

## Facilitative Leadership through Positive Deviance

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*Synopsis: Amplifying positive deviance (PD) offers a novel take on asset-based approaches to change, in that it focuses on sharing, discovering and acting on what already exists and what works. This article sets out the basics of the approach, discusses a case study and looks at how to make it work.*



POSITIVE DEVIANCE IS A GROUP COACHING APPROACH that models sustainable engagement and active inclusion; it empowers teams and ignites action. Internationally tested on 'difficult' issues such as female circumcision in Egypt and gang culture in Pennsylvania, it has been used increasingly in organisations, most recently for delivering impressive reductions in MRSA infections in US hospitals and in discovering more efficient working practices in adult care services in the UK.

PD uses an asset-, or strengths-based approach, but unlike appreciative inquiry or solutions-focused brief therapy, PD recognises and clearly defines the problem to be tackled.

Skilled facilitators support the community affected by the problem – which may seem intractable at the outset – to discover locally practised, but hidden, solutions. The process is organic and unpredictable each time it is used, but it has a high success rate in

addressing embedded behavioural issues. Managers employing PD need to let go of favoured processes and instead focus on outcomes while giving those affected by the problem (the community, in PD terms) the space to learn.



Facilitation takes community members on a journey of discovery that starts with defining the problem and desired outcome. They often find that their perception of the problem is not the same as the actual problem. The facilitator then helps the community to use data, observation, enquiry and an inclusive approach to find people who perform better than the norm (the “positive deviants”). Community members then look into the fine detail of the positive deviants’ coping practices and help others in the community to learn these practices and practise them until they are fully comfortable with them. A progress-monitoring process is designed by the community to sustain improvements.

The benefits to the people who have the original problem – the “community” – are that:

1. the exercise is entirely owned and driven by community members, so there is a shared purpose and solving the problem will clearly make their working life better,
2. the process is not expert driven, i.e. it is non-intellectual and highly practical, reducing resistance,
3. the process of invitation and inclusion strengthens and builds the community, and
4. overall, it creates a sense of self-determination and hope, which releases creativity and innovation.

The benefits to the organisation are:

- the community improves performance to benefit

both community and organisation even though the community defines the problem in its own terms,

- the approach facilitates a heightened understanding of community nuances and networks,
- sustainable change happens within existing resources,
- the approach, being driven by the community, is always culturally appropriate, and
- it harnesses and builds on diversity and the latent knowledge of the workforce.

## Case study – Hertfordshire Adult Care Services

This important area of the Hertfordshire County Council provides support for infirm and elderly adults, as well as adults with sensory deprivation and learning difficulties.

There had been a long history of failing to complete paperwork, which led to the need for the creation of data quality teams. Morale was low, and there was a big variation in performance among social workers despite having a large service/quality improvement team, new systems and detailed process mapping. Senior management and front-line perceptions of the issues were very different: managers were frustrated that the teams weren’t completing records on the system, creating problems in handling clients, whilst the social workers felt that they were spending all their time on paperwork and record-keeping.

Having heard about PD from a colleague, the Assistant Director of Performance agreed to give it a try, and assembled a team which represented all levels, with a light-touch approach to supervision by the deputy area manager.

### What the team delivered

In three months:

- Generated up to 30% in time savings per day for social workers,
- In addition, delivered efficiencies of £50,000 and £110,400 a year, created by saving between one and two hours per social worker per week for a team of 60 social workers (based on a social worker salary of £34,000 and no on-costs),
- Cut out an unnecessary stage of the adaptations process for Council tenants,

- Enabled team to cope with more referrals during a flu epidemic, and
- Discovered lots of “latent solutions” – e.g. letters to service users and route map through pathway.

### How they did it

- By focusing on Eva’s nan (the grandmother of one of the PD team members who was a service user) to serve as a point of inspiration,
- By collecting data that highlighted some problems that were not visible and that disproved some myths,
- By the efforts of middle management to oil the wheels and keep the team focused, and
- By the efforts of top management to create space, allowing access to teams, and not being involved in the PD enquiry and observation.

The exercise unpacked the real issues and worked in the middle of other significant changes such as relocation. Solutions discovered included:

- Changing call handling to free up social worker time and to get the right answer to callers the first time,
- Hyper-linking documents within the two systems in use to stop duplication of input, and
- Cutting out process stages and an unnecessary waiting list.

Front-line staff and middle managers were empowered and discovered new capabilities and the process opened up mature discussions on change and systems development. The impact of not completing the paperwork was demonstrated by the data collection – those people who failed to complete case records created time-management problems for their colleagues, who had to spend time finding missing information. Making this visible created behaviour change.

