



**Saïd Business School**  
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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## **EXPLORING POSITIVE DEVIANCE – NEW FRONTIERS IN COLLABORATIVE CHANGE**

14–15 May 2010

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# EXPLORING POSITIVE DEVIANCE – NEW FRONTIERS IN COLLABORATIVE CHANGE

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Report from a practice research workshop held 14–15 May 2010  
Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, Executive Education Centre

## WORKSHOP PARTNERS



POSITIVE  
DEVIANCE  
INITIATIVE



W O O D W A R D  
L E W I S

## PREFACE



**Gay Haskins**  
**Dean of Executive Education**  
**Saïd Business School**

Many of our Executive Education clients – whether policy makers or managers, whether public sector or private, face a world of change and turbulence. Our strategy and leadership programmes in Executive Education at the Saïd Business School increasingly include sharing of new approaches to dealing with large scale and sustainable change – often to address adaptive and wicked problems. Our research at Oxford can draw on traditional management research as well as other social sciences, life sciences, and humanities. Business also needs to learn continuously from the world of change in wider societies and communities.

As Dean of Executive Education at Oxford I was delighted to sponsor this practice workshop to bring together both academics and practitioners to share ideas about change and Positive Deviance in particular we were also delighted to honour the memory of the late Jerry Sternin, who has done so much to pursue ‘change for the good’. My thanks in particular go to Associate Fellow Keith Ruddle, Jane Lewis from Woodward Lewis and colleagues from the Positive Deviance Initiative, and to Paul Kadetz for their generosity with time and resources to make this workshop a success.

We aim to hold similar future events and would be very interested to hear ideas from our clients, contacts and colleagues with an interest in leadership and management practice and how Executive Education at Saïd Business School can help.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gay Haskins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all the participants, facilitators, rapporteurs and to those who provided supporting materials after the conference for these notes. Notes from Rachel Amato and Jim Armstrong notes have been very helpful. Thank you in particular to Dr Richard Pascale for sharing his proof of “The Power of Positive Deviance” ahead of publication to provide additional insights, and for his input to the design and conduct of the workshop. A special thank you goes to Pam Reeder for her unstinting help with the organisation of the event. Acknowledgement for front cover and key photos goes to Cécile Demailly.

**Keith Ruddle**, Saïd Business School  
**Jane Lewis**, Woodward Lewis

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## WHY POSITIVE DEVIANCE AT SAÏD BUSINESS SCHOOL?

We are not short of recipes and approaches to leading or managing change. Increasingly, as communities, systems and organisations face more adaptive or ‘intractable’ problems, with economic constraints, traditional ‘top down’ approaches have been complemented with other approaches that work within and with the system itself. Positive Deviance (PD) can be seen as in a family of approaches that harnesses the innovations and expertise already present in a community. This minimises resistance and facilitates adaptation. It has demonstrated success in addressing a wide range of intractable issues such as malnutrition, antibiotic resistant infections in hospitals, teen violence, infant mortality, re-integration of child soldiers, school retention, HIV transmission, and sales force productivity. The approach aims to achieve change without additional resources, making it an attractive option in an era of economic constraints.

The late Jerry Sternin pioneered its application in a wide range of countries and contexts, with his wife, Monique and a small group of colleagues that included Richard Pascale – who established the Positive Deviance Initiative at Tufts University, funded originally by the Ford Foundation. Richard, an Associate Fellow at Oxford who leads sessions on Oxford’s Executive Education programmes on adaptive leadership, introduced PD and Jerry to Oxford through the Consulting and Coaching for Change masters programme. Jerry subsequently became an Associate Fellow of the Saïd Business School. His work and innovative contributions were celebrated in a dinner prior to this practice research workshop held at Saïd Business School’s Executive Education Centre in May 2010.

A new book on Positive Deviance is being published by Harvard Business Press in June 2010. Written by Dr Richard Pascale, Jerry and Monique Sternin, “The Power of Positive Deviance – how unlikely innovators solve the world’s toughest problems”, is the first comprehensive study of cases and the approach, with vivid, first-hand stories of what has been achieved. This book was used as a source of core material for the workshop. This was a timely opportunity to meet and share experience of both PD and its place in a wider landscape of approaches to sustainable change.

## WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES AND PARTICIPANTS

The aim of this workshop was to explore and discuss the PD experience with academics, policy makers, and change practitioners, and debate where it fits in the broader landscape of large scale transformation and change in the private and public sectors. Specific objectives were:

- To explore the latest thinking and experiences in approaches to sustainable and scalable change through participation, exchange and debate
- To learn from, critique and explore the applicability of Positive Deviance in a range of change settings
- To review how PD fits with a wider landscape of change approaches
- To set a possible future agenda for research, practice exploration and leadership development

The Practice Research Workshop was designed and led by Dr Richard Pascale and Dr Keith Ruddle, with help from Jane Lewis of Woodward Lewis, a UK PD practitioner, and Roberto Saco, Chairman of the American Society for Quality, principal of Aporia Advisors and author of a study of PD and its links to other asset-based change methods. Paul Kadetz, of Queen Elizabeth House at Oxford, was instrumental in bringing the workshop about and also contributed to content and facilitation. Angela Sims of Woodward Lewis added ideas and facilitation expertise.

Leading speakers from the Positive Deviance Initiative (PDI), Tufts University, Boston Massachusetts, included Monique Sternin, Dr Jon Lloyd, Mark Munger, and Randa Wilkinson. They provided insights from field work. Lars Thuesen of the Danish Probation and Prison Service also contributed a case study. Their supporting materials have been a helpful source for these notes and a summary of their ‘pitches’ is set out in the section on Positive Deviance in Practice.

The other participants were experienced change practitioners, clients of Saïd Business School and Woodward Lewis, alumni of the Saïd Business School/HEC Paris Consulting and Coaching for Change (CCC) masters programme, and members of Saïd Business School’s advisory board and faculty. The full delegate list is to be found at the end of this report.

# FUNDAMENTALS OF POSITIVE DEVIANCE (PD)

PD is one of a number of asset-based approaches to change. It is based on the observation that in every community, there are a few people, the positive deviants, who have managed to cope with apparently intractable problems within the same resources as their peers. One key feature is its highly practical approach to formulating and re-framing a social or behavioural problem and in learning from existing successful practices, within resources that are already available. The community then decides how to best amplify and practise these existing discovered behaviours.

Sustainable change occurs when the community is facilitated to:

- Define/recognise the problem
- Use data to determine if there are positive deviants (PDs)
- Discover the detail of what they do
- Act their way into a new way of thinking, by learning how to do what PDs do and by using data to see the results for themselves

The approach empowers the community to:

- Discover existing and sustainable solutions from within and learn from the process
- Own the process and foster innovation
- Identify, involve and engage all stakeholders
- Create and expand formal and informal social networks
- Promote action and support the implementation of the discovered successful behaviours and strategies
- Track progress by creating its own monitoring and evaluation tools
- Amplify social and behaviour change by sharing results and adoption of new behaviours in the wider community

Whilst ownership of a positive deviance project must rest with the people who need to deliver change, facilitation of the process is critical. This might initially involve an external intervention but later can involve internally learnt facilitation capability. Whilst a PD exercise falls broadly into four stages as outlined above, it is an iterative process, as the problem under review tends to 'morph' as the project progresses.

The traditional, or standard model of change is contrasted with the PD model of change in the table below. A discussion about the standard model of change was also part of the morning's events.

Traditional approach to change	PD approach to change
Management identifies the 'problem' and benefit to the organisation of solving it	The people affected identify the problem and the benefits gained for themselves by solving it
Management owns the data that measures the problem and monitors progress	The people are facilitated to develop their own data and use it to make the problem concrete and to quantify solutions
Ownership and momentum for change come from above – leadership is through traditional project management processes	The people are offered to help to solve their own problems; they own the problem and its solution; those affected are coached and facilitated through the journey of change
Deficit-based finding what's wrong	Asset-based – finding what's right, amplifying successful practices
Improvements are brought in from outside, through experts, benchmarking and so on	Improvements are spread from the inside outwards, through finding existing solutions and amplifying them
Improvement strategies are driven by logic – people are expected to think their way into a new method of acting, emotion and other non-rational resistance tend to be underrated	Improvement comes from seeing and experiencing a different way of working – acting their way into a new way of thinking, using their own data to see improvement
'Transplant rejection' can occur through resistance to practices imported from outside (the 'not invented here' syndrome)	Self-replication occurs – latest wisdom is tapped and tangible/visible benefits are delivered quickly by the people, for the people
Flow of thought is from problem identification and solving to solution identification; best practices are applied within defined parameters	Flow of thought starts with problem definition but moves straight away to those who have found a solution within the community and context
Focus starts on those who are directly associated with the problem – easy to fall into a blame culture	Starts by getting perspectives from all potential stakeholders and focuses on those who have found a solution without 'putting them in the frame'

*Contrasting the 'standard model' of change and PD – from Lewis, 2007*

# POSITIVE DEVIANCE IN PRACTICE

Following an introduction by Dr Keith Ruddle and scene setting by Dr Richard Pascale, seven case studies were presented in a 'trade fair' format. They included community and organisational development examples, as follows:

## **MALNUTRITION IN VIETNAM: FACILITATED BY MARK MUNGER, SENIOR ASSOCIATE, PDI**

Mark Munger presented his insights into the seminal case study of how a community was facilitated by the Sternins to identify a range of positively deviant practices. In the community, the norm was to feed children rice twice a day, and this practice was a major source of the problem. PD practices were to feed shrimps and crabs from paddy fields, with greens, several times a day. The community conducted its own enquiry and observation process, with the leadership of a key community member, which demonstrated by measurement how effective these practices were, then taught the rest of the community to adopt and sustain them. Malnutrition decreased by up to 85% in pilot communities over two years. When the Sternins returned five years later, they found that families had maintained the PD practices from one child to the next and that new mothers were being taught the feeding techniques.

## **FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING (FGC) IN EGYPT: FACILITATED BY MONIQUE STERNIN, DIRECTOR, PDI**

In this case, a critical issue was that the community did not recognise FGC as a problem. Advocacy was therefore required to address a cultural tradition, where 96% of females are circumcised, irrespective of social, educational or religious backgrounds and beliefs.

Monique Sternin explained how the PD approach was used to improve advocacy work being carried out by local Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) amongst families. Their aim was to raise awareness of the enormous physiological and psychological problems faced by girls who had been through this procedure. The starting point was that at that very moment there were 300,000 to 500,000 women who were not circumcised. That meant that there were successful advocates who had influenced thousands of relatives not to practise FGC – i.e. positive deviants. The small group discovered:

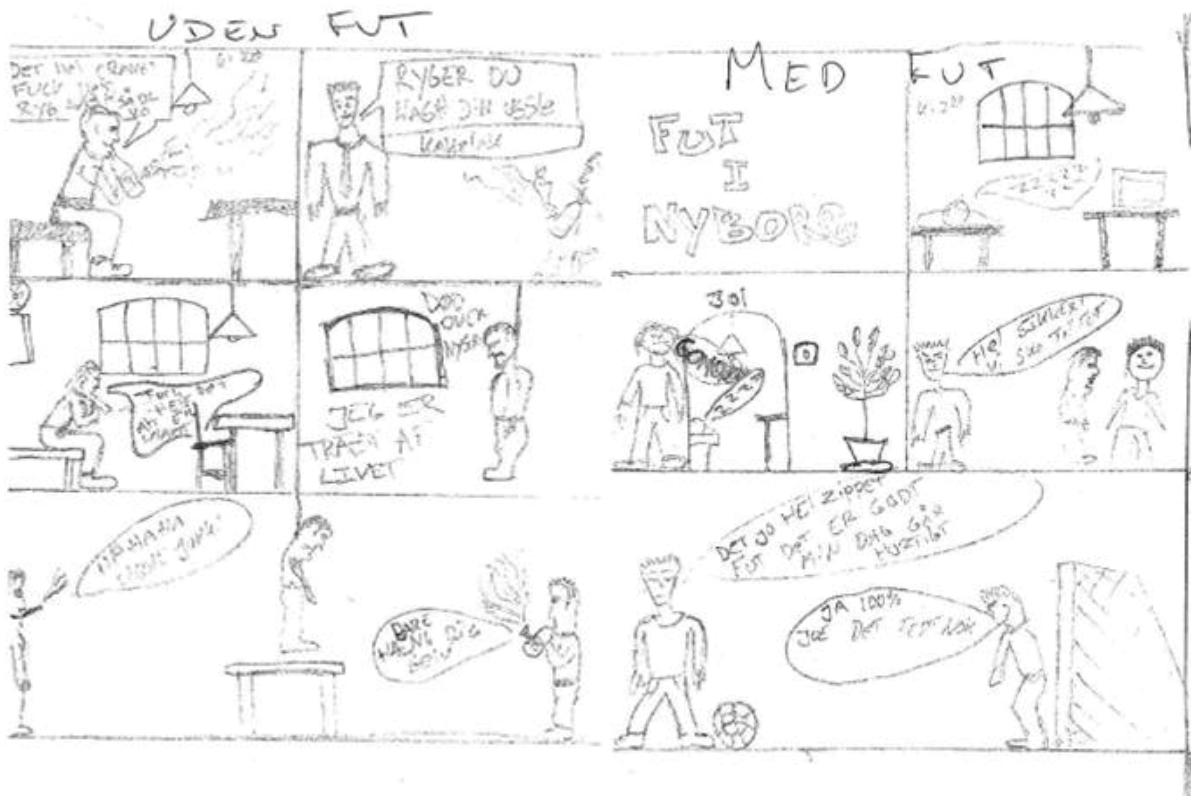
- Other relatives who successfully convinced the decision maker not to circumcise a young girl relative
- Uncircumcised married women
- The husbands of uncircumcised women
- Doctors who have stopped practising female circumcision
- Sheikhs and priests openly against the practice

By capitalising on the presence of PD individuals and skilfully overcoming the fear of discussing FGC in the community, the advocacy movement against FGC is building momentum in upper Egypt. The results of this activity are that there are now dozens of circumcision-free villages and that a large proportion of families are now delaying the decision to circumcise. The latest Demographic and Health Survey showed a decline from 82% in 1995 to 63% in 2008 in women who believe that FGC should continue.

## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS IN DANISH PRISONS: FACILITATED BY LARS THUESEN, DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT, DANISH PROBATION AND PRISONS SERVICE**

The Danish prison system is acknowledged worldwide for low rates of recidivism, high numbers of inmate re-socialisation, high security standards, and a healthy working environment. Still, severe social challenges exist in fulfilling overall goals of reducing criminality by balancing tough and soft approaches. The nature of the challenges is often systemic, complicated, and entails a lot of dilemmas in the daily working routines. On one hand, the system entails a lot of control and regulatory mechanisms; on the other, it requires much system flexibility and individual judgement in order to function effectively.

Using PD principles, better practices have emerged, which at first sight may not seem dramatic, but none the less, have an enormous impact, as can be seen from the cartoon drawn by an inmate, below:



An inmate has drawn this cartoon showing the situation before and after the initiative. Before the initiative he is bored, smoking hashish and the relationship to the guards is very negative. Finally he hangs himself. After the initiative the feelings are positive, with kind 'good mornings' and common sports activities with staff and inmates together

The results of the exercise have included a programme of engagement and physical fitness training, a review of guard behaviours that improve or 'tighten' prisoner relationships and in a third establishment, a review of PD behaviours in respect of guard absence that showed that PDs have a natural regard for prisoners whilst maintaining a professional distance. PDs don't read prisoner's records and keep an open mind about what they see.

The full findings of this exercise are available in a paper on the PDI website.

### **SALES IMPROVEMENT MERCK PHARMACEUTICALS – EARLY WINS, SQUANDERED GAINS: FACILITATED BY DR RICHARD PASCALE**

This case study demonstrates how the not-invented-here syndrome prevented transference of a highly successful PD exercise that boosted Mexico from the bottom of the league table of Fosamax sales to the top.

Richard Pascale explained how Grey Warner, the area manager, had agreed to try PD as a means of tackling an intractable sales performance problem. The company already had much data to analyse performance and Mexico was identified as losing market share.

There were many rules enforced by district managers based on company orthodoxy, in particular, the rule of seven, which dictated that sales representatives had to make seven calls a day to hit targets. District managers were therefore tasked to interview sales reps to identify positively deviant practices. Their discoveries were surprising. Whereas the average salesman was adhering to standards (i.e., adhering to management's sales productivity checklist), exceptional people were throwing the rulebook away. Scattered across Mexico were a few exceptional sales reps with novel shortcuts to productivity, imaginative ways of positioning products, and personal touches that made them a trusted partner with the doctors.





*Richard Pascale explains the Merck phenomenon*

Management convened a big meeting of sales reps to debate the results, without telling them how to share best practice. Through conversations, reps were learning from each other. District managers observed from the sidelines and did not intrude on group discussions. PD practices were learned through discussion rather than diktat, and market share in Mexico for Fosamax became the highest in the world. However, the PD approach was not taken on elsewhere. The process was energy intensive and Pascale ascribes the lack of interest as 'organisational drift', a kind of regression to the average, where lack of management commitment meant that further investment in PD was not made, despite impressive, measurable results. Managers appeared reluctant to invest resources perceived as scarce into this way of working.

### **NEONATAL DEATH IN PAKISTAN: FACILITATED BY RANDA WILKINSON**

PD has helped to reduce neonatal death in the Haripur district of the North West Frontier province in Pakistan. One in four newborns were dying within the first 40 days of birth. After the project, no newborns died the first year, and the programme has been amplified through a national television series. Monitoring newborn outcome is now routine in this district.

The district is remote and culture requires strict gender segregation. By inviting men, who traditionally are not involved in any activity related to pregnancy and childbirth, to discuss the issue of newborns dying, and furthermore engaging men and women separately but simultaneously, in the process of discovery, the team from Save the Children led by Monique Sternin were able to create the possibility of change.

