



Solutions exist if you know where to look

When organisations are faced with a seemingly insoluble problem they may try to bring in experts and explore best practice. But the solution is likely to lie with individuals within the business who already know the answer. The art is to find them and embrace the innovative concept of positive deviance. By **Richard Pascale, Jerry Sternin and Monique Sternin**

When it comes to solving complex problems, most leaders turn to internal or external 'experts', borrowing 'best practices' and implementing top-down strategies that typically inspire few and accomplish little. It is time to exchange that approach for an unconventional notion: at least one person somewhere in your company or community has already licked the problem you are trying to solve. These 'positive deviants' are individuals who live and work under the

same constraints as everyone else, yet find solutions that elude their colleagues. This approach requires a business to let go of traditional ideas of authority and power and instead allow people to discover the answers for themselves.

In the Amazon delta of Brazil, cash crops now grow in tidal wetlands previously regarded as unsuitable for agriculture. Rosario Costa Cobral and her family occupy a small homestead on the banks of the great muddy river. With barely enough dry land to eke out a subsistence living, Rosario sought a way to harness the vast swaths of rich delta soil inundated by twice-daily flooding. She questioned the orthodoxy that farming and floodplains do not mix. A close observer of the Amazon's daily rhythms and seasonal cycles, she noted that in any given year, the contours of the river bottom are relatively stable. Higher patches drain quickly when waters recede. Could plants survive if submerged only a few hours a day?

Rosario's first experiments were with cassava, a vigorous, water-tolerant staple of the Amazonian diet. Selecting for mutations within the species that flourished in especially wet places, she planted rootstock in the dry season when the river was low. Seedlings gained a sustainable foothold. Success emboldened her to experiment with other crops – lemons and chilli peppers. Today, the family not only feeds itself but also generates an income, and Rosario has gained recognition from plant biologists and environmentalists for her pioneering discovery.

Reversing desertification

Likewise, looking at satellite photos taken of the Sahel Desert of Niger 30 years apart – 1975 and 2005 – one's attention is drawn to the anomaly of vast swaths of former desert that turned green. On closer examination, it is evident that vegetation is densest in the most densely populated regions. Most remarkable of all, this transformation took place in a fragile ecosystem where only 12% of the land is arable and 90% of the 13 million residents live off agriculture. How, against impossible odds, did the community turn back the tide of sand dunes that had been inundating their huts?

Farmer Ibrahim Donjimo had realized

that the worsening trend was more than a seasonal aberration. The long-prevailing practice of clearing all trees to maximise crop density on scarce land had given rise to a tree-less landscape. In the mid-1980s, Ibrahim began setting an example for other farmers in Guidan Bakoye by taking a counterintuitive step. Instead of clearing the saplings that sprouted from the earth each year, he protected them. In particular, he nurtured the indigenous gao and baobab trees, which flourish in harsh conditions.

Ibrahim had stumbled on a highly effective, resource-neutral strategy. Fallen leaves add nutrients to the soil. Roots fix nitrogen from the air and help prevent erosion when infrequent, torrential rains batter the brick-hard earth. Because the deciduous trees are bare during the rainy season, canopy is absent when crops densely planted below their branches are most in need of sun.

Ibrahim's experiment bore fruit. After several years of observing his better crop yields and cash flow, others began to follow suit. Today, farmers sell branches for firewood, sell or eat the fruit, and use the pods for animal fodder. Revenue from 20 trees brings in \$300 a year, a major contribution to average income. As tree planting spread from one town to another, the region began to evolve a more benign microclimate, which mitigates the impact of searing droughts and arid winds.

Successful exceptions

These two stories of positive deviants share the common thread of observable exceptions. This is the unique point of entry for the positive deviance process: a focus on the successful exceptions. As a problem-solving process, this approach requires us to retrain ourselves to pay attention differently – awakening minds accustomed to overlook outliers and cultivating scepticism about accepted truths. Once this concept is grasped, it becomes natural to seek out the exceptions and discover how they are succeeding.

Positive deviance (PD) is founded on the premise that at least one person in a community is finding success with a different approach. This individual is an outlier in the statistical sense: an exception, someone whose outcome deviates in a

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“Solutions to seemingly intractable problems exist; they have been discovered by positive deviants who succeed despite sharing the same constraints and barriers as others.”

positive way from the norm. In most cases, this person does 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 business. These individual differences can be regarded as a resource. Engagement throughout the organisation is essential to discovering noteworthy variants in its midst and adapting their practices and strategies.

Along a continuum of change tools, the PD approach is one among a broad set of participatory methods. The basic premise is: solutions to seemingly intractable problems already exist, they have been discovered by members of the organisation, and these innovators (individual positive deviants) have succeeded even though they share the same constraints and barriers as others.

The positive deviance process is not suitable for everything – it is unnecessary when a technical solution exists. But the process comes into its own for problems that require social and behavioral change, and that entail solutions that are potentially rife with unforeseeable consequences. It provides a fresh alternative when problems are viewed as intractable, by redirecting attention from ‘what’s wrong’ to ‘what’s right’.

Overcoming barriers

It is important that those in authority are committed to giving the process a try. This often unfolds in a circuitous manner – sponsors seldom fully fathom what they are getting themselves into. Over the course of the exercise, things change in ways they did not foresee.

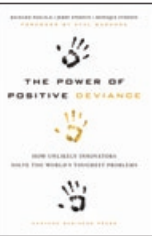
Leaders and the led become intertwined in a cogenerative process in which all are altered. Outcomes are more often multiplicative than additive.

