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Your Company's Secret Change Agents

by Richard Tanner Pascale and Jerry Sternin

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Some business problems—employees working at half their potential, endlessly escalating health care costs, conflicts between departments—never seem to get fixed, no matter how hard people try. But if you look closely, you'll find that the tyranny of averages always conceals sparkling exceptions to the rule. Somehow, a few isolated groups and individuals, operating with the same constraints and resources as everyone else, prevail against the odds.

Bridging the gap between what is happening and what is possible is what change management is all about. The traditional process for creating organizational change involves digging deep to uncover the root causes of problems, hiring experts or importing best-of-breed practices, and assigning a strong role to leaders as champions of change. We believe there is a better method, one that looks for indigenous sources of change. There are people in your company or group who are already doing things in a radically better way. The process we advocate seeks to bring the isolated success strategies of these "positive deviants" into the mainstream. Ordinary change management methods don't do a very good job at that: Managers either overlook the isolated successes under their noses or, having spotted them, repackage the discoveries as templates and disseminate them from the top. This seldom generates the enthusiasm necessary to create change. (For a look at the pitfalls of best practices, see the sidebar "Best Practices Are Hard to Copy.")

It's time for a radical break. Isolated success strategies can indeed be brought into the mainstream, but doing so requires a departure from the notions of benchmarking and best practices with which we are all familiar. The key is to engage the members of the community you want to change in the process of discovery, making them the evangelists of their own conversion experience. This means that as a leader, you will take on a very different role from the one you have played in previous change management scenarios.

During the past 14 years, we have been

working to uncover these positive deviants—usually individuals on the periphery of their organizations or societies who are far removed from the orthodoxies of mainstream change endeavors. These innovators' uncommon practices and behaviors enable them to find better solutions to problems than others in their communities. They are the key to this approach to change.

Change in Action

Skeptical readers may be inured to overheated claims of "the next new change model." Fasten your seat belts. Far from basing our case on esoteric and isolated incidents, we have derived our conclusions from some of the largest, messiest, most intractable change problems on the planet: malnutrition in Mali and Vietnam, catastrophic dropout rates within rural schools in Argentina, the trafficking of girls in East Java, the spread of HIV/AIDS in Myanmar, and the widespread practice of female circumcision in Egypt.

The positive deviance approach has also begun to penetrate the corporate consciousness. Goldman Sachs used it to transform the practices of its nationwide force of investment advisers. Engineers at Hewlett-Packard used it to tackle technical challenges. At Genentech, two positive deviants outperformed the median results of the company's national sales force by a factor of 20:1. Merck and Novartis are experimenting with the model as well. In short, the positive deviance model works. Its results are verifiable, replicable, and scalable. Millions of individuals around the world have been its beneficiaries. (For a look at the differences between the positive deviance model and the traditional approach, see the exhibit "Uncommon Sense?")

Based on inductive research, we developed the following six-step positive deviance model, which upends standard notions of the way change works.

Step 1: Make the group the guru. The literature on change management universally emphasizes the importance of "champions" and leaders. They matter, of course, but too often, these individuals generate unconstructive dependency from their teams. This absolves the community from owning the solutions it must adopt for change to succeed. In the positive deviance model, problem identification, ownership, and action begin in and remain with the community. Because the innovators are members of the community who are "just like us," disbelief and resistance are easier to overcome.

Consider what happened at a village in Mali, where prevailing beliefs attributed widespread childhood malnutrition to the village sorcerer. The will of the sorcerer was like an immutable law of nature that the villagers unquestioningly accepted. Nothing could prevail against the sorcerer's spells. Change seemed impossible.

Representatives from Save the Children who were working to solve the problem of malnutrition began a positive deviance inquiry—the jumping-off point for the process—with a simple question: "Has the sorcerer put a spell on *every* child in the village?" A few children in the community were, in fact, rarely sick or lethargic. It became clear that their parents engaged in behaviors that were different from those of the sick children's parents. They provided their children with several additional daily snacks, and all the members of the household washed their hands with soap and water. The fathers of the healthy children were also actively involved in mealtimes and helped decide whether their youngsters needed to go to the clinic (normally that decision was left to grandfathers). Perhaps, the villagers reasoned, these actions kept the sorcerer's spell at bay.