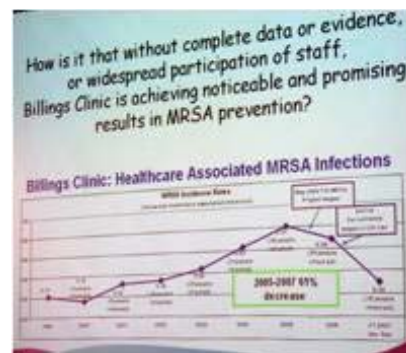
Discussion, often using symbolic objects and dolls to represent new-born babies, raised awareness of the issues and the scale of the problem. One key positive deviant finding among the men was having a clean, new razor blade as part of the delivery kit. Among the women, a positive deviant behaviour came from a mother-in-law. Common practice was for a woman to give birth in the animal shed and once the baby was delivered, to place the newborn on the dirt floor until the new mother had been attended to. One mother-in-law made a small pillow out of rags to place the newborn on, and then covered her new grandchild with a warm rag before attending to her daughter-in-law.

The importance of involving men was critical, as were regular meetings and culturally appropriate messages around the discovered behaviours. After a year, no neonatal deaths had occurred and the community decided to celebrate with a healthy baby fair. Organised by the community, this celebration was the first time men and women gathered together under one roof, separated by a wall of cloth. Healthy Baby Fairs have been repeated in subsequent years and a television series was broadcast nationally sharing those behaviours that can be replicated without outside resources and which save newborns from dying. Not everything went smoothly – mothers-in-law felt their authority was undermined, so they were included in subsequent activities.

### **VETERANS ADMINISTRATION HOSPITALS – MRSA REDUCTION: FACILITATED BY DR JON LLOYD**

MRSA (methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus) in the USA kills as many people as would be killed if a 747 crashed every five days. This case study demonstrated how PD is a catalyst, enabling people to look again at problems they have become fatalistic about. It is a process that bridges 'science' (rules, principles of 'good' practice) and real life. In the case of MRSA in the hospitals, where people know what the rules about hygiene are, surgeons were the worst offenders.

Jon Lloyd explained how, being desperate, the Center for Disease Control invited the Sternins to talk to 150 representative staff at one of the largest hospitals about PD. Dr Rajiv Jain, the Chief Medical Officer, showed leadership in allowing the group the space to opt in and to develop their own solutions. There were examples of outstanding creativity in raising awareness of the issues and, hidden away, some unlikely practitioners of effective disease control.



The PD process involved everyone in infection control, reducing infection and changing attitudes at all levels. Improvisational theatre was an important tool in raising awareness of personal responsibility for controlling infection. The PD approach brought everyone in the hospitals into discussions and exercises that revealed how easily the bacterium is spread, and which revealed ideas and solutions from all sides. A janitor had practised a way of safely disposing of soiled gowns for years and the clergy in the hospitals suddenly realised that germs could be spread on the holy books they took with them when they visited patients.

Although the hospitals had been working successfully with the Toyota Production System, gains had been slow. After implementing PD, infection rates declined noticeably quickly, as can be seen in the graph above. This initiative has been so successful that it is now being rolled out across all of the Veterans Administration Hospitals, and also in Canada.

## APPLICATIONS OF PD IN THE UK

As yet there have been only a few applications of PD in the UK. As Richard Pascale pointed out, it seems to work well where the 'psychological contract' in organisations means that there is a strong professional ethos with delegated authority. One of the seven trade fair cases was from the UK.

### HERTFORDSHIRE ADULT CARE SERVICES: FACILITATED BY JANE LEWIS

This important area of Hertfordshire County Council provides support for infirm and elderly adults, and 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 between 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.



Flipchart from workshop session highlighting problems

Having heard about PD from Jerry Sternin's seminar at Egrove Park for Woodward Lewis, the Assistant Director of Performance agreed to give PD a try, and a team was put together, which represented all levels, with a light-touch approach to supervision by the deputy area manager.

## WHAT THE TEAM DELIVERED

In three months:

- Up to 30% time savings per day for some 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 stage of the adaptations process for Council tenants
- Enabled team to cope with more referrals during a flu epidemic
- Lots of 'latent solutions' – letters to service users, 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) as a focal point and prompt for ideas
- By collecting data that highlighted some problems that were not visible and that disproved some myths
- Middle managers oiled the wheels and kept team focused
- Top management created space – allowing access to teams, not being involved in 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 first time for callers
- Hyperlinking documents within the two systems in use to stop duplication of input
- Cutting out stages in processes and a whole 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.

## 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

## OTHER UK APPLICATIONS

Jane and her team have since worked on a similar project with Peterborough Adult Care Services, and are also working with Gosport Borough Council and Hampshire County Council on community projects that are using the approach to:

- Prevent teenage pregnancy
- Improve well-being on deprived estates
- Improve the safety of children from 0–5 years
- Address the behaviour of parents on the school run and increase the number of children walking to school

The approach has made sufficient impact to now be rolled out across Hampshire. The Home Office is interested in PD as a means of engaging the public in improving anti-social behaviour, and Southwark Council is considering it as a means of tackling domestic violence.

