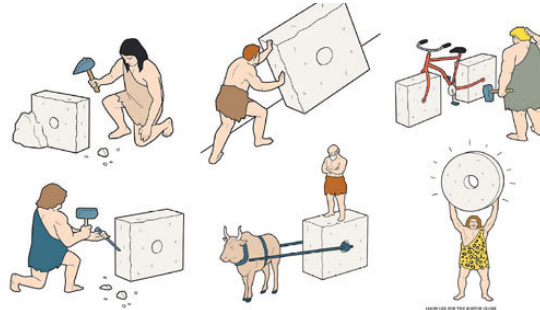


# The Power of Positive Deviance

How unlikely innovators solve the world's problems.

By Richard Pascale, Jerry Sternin, Monique Sternin

Reviewed by David Hanlon (November, 2011)



Most innovations occur when someone deviates from the normal – they see another way of doing something. However we tend to compartmentalise our thinking:

- Innovation is about creating a new wheel, whilst
- Organisational performance is about correcting aberrant or slack performance.

Accordingly, when we think of the term “deviant”, most of us are likely to associate the term with those who do bad things. That is someone (or a perhaps a group) who generally disrupt the natural flow of society. However, there are also positive deviants. These people are at the other end of the performance spectrum; they are the very top performers.

The term “positive deviant” was first used by Richard Pascale and Jerry Sternin<sup>1</sup> to describe people who, with exactly the same resources and circumstances as everyone else, are consistently and significantly more successful than the norm. Since that article, Pascale and Sternin have been joined by Monique Sternin and together they extend the concept to demonstrate how it can be used to resolve complex and frequently very entrenched issues within the larger community.

In simple terms, **Positive Deviance** is based on the observation that in any community, there are people whose uncommon but successful behaviors or strategies enable them to find better solutions to a problem than their peers, despite facing similar challenges and having no extra resources or knowledge than their peers. These individuals are referred to as positive deviants. Or, as Mike Harper in reframing the adult learning model suggests. We shift from “we don't know what we don't know” to a focus on “we don't know what we do know.”

**Don't be put off by these topics if you are scanning the Table of Contents. There is something in this book for every possible situation, no matter what type of organisation or business you are involved with.**

The bulk of the material in this book focuses on how the positive deviance approach has helped to alleviate some of the world's toughest problems associated with childhood malnutrition in Vietnam, female circumcision in Egypt, hospital infections, “early wins, squandered gains” at Merck, and “girl soldiers” in Uganda.

In these and other situations, the authors explain a natural progression of change within evolutionary systems that can be incorporated into the positive deviance approach: change can disrupt prolonged equilibrium, “a precursor to death or stagnation”; an invitation to become involved in change requires those who accept to vacate a comfort zone and share ownership of challenges. One can disturb them in a manner that approximates a desired outcome - but never fully direct them.”

Organisational behaviour literature backs up the claims in this book. Spreitzer and Doneson<sup>2</sup> argue there is a greater likelihood that employees engage in positive deviant behaviours once they are

<sup>1</sup> Pascale, Richard Tanner, and Jerry Sternin. “Your Company's Secret Change Agents.” Harvard Business Review, May 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Spreitzer, G.M. and Doneson, D. (2005), “Musings on the past and future of employee empowerment”, in Cummings, T. (Ed.), Handbook of Organizational Development, Sage Publishing, London.

psychologically empowered in the working environment. With empowerment, employees are willing to break out of stagnant mindsets to take a risk and try something new.

## The essence of the process

### 1. Don't presume that you have the answer

Start with a clean slate and be prepared to listen, really listen.

### 2. Keep teams or functional groups together

Have those who have to face exactly the same issues, have the same sets of resources together. In this way, everyone identifies totally with the others.

### 3. Let them do it themselves

Set up situations whereby people, including those who need to change the way that they operate, can discover, on their own, a better way to do things. Raise questions, but let the group come up with the answers on its own. **Establish research guidelines that isolate and analyse the behavior of positive deviants inside the group itself.**

**“Experts are ‘answers’ looking for problems to solve. PD practitioners, on the other hand, are community mobilisers who catalyze others’ empowerment.”.**

### 4. Identify conventional wisdom

Before you can recognise how the positive deviants stray from conventional wisdom, you first have to understand clearly what the accepted behavior is. Establish what it is that most group members do. Clarify the conventional wisdom of the average and of the majority.