As the parents of the malnourished children began emulating their neighbors' counterconventional behaviors, their own children grew healthier. The villagers experienced a communitywide epiphany: They could be the agents of change. Malnutrition was no longer beyond their control. A wizened grandmother summed up the villagers' sense of triumph when she proclaimed, "We have vanquished the sorcerer!"

The field conditions in Mali have parallels in the corporate world. How often do we encounter conventional wisdom that shifts blame—along with the responsibility for fixing the problem—to those in authority? Contemporary superstitions such as "Headquarters will never let us do it" or "Don't bother; the boss already has the answer" create *Dilbert*-like echoes of villagers resigned to obeying the sorcerer.

At Hewlett-Packard, a seemingly intractable computer design problem was solved and turned into a competitive advantage when a positive deviant decided to take on the chal-

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Best Practices are Hard to Copy

Best practices and benchmarking share one trait with positive deviance: They strive to utilize success models to stimulate learning. But the similarities end there. Best practices rely on an external authority, not on the community itself, to identify and introduce a superior template. That, in part, is why best practices are often interpreted as code for "Why aren't you as good as the other guy?" With best practices, onlookers view the circumstances that fostered the success as being quite different from their own—it's easy to accuse advocates of having incubated success under exceptional and unreplicable conditions. Best practices are a foreign import. No surprise, then, that they suffer a dismal replication rate.

Recent events at top biopharmaceutical firm Genentech illustrate both the opportunities of positive deviance and the pitfalls of best practices. In 2003, Genentech introduced Xolair, a miracle drug for many chronic asthma sufferers. Unlike standard treatments, which arrest asthma attacks after they occur, Xolair modulates the histamines in the immune system and addresses asthma preventatively. The patient can lead a normal life, free from the fear of debilitating attacks. But despite Xolair's pharmacological superiority, sales remained well below expectations six months after launch.

As the company sought an explanation for the disappointing results, managers spotted an anomaly. Two 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, had successfully overcome resistance in the target audience.

Upon closer investigation, executives could see why this was happening. Genentech's traditional stronghold was in cancer medicine. Whereas oncologists and pulmonary specialists routinely administer chemotherapy—an infusion procedure—in their offices on an outpatient basis, allergists and pediatricians—the target market for asthma drugs—do not. Infusion protocols (delivering medication in the form of an intravenous drip) require infusion rooms, infusion couches, and infusion nurses—all of which were unfamiliar for this segment of physicians and their nursing staffs. The positive deviants from Dallas and Fort Worth understood that product acceptance would not happen through a standard sit-down physician call. Nor could resistance be allayed with yet more data demonstrating Xolair's pharmacological superiority. The hidden obstacles were fear of seemingly exotic procedures, concerns about time-consuming insurance approvals, and worries that patients would be exposed to unnecessary risks. At the heart of the matter was a need to alter the doctors' mindsets and the front-office culture.

The two women guided doctors and nurses through the process of readying the drug for infusion and administering it to patients. They taught administrators how to fill out the specialized paperwork. They pitched the drug's lifestyle impact and described how children who took Xolair could own pets and participate in outdoor sports. In expanding the horizons of doctors, nurses, and administrators, the two salespeople had discovered what armies of Genetech's market researchers had missed. They were successful because they had morphed into change agents.

Our narrative seems headed for the predictable successful conclusion. But what actually unfolded provides a sobering counterpoint. The aberrant sales results actually evoked consternation and scrutiny. Management's initial assumption was that the sales team had an unfair advantage and that territories or the quota system needed to be reconfigured. Belatedly, after retaining an external market research firm, the company accepted the merits of the change agent strategy. It then implemented a conventional best practices rollout. The manager of the Dallas and Fort Worth reps described the techniques to other managers during a conference call. The result? Partial acceptance by some members of the sales force. Implementation at modest velocity.