It is particularly attractive at the moment, as it unlocks social capital in line with the coalition Government's Big Society concept. It should translate into real cost savings for government over the medium to long term, if the resources inherent in the community are applied to deliver and sustain improved outcomes. The community sustains the solutions they discover because people are much less likely to abandon something they have created themselves.

## PD IDEAS LAB – EMERGING THEMES AND ISSUES

In a second morning session Richard Pascale and Mark Munger from the Positive Deviance Initiative team, set out four ‘ideas themes’ – that had emerged from studying many different experiences of PD in the field – and are explored in more depth in the Pascale and Sternins new book – as well as on the PDI website. At the workshop participants self-selected to join one of the four breakouts resulting in some challenges, observations and overarching questions.

### THE SOCIAL LIFE OF LEARNING: FACILITATED BY MARK MUNGER

Change requires learning – and in the introduction a film of magpies learning and transferring learning demonstrated the importance of their acquired culture and social system. PD as an intervention disturbs the authority structure in social systems; it creates new leadership. It is important to ensure the culture is respected. This means that the actual community leadership must be involved and respected, they need to be brought into the discussion for their support of the process. However, they do not need to be part of the process. Their permission to learn from the community about what is already working allows the front-line workers to take charge of the discovery. There is no ready-made solution, it is always a tension. This ‘juggling act’ is of course not exclusive to PD.

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 can be seen in the social network diagrams in the Billings Clinic, showing clusters of relationships before PD, then extended networks after. Particularly in corporate environments and organisations with strong silo mentalities, PD could be considered to reinforce a sense of community and shared learning.

The discussion raised a number of challenges:

- How do we create social situations that enhance engagement in a social goal, so that the community goes on a journey together?
- How does the notion of a tipping point apply? i.e. going from threatening the existing power structure to allowing front-line workers to accomplish something
- What is the role of facilitation and how can one best not over-engineer the process and leave space for emergent phenomena?
- Is there a critical mass for uptake to happen? Is it a question of individual experience or organisational culture?
- What is the role of leader authority vs. social control in influencing uptake of new practices or not?

### THE CHALLENGE OF COMMUNITY CHANGE: FACILITATED BY DR JON LLOYD

PD exercises do not set out with the intention of delivering community change. Their focus is specifically to deal with a concrete problem that requires behaviour change. However, as can be seen from the examples in the trade fair presentations, in solving the problem, community behaviour is altered as well as individual behaviour.

Not all problems require PD. But PD does create and strengthen existing networks and local capacity to self organise around important issues.

While it is not culture change in an expert way – Jerry Sternin always said he never set out to change a culture, but he worked within it – the PD approach can result in significant cultural change (for example, Vietnamese eating habits, men-women relations in Pakistan, new views on female circumcision in Egypt, collaborative work on MRSA in hospitals, ...).

There can be a paradox with some helping organisations such as NGOs and consultancies, as their raison d’être depends on their clients having problems. In other words, they have an interest in their clients’ problems. They also have a need both for economies of scale, and to be seen to be doing something, which tends to lead to big,

community-, or organisation-wide support programmes with a 'one-size fits all' approach. An example is the 'cats being parachuted in' model of change as in a Borneo malaria epidemic. The NGO identifies problem as being x, drops in an external solution (a) However, the external solution creates a further problem, y, which then requires another external solution, (b) Yet all the time, in Borneo, local farmers had a solution to the issue of malaria – just to spray ponds and puddles with DDT. This did not cause the widespread devastation of the NGO solution, which involved spraying the entire countryside, upsetting the ecosystem for years afterwards, and the local solution was easily spread from peer to peer.

The PD model of transmission enables scaling up whilst delivering 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. Peer to peer sharing takes you to where the expertise is and makes information public, which again is at odds with western thinking on intellectual capital. However it is a proven way of unlocking social capital.

### **CHALLENGE OF SCALING AND TRANSFER TO NEW SETTINGS: FACILITATED BY MONIQUE STERNIN**

An issue with PD is whether it is possible to extend the ideas from one community to another, or indeed extend the approach from one community to another to solve their own variant ideas. In the introductory remarks the connection with the ecology or complex adaptive systems was made – with the notion of variation and replication. Here the language of scaling up may not be helpful. It is perhaps more about spreading. In many cases the solutions are small scale and particular to the circumstances of the community. Because of their local community ownership the solutions have difficulty in being copied in other communities.