### 5. Identify and analyse the deviants

As you track how all people in the group go about their tasks, and as you begin to list the behaviours that they all have in common, the positive deviants will naturally emerge. At the same time, it will become clear that the deviants have found a better way; their results will prove it. If you've defined your group effectively (in such a way that everyone has the exact same set of resources), then the people who need to change can see how to do it...if you help them identify the positive deviants. Just as important, they won't feel that an outside solution has been imposed on them. They will have discovered a new way of doing things themselves, making it their discovery, not yours. Analyse and list the set of behaviors that the deviants have in common. Single out exactly what makes them successful.

### 6. Let the deviants adopt deviations on their own

"The next step is critical," the authors says. "Once you find deviant behaviors, don't tell people about them. It's not a transfer of knowledge. It's not about importing best practices from somewhere else. **It's about changing behaviour.** You design an intervention that requires and enables people to access and to act on these new premises. You enable people to practice a new behavior, not to sit in a class learning about it."

The authors makes the point of emphasising the distinction: Don't teach new knowledge - encourage new behaviour. Let the people who have discovered the deviations spread the word in their group. Don't require adherence to the new practices, but do offer incentives for it.

**The fundamental shift...**

**Don't teach new knowledge....encourage new behaviour.**

### 7. Track results and publicise them

Post the results, show how they were achieved, and let other groups develop their own curiosity about them. Celebrate success when you achieve it. Go back on a periodic basis and observe how different groups have changed, and track the results quantitatively to show how positive deviance works. Chip away at conventional wisdom, and gradually alter low expectations by showing, in indisputable terms, the results that come with doing things differently.

### 8. Repeat steps one through seven

Make the whole process cyclical. Once people discover effective ways to deviate from the norm, and once those methods have become common practice, it's time to do another study to find out how the best performers in the group are operating now. Chances are that they've discovered new deviations from the new norm. The bell curve of performance keeps moving up, as long as you disseminate the best deviations across the curve and continue to discover new examples of positive deviance among the next group of best performers.

Some of the “takeaways from the book are:

**“It’s easier to act your way into a new way of thinking, than to think your way into a new way of acting.”**

The above quotation from the book sums up the essence of the approach. Far too often, we are drawn to the WHAT and forget the HOW. We are captivated by the technical “fix” and, the more complex, the more effective we believe it to be. “Experts” are critical in this process.

We are always mindful of the benefits of technical upgrades, new innovations, however as the authors say, “That’s the easy part – and only 20 percent of the work. What matters far more is the ‘how’ – the very particular journey that each community must engage in to mobilise itself, ... discover its latent wisdom, and put this wisdom into practice.”

Positive deviance is not the same as “Best Practice”  
As Change Specialist Kevin Bishop suggests: “What comes out of the positive deviance process should not be confused with ‘best practices’ that we all are familiar with in our organisations. ‘Best Practices’ are typically identified by those at the top and then presented to everyone else for adoption. Positive deviance, on the other hand, is based on discovery by the practitioners themselves, which promotes buy in, acceptance, and change.

## In summary

The co-authors acknowledge that the positive deviance process is not suitable for everything and suggest that “the process excels over most alternatives when addressing problems that :

1. Are enmeshed in a complex social system;
2. Require social and behavioural change; and
3. Entail solutions that are rife with unforeseeable or unintended consequences.”

Also, this process should be at least considered when the given problems are viewed as “intractable” after prior solutions failed. Moreover, the process redirects attention from “what’s wrong” to “what’s right” - observable exceptions that succeed “against all odds.”

The irony is that organisations spend enormous resources attacking negative deviance (as in “let’s do a root cause analysis and fix the problem”) but little or no effort looking for things that are “out of spec” in a positive direction. This is a book about how to do that - how to see what is happening, how to nurture it, and how to build a culture that embraces that kind of stimulus and change. For me that may have been the most powerful take-away: look for what is working - even better than you thought - work out why and embrace it.

The Power of Positive Deviance is available from good bookshops and on-line. At the time of preparing this review, it was not available in audible form.

**David Hanlon** is the founder of the Right Mind International Pty Ltd. He conducts his consulting and training activities globally. His leadership program, Conversations for Growth®, was a 2010 finalist in the Australian Institute of Training and Development’s Australian Learning Innovation award.