### Conclusions

- The programme started slowly but improvements were real and sustainable – and cheap.
- In line with the PD principle “Nothing about me without me” everyone involved in working with service users was engaged.
- Making the invisible, visible – the successful practices were there all the time.
- Working with possibility - delivered a more positive culture in short space of time.



An outcome of the PD process is that organisations become more collaborative: People start working with parts of the organisation they had never talked to before, as could be seen in the MRSA case study, where the social network diagrams they used showed clusters of relationships before PD, then extended networks after. Particularly in corporate environments and organisations with strong silo mentalities, PD reinforces a sense of community and shared learning.

The PD model delivers community change without actually attempting to change the community. This goes against Western/northern thinking, which is strongly focused on the role of experts and which assumes that the community knows little. Likewise, peer-to-peer sharing makes information visible, a process that is at odds with the usual thinking about intellectual capital. However such sharing is a proven way of unlocking social capital.

Creating a contract of trust is central to the task of transferring the PD approach to new settings. One

essential part of PD is that communities form around their problems – to define the problem is one of the most difficult issues for the community, and indeed for PD. It could be seen as dangerous, in that everything that happens can challenge the status quo.

**THE AUTHORITY STRUCTURE IN A CORPORATION MAY RESIST THE RISKY AND ‘UNCONTROLLABLE’ PD APPROACH – IN SPITE OF EVIDENCE THAT THE ‘STANDARD MODEL’ CANNOT SOLVE ADAPTIVE PROBLEMS.**



PD exercises have a structure but are difficult to plan, in the same way as individual coaching is difficult to plan. Learning happens at the pace of the group, and the community has to be allowed within reason to learn from its own mistakes. The community also decides how much time they can allocate to the exercise and where and how it will work. This can make the process feel messy, but reinforces the sense of ownership and the community feels confident to work within the boundaries they have set for themselves. Once a few breakthroughs happen, groups typically become more ambitious.

The issue within a PD setting is that it connects very strongly with a set of values, around how the community should be transformed and who has the power. Giving people the opportunity for a voice creates dignity and respect in the community. PD seems to have a set of values which creates a more emancipated agenda than Lean or Six Sigma, although both encourage stakeholder participation in process redesign.

## Implications for leaders

The principle of PD is that it replaces normal practice or known technical solutions (i.e. the standard model) when a community is faced with a “wicked” problem requiring an adaptive solution. However, the authority structure in a corporation may resist the risky and ‘uncontrollable’ PD approach – in spite of evidence that the ‘standard model’ cannot solve adaptive problems. Heifetz’s adaptive leadership research has attempted to demonstrate a new role for those ‘in charge’ for such adaptive problems, but the concepts of facilitative leadership may not suit all organisational cultures.

A key issue is how to engage stakeholders in the conversation to question established cultural norms, particularly in the corporate environment, where the normal expectation is compliance.

However, the experience of using PD in organisations in the UK indicates that if leaders allow communities to form around problems, with the aim of solving them, they gain their own momentum. However, if leaders try to force the pace, for example by setting the timetable, as happened in a recent exercise we did, it immediately disenfranchises the community, which reverts to a more passive mode, or worse, creates resistance.

Recommendations for a successful PD exercise are:

- ♦ Start with an independent, skilled facilitator.
- ♦ Involve leaders and managers in all stages and discover how they can best contribute whilst still allowing front-line staff to undertake the journey of discovery.
- ♦ Ensure managers do not articulate patronizing feelings such as “I could have told you that” – what the team or community discovers may well be known to managers, but it is the journey that matters.
- ♦ Ensure that leaders and managers allow the community members to have the authority to collect and use data, to conduct investigations, to make observations, and to have a platform to feed back findings to senior management.
- ♦ Understand that you have to start slowly to go quickly – getting the set-up right; understanding networks, stakeholder maps and relationships is critical.
- ♦ Remember that gains will be sustained without further recourse to external resources.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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More information can be gained from the Positive Deviance Initiative at Tufts University in Boston, Mass., [www.positivedeviance.org](http://www.positivedeviance.org). Their mission is to spread the use of PD for vulnerable populations. Further reading includes the recently-published "*The Power of Positive Deviance - how unlikely innovators solve the world's toughest problems*" by Richard Pascale (Harvard University Press, 2010) and "*Switch - how to change things when change is hard*" - Chip and Dan Heath, Random House Business Books, 2010. Other resources are available at [Woodward Lewis](#).