When identification of a superior method is imposed, not self-discovered, cries of "We're not them" or "It just won't work here" predictably limit acceptance. By contrast, a design that allows a community to learn from its own hidden wisdom is, among other things, respectful. Innovator and adopter share the same DNA. Community members invest sweat equity in discovering the positive deviants, and, in the process, they become partners to change.

lenge. The problem: When computers are left running—as most computers are—they get hot, which accelerates their failure rate. This is known as thermal transfer. Periodically, management would vaguely declare that something needed to be done about the issue. But the company's engineers, rewarded for tackling more intellectually demanding challenges, regarded the problem as a low-status janitorial job. The sorcerer, in this instance, was the fixed idea that thermal transfer was a fact of life; every computer on the planet built up heat, and there was little that could be done about it. Another fixed notion was that real computer engineers worked on more glamorous problems.

Uncommon Sense?

Traditional change efforts are typically top-down, outside in, and deficit based. They focus on fixing what's wrong or not working. They also assume a reasonable degree of predictability and control during the change initiative. Unintended consequences are rarely anticipated. Once a solution is chosen, the change program is communicated and rolled out through the ranks. The positive deviance approach to change, by contrast, is bottom-up, inside out, and asset based. It powers change from within by identifying and leveraging innovators. This method diminishes the social distance that often blocks acceptance.

TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO CHANGE	POSITIVE DEVIANCE APPROACH TO CHANGE
Leadership as Path Breaker Primary ownership and momentum for change come from above.	**Leadership as Inquiry** Leader facilitates search; community takes ownership of the quest for change.
Outside In Experts identify and disseminate best practices.	**Inside Out** Community identifies preexisting solutions and amplifies them.
Deficit Based Leaders deconstruct common problems and recommend best-practice solutions. Implication: "Why aren't you as good as your peers?"	**Asset Based** Community leverages preexisting solutions practiced by those who succeed against the odds.
Logic Driven Participants think into a new way of acting.	**Learning Driven** Participants act into a new way of thinking.
Vulnerable to Transplant Rejection Resistance arises from ideas imported or imposed by outsiders.	**Open to Self-Replication** Latent wisdom is tapped within a community to circumvent the social system's reaction.
Flows from Problem Solving to Solution Identification Best practices are applied to problems defined within the context of existing parameters.	**Flows from Solution Identification to Problem Solving** Solution space is expanded through the discovery of new parameters.
Focused on the Protagonists Engages stakeholders who would be conventionally associated with the problem.	**Focused on Enlarging the Network** Identifies stakeholders beyond those directly involved with the problem.

A program within HP's research division exposed a cadre of engineers to the concept of positive deviance. One of them, Chandra Patel, decided to take on thermal transfer in earnest. He set about identifying shards of a solution. Scattered around HP's global engineering fraternity were a few positive deviants who had dabbled in the problem and who had developed various ideas and prototypes. Ultimately, the inquiry galvanized 100 engineers and resulted in some unprecedented solutions. Today, HP enjoys unchallenged leadership in the thermal-transfer domain—an advantage that funnels millions to the bottom line as the result of savings generated from cooler and less-failure-prone machines. Patel was rewarded with increased opportunity and accelerated career advancement, as well as with peer recognition.

In short, some problems can be solved only by those in the trenches. When change agents work together to discover others just like them who are doing things differently, they can step up to being accountable for their own solutions.

Step 2: Reframe through facts. Inside-the-box definitions of problems guarantee inside-the-box solutions. Restating the problem shifts attention to fertile new ground and opens minds to new possibilities. If there is an art form to facilitating a positive deviance inquiry, it lies in ferreting out and framing the real challenge at hand, as opposed to reverting to tired clichés and pseudochallenges. By casting a problem in a different light and by using hard data to confront orthodoxies, a community can be encouraged to discover whether there are exceptions to the status quo and, if so, how those exceptions came about.

Reframing a problem entails three steps. First, grasp its conventional presentation ("The sorcerer's curse makes our children sick.") Second, find out if there are exceptions to the norm, people in identical circumstances who seem to be coping especially well. Third, reframe the problem to focus attention on the exceptions.