The greatest barrier to the application of the PD approach comes not from the members of the organisational community themselves but from the ‘experts’ who seek to help them and from the authorities who preside over them. This is due to deeply ingrained views that those at the top of a hierarchy know more than those below and therefore change is most efficiently driven top down and outside in. We call this the standard model and it is the primary means by which most people tackle change. Many leaders, field workers, facilitators, and consultants tend to identify gaps, devise initiatives to fill them and create institutions dependent on top-down premises. Even when done with good intent, this approach may be largely ineffective since it ignores a great big elephant in the room: social complexity.

Standard model

In brief, the standard model entails top-down change in which expertise is located near the top, control of the implementation process is assumed, and rollout is driven through the ranks. Default to this standard model is a conditioned reflex; it preserves the existing power and authority structure. Accordingly, a process such as PD is often brushed aside as too slow, too problematic, unnecessarily indirect and complex. People are assumed to be rational and their social systems adaptable, so it is sufficient to give them the answer and expect them to get on with it. Involving the community in a process of self-discovery? Letting people decide to opt in or opt out? Using practice (rather than knowledge or information) to disseminate new opportunities? All such premises are widely discounted as inefficient whereas in fact they can be unbelievably effective.

As described in the box, right, biopharmaceutical pioneer Genentech did not want for positive deviants. Its sales of a ‘miracle cure’ for chronic asthma were 20 times higher than those of its peers. Yet the pervasive filter of the standard model largely diluted potential gains, giving rise to the conundrum: how could an enterprise



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as institutionally clever as Genentech so completely miss the golden opportunity within its grasp? More generally, why has the PD process had little or no uptake in for-profit companies, when it has been proven in 40 countries to be successful in tackling a wide variety of problems across a spectrum of organisations and social systems? The answer: the standard model is so deeply socialised into companies that “it’s just common sense”. It acts like a lens through which we see the world but one that distorts perception and limits choice without our knowing it.

Nevertheless, the standard model is probably the best course of action for between 70% and 80% of change problems encountered. But when empirical experience leads us to conclude, “we’ve tried everything and nothing works”, harnessing understanding from within may be the way to break the impasse. ■

Persisting with the standard model at Genentech

In 2003, Genentech, the highly successful pioneer of genetically engineered drugs, introduced Xolair, a ‘miracle cure’ for many chronic asthma sufferers. Unlike standard treatments, which arrest asthma attacks after they occur, Xolair modulates the histamines in the immune system through periodic intravenous treatments given at the doctor’s surgery that address asthma preventatively. This allows the patient to lead a life free of the fear of debilitating attacks. Despite this, sales remained well below expectations six months after launch.

As management wrestled to explain the disappointing results, analysts spotted an anomaly. Two otherwise ordinary salespeople among a national force of 242 were selling 20 times more Xolair than their peers. Here were classic positive deviants. Two women responsible for the Dallas and Fort Worth territories in Texas had successfully overcome resistance within the medical community and gained extraordinarily high rates of acceptance.

Investigation shed light on the breakthrough. Genentech’s stronghold is cancer medicine. The clientele for its mainstream products – oncologists and pulmonary specialists – routinely administer chemotherapy, an infusion procedure performed on an outpatient basis. Xolair’s market, in contrast, is allergists and pediatricians, the primary source of care for asthma patients. Infusion

protocols (delivering medication in the form of an IV drip) require infusion rooms, infusion couches and infusion nurses. This is unfamiliar territory for allergists, pediatricians, and their nursing staff.

Redefined roles

The positive deviants grasped that product acceptance could not be achieved through the routine sales call between the Genentech rep and the physician. The real obstacles were the doctors’ fear of unfamiliar procedures, concerns about time-consuming insurance approvals and worries that patients would be exposed to unnecessary risk. The challenge, therefore, was to expand the doctors’ repertoire and transform surgery culture. So the salespeople redefined their role as onsite consultants.

They guided doctors and nurses through the process of readying Xolair for infusion and administering it to patients. They taught administrators to negotiate the paperwork to secure reimbursement from insurance companies. They pitched the drug’s beneficial lifestyle impacts for the patients in whom it had received FDA approval. Instead of applying force against force, they used judo-style principles by engaging the doctors’ teams in enlarging their practice repertoire and enriching the job content of nurses and administrators. They had discovered what armies of Genentech’s market researchers had missed. They were

successful because they had morphed from sales agents into change agents.

Our narrative seems destined for an upbeat ending but what actually unfolded testifies to the persistence and perversity of the standard model. Genentech prescribed a top-down protocol for its sales force that relied on data showing Xolair’s superiority. Management’s response to the positive deviants’ results was that the sales team was cheating – poaching other territories or shortcutting safeguards, somehow encouraging the drug’s use outside the FDA approval, or overstocking doctors’ drug inventories with a product with a short shelf life.

Only when an external market research firm confirmed that the true source of success was innovative employees, who were not violating ethical or procedural rules, did management consider the merits of their consultative strategy. But trusting in the power of disseminated information and cascading intention, they still implemented a conventional best-practices rollout. Management insulated the two successful reps from their peers by doing the fact finding themselves using a conference call with the positive deviants. They then issued a broadcast e-mail followed up by a conference call directing other reps to consider a consultative approach to increase sales of Xolair. Result? Lukewarm acceptance and modest improvement in market penetration.