tribe of Mozambique has a succinct adage: "The faraway stick does not kill the snake." Positive deviants in your midst are the stick close at hand—readily accessible and successfully employed by people "just like us." No need for outside experts or best-practice remedies that "may work over there but won't work here." No need for deep systemic analysis or a resource-intensive assault on root causes. Just discover the closest stick and use it.

*Richard Pascale is co-author, with Jerry Sternin and Monique Sternin, of The Power of Positive Deviance (Harvard Business Press). The Positive Deviance Initiative's website ([positivedeviance.org](http://positivedeviance.org)) receives nearly four thousand unique visitors each month.*

---

©independent.co.uk Terms & Policies | Email newsletter | RSS | Contact us | Syndication | Advertising Guide | Subscriptions | Jobs | Evening Standard | Homes & Property | London Careers