Reframing through facts was essential in addressing the elevated dropout rates in Argentina's rural elementary schools. A workshop on positive deviance sponsored by the World Bank brought together two dozen teachers and principals. They shared a strong suspicion that the nation's Ministry of Education was trying to implicate them in the high dropout rates

and deflect attention from the ministry's accountability for a woefully underfunded education system. Although 86% of children in Argentina completed elementary education, only 56% of children in the rural province of Misiones did so.

Imagine the setting: a stark cafeteria with concrete floors and steel chairs. The teachers and principals are seated, with their arms folded across their chests. Their body language speaks volumes: "OK, dazzle us with your expertise. This problem involves a whole bunch of things we can't control. We're angry. We haven't been paid in six months. We don't want to be here." Blame for the dropout problem lay elsewhere, in lazy students, uninterested parents, and lousy facilities.

The atmosphere changed when workshop participants turned their attention to the question of whether any schools plagued by the same constraints had a better track record. This reframing was reinforced by dropout statistics for all 120 schools in the Misiones district. Working in small groups, the educators found plenty of schools clustered near the median. But they were flabbergasted to discover that one school had retained 100% of its pupils through sixth grade and that ten had retained nearly 90%. "How," they asked themselves, "do these schools retain so many students?" After all, their teachers presumably hadn't been paid either. The mood shifted from self-righteous anger to surprise and curiosity.

The workshop participants visited the high-retention schools and discovered that the differentiating factor had little to do with what was happening in the classroom. The teachers there were negotiating "learning contracts" with rural parents before the beginning of each school year. In effect, the teachers were enrolling illiterate parents as partners in their children's education. As the children learned to read, add, and subtract, they could help their parents take advantage of government subsidies and compute the amount earned from crops or owed at the village store. With parents as partners, students showed up at school and did their assignments. The teachers and principals who had participated in the workshop began negotiating similar contracts with families of at-risk children. One year later, dropout rates in Misiones had reportedly decreased by half.

A corporate example that illustrates refram-

"Learn from the people, plan with the people… when the task is accomplished, the people all remark, we have done it ourselves"
—Lao-tzu

ing through hard data—although it's not part of a positive deviance inquiry—comes from Billy Beane, the celebrated general manager of the Oakland A's. In 1997, Beane took over a losing baseball team and a low-budget franchise. Instead of badgering the owners for more recruiting dollars or arguing with talent scouts over the prospects of high school superstars, Beane looked for great players by mining professional baseball's near-inexhaustible vein of statistics. In doing so, he shifted management's focus from religious wars over the potential and value of players to an actuarial examination of the factors that most highly correlated with winning games. On-base percentage turned out to be a far better predictor than long-shot bets on who would be the next Barry Bonds. Beane's approach transformed the A's into a frequent title contender, though he had one of the smallest budgets in the game. The moral? There's value in looking at things in a different way and getting beyond gut feelings to hard facts.

Step 3: Make it safe to learn. People get attached to the status quo, even when it's not good for them. Problems often go unresolved because the path to the solution is littered with potential losses and other risks. It is essential to acknowledge that journeying into terra incognita is a danger sport. Positive deviants may fear being exposed, ridiculed, or subjected to retaliation if their newly enhanced influence challenges the status of others. Authority figures may feel threatened by a process that invites them to learn rather than just have all the answers or, as in the case of Mali's sorcerers, that disempowers them altogether. Likewise, the others in the group may fear that acknowledging a problem implicates them in it. Few hospitals, for example, want to tackle the predictive indicators of malpractice because doing so might be misconstrued as having foreknowledge. What's more, discussions might be discoverable in legal proceedings. Only when people feel safe enough to discuss a taboo and when the community is sufficiently invested in finding solutions can the prospect of an alternative reality appear.

In Indonesia, the need for psychological safety underscored the difficult topic of human trafficking. A local nongovernmental organization (NGO) had observed the worrisome trend among poor East Javan families of "exporting" young village girls to urban centers. Silence en-shrouded the practice. Parental shame was compounded by fear of repercussions if procurers' supply channels were disrupted.

The NGO convened a low-profile positive deviance workshop for villagers to explore "safe" problems such as school dropout rates. As the workshop leaders talked about how positive deviance had helped communities find solutions for sensitive challenges such as HIV/AIDS-risk reduction in other countries, the group became less guarded. One outspoken volunteer raised the issue of girls "going out"—a euphemism for trafficking. The oblique approach to the undiscussable topic eventually led the villagers to broach the problem of girls being sent away by their poverty-stricken parents.

