

# Understanding the Impact of Positive Deviance in Work Organizations

4/7/2004 --

**Positive deviance may help scholars understand and promote positive behaviors in the workplace.**

ANN ARBOR, Mich. – Deviance in the workplace can actually be a good thing, as long as it's positive, say University of Michigan Business School researchers.

Traditionally, deviance has referred to intentional behaviors that depart from organizational norms in a negative way, thereby threatening the well-being of an organization and/or its members. Stealing and incivility are commonly cited as examples of deviant, or harmful, behavior.

In their new article in the *American Behavioral Scientist*, Gretchen Spreitzer, clinical professor of management and organizations, and Ph.D. student Scott Sonenshein define positive deviance as "intentional behaviors that significantly depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways."

They discuss how positive deviance differs from related pro-social types of behaviors, such as organizational citizenship, whistle-blowing, corporate social responsibility and creativity/innovation, and offer initial recommendations on ways to operationalize (measure and assess) positive deviance in order to encourage empirical research on the topic.

"Positive deviance focuses on those extreme cases of excellence when organizations and their members break free from the constraints of norms to conduct honorable behaviors," Spreitzer says. "It has profound effects on the individuals and organizations that partake and benefit from such activities."

In defining positive deviance, Spreitzer and Sonenshein argue for a normative approach, which implies the evaluation of conduct (that ought or ought not to occur) by a specific body of people (a referent group) whose expectations determine regular or typical behaviors. In addition, the researchers say, positively deviant behavior must be something others would extol or commend, if aware of it, and must focus on actions with honorable intentions, independent of outcomes.

Organizational citizenship activities, they say, do not fit the definition of positive deviance, because these behaviors are minor in magnitude and are often extensions of prescribed role responsibilities, do not depart substantially from norms, and are intended to improve organizational functioning (which positive deviance may or may not do).

In addition, a whistle-blower's intentional actions to disclose information of unethical

or illegal behavior typically departs from the normative expectations of a referent group (the wrongdoers) but may or may not be honorable—and thus may or may not be positively deviant—depending on whether the person's actions are altruistic or revengeful.

Finally, activities associated with corporate social responsibility and creativity/innovation also tend to fall short of meeting the three criteria for positive deviance: voluntary behaviors; significant departure from the norms of a referent group; and honorable intentions.

To illustrate positive deviance in action, Spreitzer and Sonenshein recount how Merck & Co. decided in 1978 to manufacture at its own expense and distribute for free a drug that helped to eradicate river blindness in developing countries. In another case study of positive deviance, the two researchers describe how the owner of a small bus company located her facility in an impoverished Chicago neighborhood, instilled ideas about business and entrepreneurship in her employees and served as an incubator for new ventures launched by the residents she hired.

"By understanding better these remarkable individuals and organizational-level behaviors, scholars will learn how and why such behaviors occur," Spreitzer says. "By answering the how and why questions for positively deviant behaviors, Positive Organizational Scholarship can take an important step toward understanding and promoting additional positive behaviors in the work organization."

The rise of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS), which focuses on the virtuousness inherent in work organizations, has stimulated intense interest in the opposite end of the spectrum—i.e., positive behaviors that diverge from workplace norms in a beneficial, rather than detrimental, way. A growing number of scholars believe positive deviance may be important for promoting subjective well-being and long-term organizational effectiveness.

POS has been established as a center of excellence at the Michigan Business School where leading faculty are exploring its potential, conducting field studies and sharing their findings through teaching, symposiums, scholarly papers and professional journals.

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