The participants organized an inquiry and visited poor families that had resisted the temptation to send their girls away. Six months later, community watch groups had identified the homes of high-risk girls. Local leaders, who had previously ignored regulations regarding submission of "travel papers," began to enforce the rules. Today, this early warning system dispatches volunteers to counsel the families of all girls planning to leave the village and provides access to positive deviant families that have addressed their economic shortfalls through other means, such as creating home gardens and purchasing fewer packs of cigarettes. The approach has halved the number of documented trafficking incidents in the area.

Corporations have their own sets of unspoken taboos that, if not addressed, can develop into problems of Enronesque proportions. Richard Pascale, one of the authors of this article, has worked with companies such as Coca-Cola, Ford, BP, Shell, and BAE Systems to surface "undiscussable" issues using a four-step "organizational CAT scan." The centerpiece of this process is a one-day workshop, set up and conducted by an external facilitator. The group consists of 50 to 100 key stakeholders deemed critical to organizational change. The convening executive kicks off the event by emphasizing the importance of confronting problems squarely and of learning from past failures. The focus is on identifying and removing obstacles, not killing messengers. Candor is crucial to this work. The group members read blind and blunt quotes from one another that talk about the problems in the company. The group then divides into subgroups, each of

which delves into the identified issues and reports back in an hour or two with its analysis. In a span of six hours, an organization can generate a penetrating, real-time case study of itself. On the heels of this exercise, teams can examine the identified problems and return with action plans and milestones within 30 to 60 days.

Step 4: Make the problem concrete. Corporations are awash in meaningless discourse. While words are exchanged and heads are nodded, a great deal of signal distortion is happening between sender and receiver. Because of unwritten social codes meant to keep individuals from being put on the spot, people aren't forced to speak concretely—in fact, they're often discouraged from doing so. These abstractions do a lot to obscure insight. Consider, for example, how the format of PowerPoint can blur or hide hard facts: Before NASA's devastating loss of the Columbia space shuttle, engineers from Martin Marietta and Boeing buried the imminent risks to the spacecraft's protective ceramic tiles within the complicated, nested, ten-point-font bullet points of their PowerPoint presentation.

A firm grasp of reality obliterates vague assumptions and helps focus attention on what's really working. Dealing directly with an uncomfortable truth requires stating it concretely so that there is no way to duck the challenge at hand. This is not merely a matter of being specific. It also entails portraying or dramatizing a pivotal issue in a compelling way. An example of this type of framing occurred during a positive deviance workshop devoted to finding practices to curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS in Myanmar. The group consisted of prostitutes—nearly all of whom insisted that she faithfully made her clients use condoms. The moment of truth occurred when each participant was asked to apply a condom to a banana. Varying degrees of dexterity quickly differentiated the pretenders from the practitioners. The positive deviants, once identified, began sharing the negotiation strategies they used to persuade their partners to use condoms. Soon the others in the group became adept at overcoming their partners' objections. With the right exercises, many organizations could profit from appropriate reincarnations of the "banana test."

Step 5: Leverage social proof. The old adage "Seeing is believing" has particular potency when it comes to change. Take Alcoholics Anonymous. In the 1930s, two positive deviants stumbled onto the notion of holding weekly get-togethers to help keep themselves sober. Others joined. An inductive process of reflection and learning gave rise to the 12-step program—a protocol that was decades ahead of any intervention that had been devised by professional psychiatry. The approach is enshrined today in the worldwide success of AA and its application to many afflictions. Social proof is the lifeblood of the support group movement.

Let's turn to a far more dramatic example of the power of social proof. Envision a frightened child struggling in the grip of her mother and aunt against the assault of a barber and his straight razor. In Egypt, female genital mutilation (FGM) or female circumcision is a 4,000-year-old practice used by Christian Copts and Muslims alike to deprive women of sexual enjoyment and to ensure faithfulness. Ninety percent of Egyptian girls, usually between the ages of nine and 13, undergo the painful and sometimes dangerous procedure, often without understanding what is happening to them or why. Girls sometimes die from infection or blood loss. The practice is tightly woven into the fabric of Egyptian life and, as such, is strongly resistant to change. Traditionally, it hasn't been seen as a problem; it's simply "the way it is."

Could women's advocates find families in Egyptian villages that did not circumcise their girls—and would such families be willing to talk? Eventually, advocates in one village identified a few exceptions to the norm. The first interviews—with uncircumcised women, mothers and fathers who were against the practice, and husbands who had knowingly married uncircumcised women—were held in a remote, guarded monastery to ensure anonymity. The half-dozen families that came forward provided additional contacts who were willing to give testimony. A year into the project, more than 100 families had been identified and interviewed.

For victims, their mothers, and other female relatives, discussing the trauma of the practice spawned a therapeutic cycle of catharsis, forgiveness, and healing. The women gave poignant testimony: "We are butchering our girls." "Cutting out the tongue does not deny the experience of hunger." "Desire is in the mind, not

the organs." "I could never trust my mother again." As the conversation progressed, a new consciousness began to form. Word spread, and communities began to more openly discuss female circumcision. Other families expressed their willingness not only to be interviewed but also to be advocates within their communities.

Over time, the village experienced a contagion of spontaneous initiatives. In one case, an 18-year-old girl gathered her peers in the dusty shade of a village tamarisk tree. Together, they relived the horror of their experiences and their feelings of betrayal. All agreed to return home and beg their mothers not to subject their younger sisters to the same fate. In another case, a sheik, speaking in the mosque during prayers, asserted that circumcision was not required by Islam. Soon, mainstream village voices began to join the chorus of dissenters. An alternative possibility—rejecting the practice of FGM—was gaining legitimacy.

In the past five years, tens of thousands of ordinary villagers have proven that it is possible for a woman to be uncircumcised and still be virtuous. More than 1,000 circumcisions have been averted in a few villages alone. More remarkable, the Egyptian government is initiating its first nationwide anti-FGM campaign.

Step 6: Confound the immune defense response. Newton was right: Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. In organizations, that reaction comes in the form of avoidance, resistance, and exceptionalism. But when you fan the embers within a community rather than rely on firebrands from headquarters or outside the group, change feels natural. Internally developed solutions circumvent transplant rejection, since the change agents share the same DNA as the host. The trick is to introduce already existing ideas into the mainstream without excessive use of authority. Why use a sledgehammer when a feather will do?

Five years ago, Goldman Sachs's Private Wealth Management (PWM) business unit had experienced a string of top-down change initiatives. Its field force of more than 300 investment advisers felt strong pressure to adopt an unproven business model imposed by New York's far-reaching policy shifts and top-down edicts. Headquarters felt thwarted in achieving the pace of change needed to stay in step with the marketplace.

Investment professionals (IPs) in the field historically operated independently or as two-person teams. Each unit evolved highly idiosyncratic approaches to the work of persuading high-net-worth clients to entrust it with the management of their money. Success depended on performance, of course, but also on the creation of deep, trusting relationships with clients that often lasted for generations. Investors often invited IPs to weddings, bar mitzvahs, and graduations, extending relationships from anchor clients to heirs.

By late 2000, PWM's top management was deeply concerned that the industry was undergoing a transformation of seismic proportions. Investment firms were under pressure to deliver greater transparency and compliance oversight while simultaneously reducing their brokerage fees. How could Goldman Sachs retain its clients, improve its profitability, and grow its assets in a depressed but increasingly competitive environment? Management's solution was to transform the IPs' approach from a model that relied heavily on brokerage income to one focused on fee-based advice. But the IPs, having built their individual franchises on a well-proven formula, were passionate advocates of the "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" maxim.

One of the leaders of the PWM unit at the time was at the center of the impasse. His chosen path was to relinquish the conventional role of authority figure and let go of top management's deep attachment to its solution. Instead, he exercised a stealth brand of leadership, asking the IPs one arresting question: "Are some teams, with similar territories and prospects, able to thrive in this difficult climate?"

A six-person council of influential IPs (selected as guerrilla leaders from nationwide field offices) spearheaded a "sales force effectiveness" inquiry. The council's task was to identify exceptionally successful approaches. Its members assured the rank and file that any findings would be subjected to an acid test of relevance and scalability—what was working for the best team in Boston would have to be transferable to teams everywhere else.

Phase one of the project began in 2000 with a two-month discovery period that identified five positive deviant practices among the most successful IP teams. Phase two expanded the

community of discovery by creating five roll-out squads (again made up of informal leaders selected from around the country) for each of the five practices. The squads were charged with coming up with a template that every IP team in the country could adopt and implement on a voluntary basis.

When it was time to roll out the new templates and train others, these squads became the pointed end of the spear. They visited each office and explained why and how their particular practices worked. There was one person on each squad from each office, so one of the presenting IPs could double as a local resource on the topic. When local IP teams had questions, they turned to the resource person. This dynamic generated an amazing buzz throughout the PWM unit.

Phase three of the process involved building a system to measure progress toward goals and to track trends. Each of the 11 regional offices were ranked by their incorporation of the five practices, and the results were publicized. The process relied exclusively on transparency and peer review. No sanctions for nonadoption were imposed. People automatically felt good about being on top or bad about being on the bottom. This sustained attention when backsliding might have otherwise set in.

During the course of this endeavor, old rivalries between teams subsided. For the first time in memory, a sense of "We win together" emerged as the new ethic. Skepticism gave way to conviction as the IPs overcame their own exceptionalism. The positive deviance approaches, implemented over 18 months, shifted behavior, practice, and performance. The PWM unit got a jump on the competition. Three years later, it has gone from being a source of tumult and marginal economic returns to being a major contributor to overall firm earnings. The average productivity per IP has nearly doubled, team size has increased from 1.7 to the near-optimal three IPs per team, and the fee-based model has achieved almost universal acceptance. Today, Goldman Sachs reports that high net-worth assets under management have reached an astonishing $130 billion.

The Leader's New Role

The positive deviance approach requires a role reversal in which experts become learners, teachers become students, and leaders become followers. Leaders must relinquish to the community the job of chief discoverer. This isn't easy, for it requires leaders to set aside their egos and habitual identities (being the go-to guy, the decision maker who knows what to do). What, then, becomes of the leader?

While he or she seemingly abdicates the traditional role of discoverer, important work remains to be done. This includes four primary tasks: management of attention, allocation of scarce resources, reinforcement to sustain the momentum of inquiry, and application of score-keeping mechanisms to sustain attention and ensure progress toward goals once the community has chosen its course of action.

Instead of being the "CEO"—chief expert officer—the leader becomes the "CFO"—chief facilitation officer—whose job is to guide the positive deviance process as it unfolds. This role is as radically different from traditional leadership practices as the technique itself is from standard approaches.

The classic KAP (knowledge, attitude, practice) behavior-change model holds that knowledge changes attitudes, which in turn change practice. Positive deviance facilitators turn this upside down and employ a PAK (practice, attitude, knowledge) approach instead. Once you help the community discover who the positive deviants are and identify their practices, you help change people's attitudes through action. Why? Because people are much more likely to act their way into a new way of thinking than to think their way into a new way of acting.

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Should the positive deviance approach be applied to every change initiative? Of course not. When there are proven remedies to technical problems—the Salk vaccine to polio, supply-chain management practices, hardware and software solutions—companies can use them to work harder, faster, or smarter. And problems that rely on brainpower but that don't require major behavioral adjustments, as in the case of portfolio rebalancing, are unsuitable for the positive deviance approach.

The method works best when behavioral and attitudinal changes are called for—that is, when there is no apparent off-the-shelf remedy and successful coping strategies remain isolated and concealed. In such cases, change from within, discovered, celebrated, and implemented by the people who need to do the

People are much more likely to act their way into a new way of thinking than to think their way into a new way of acting.

changing, is a surefire win.

The Taoist sage Lao-tzu captures the essence of the positive deviance approach with eloquent simplicity:

Learn from the people
Plan with the people
Begin with what they have
Build on what they know
Of the best leaders

When the task is accomplished
The people all remark
We have done it ourselves

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