Creating a contract of trust is key to the transferring of the PD approach to new settings. One essential part of PD is that communities form around the problems – to define the problem is one of the most difficult issues for the community, and indeed for PD. It is dangerous, in that everything that happens can challenge the status quo.

It is not yet clear whether communities can develop the capacity to use PD on other problems, once it has been used successfully with external facilitation. Not all of them have the reflective capacity to do that kind of self-learning and adaptive work. Language is also very important – what may mean something in one community may mean something subtly different in another. The process also requires expert facilitation, to connect everyone emotionally.

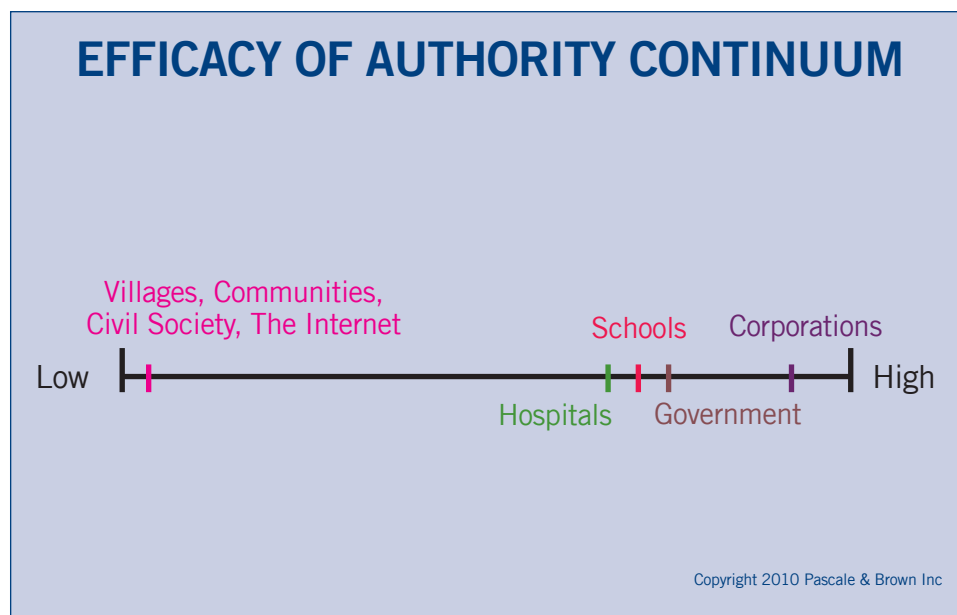
One of the challenges for spreading the approach is around how to train facilitators to let go, to enable the 'crowd surfing' (Lewis) approach and let the community find its direction. How to ensure that a rigorous data rich facilitation allows the community to find PD's rather than the usual suspects? This will allow a solution to be found from within the community.

For PD, scaling up is not geographical or through different parts of the same organisation. In the community its effects are spread in different ways, for example, television diffusion, long existing laws finally being enforced, ministries budgeting for the PD approach in other provinces.

### **THE STANDARD MODEL: WHY IT WORKS? WHEN IT DOESN'T?: FACILITATED BY DR RICHARD PASCALE**

In the new book and in the idea lab introduction Pascale refers to the lack of uptake of PD 'community' approaches when applied to a corporate setting. He refers here to the model of control and exploitation of change that assumes that the authority 'in charge' devises the solution and, with a need for speed, predictability and control, then 'rolls it out'. Hence the notion of a 'standard model'. The virtue of such a model is that 'it works most of the time' when technical solutions are known and exploitable. 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 say a corporation, resists 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.

Paradoxically, a leader in authority might indeed try to facilitate or let loose a PD approach – firmly aimed at dismantling the existing standard model and seeking a new one. 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. Is PD only applicable where the power of authority is less, for example in organisations with a strong professional ethos?



This introduction provoked some interesting debate in the group, particularly around some paradoxes. Notably:

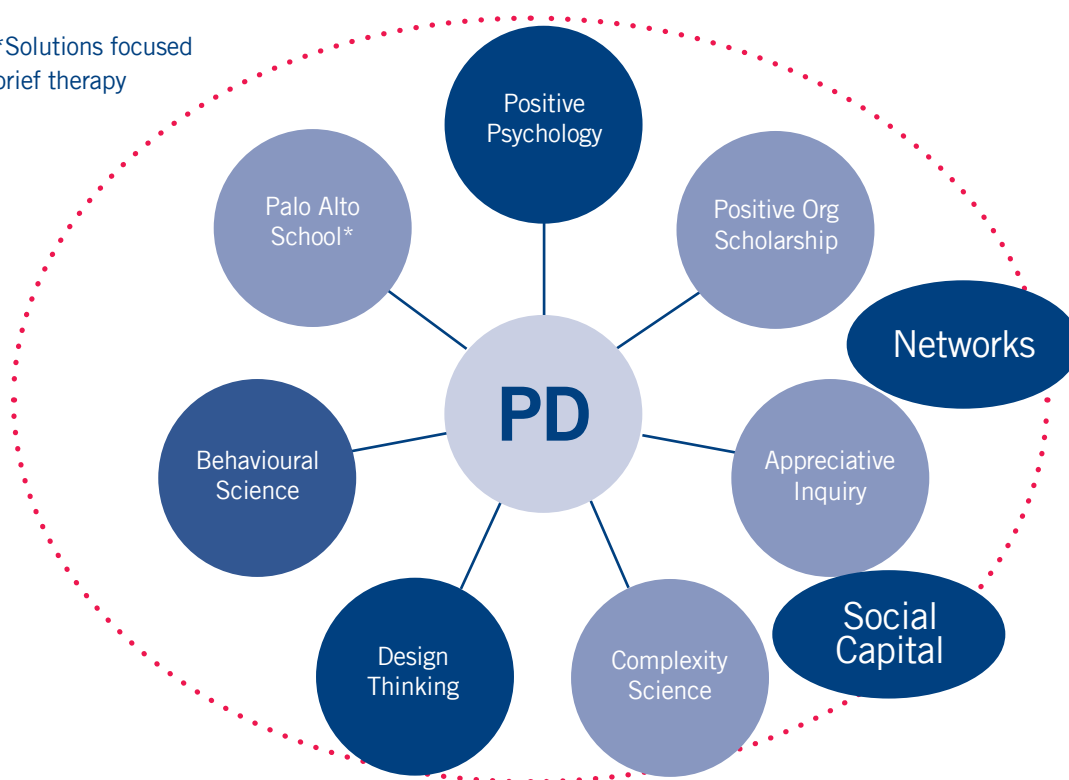
- Does a PD intervention simply provide a transition from one standard model with one technical solution to another different technical solution (based around the ‘solutions’ discovered by the community during the PD intervention)? This sounds a little like the Lewin unfreezing and refreezing phenomena. If so then the PD approach does not produce sustainable change
- Can PD as a continual approach to innovation and change in itself become a new ‘standard model’ for a culture of continuous innovation? The DNA and cultural routines in an organisation such as Google might be an example. Here PD might itself become the ‘standard model of change’

# LOCATING PD IN THE WIDER CHANGE LANDSCAPE – RELATED THEORIES AND APPROACHES

Roberto Saco explained that PD is often called an asset-based approach, based on the discovery of what is right in a social system, by comparison with deficit-based approaches – which are founded on the diagnosis of what is wrong with it, and which form the ‘standard model’ for change interventions.

## PD AND ITS AFFINITIES.....

\*Solutions focused  
brief therapy



*Links between PD and (mainly) asset-based approaches to change – Saco and Lewis CCC programme slide*

There are strong affinities between PD and many theories, but the Sternin’s PD approach was developed primarily from Dr Marian Zeitlin’s research work in nutrition, and then enhanced by trial and error in the field.

Roberto highlighted the connections between how PD has emerged with Kenneth Gergen’s work on the social construction of reality, and the links between the way PD works in practice and positive psychologists’ thinking about individuals, including:

- Martin Seligman: in “Authentic Happiness” Seligman indicates that knowing and following your strengths builds optimism, provides direction and resilience
- Rick Snyder: his “Psychology of Hope” demonstrates that we feel hope if we know what we want, can think of a range of ways to get there and can start and keep going
- Barbara Fredrickson: “Positivity” sets out the ‘broaden and build’ theory, which shows that personal growth and development are affected by positive experiences because they broaden our thought-action repertoires; positive emotions undo negative emotions, can trigger an upward spiral, build psychological resources and enhance resilience.

There are also similarities with the positive focus of solutions-based brief therapy, a psychodynamic approach to working with individuals that eschews going back into history and looks forward at possibilities, based on what works for them. The surprising realisation is that there is a better state within reach, whereas with PD there is a surprising discovery of PD practices that already exist.

Whilst there may seem to be many affinities with Appreciative Inquiry (AI), the tools, tactics and application logic differ from PD. Both deal with possibilities but AI focuses on the strategic, visionary and bold, the intriguing possibilities that do not yet exist, whereas PD focuses on uncovering strengths that are in place now but hidden, discovering and disseminating them. Social change can be a by-product, but is not the aim itself.

As was discussed later, network theory and complexity science offer other perspectives on how and why PD might work. The PD approach of 'sitting in the marketplace' is necessary to understand and work with local networks, and the process leverages the social capital in those networks. Networks are a fundamental part of understanding complex social systems. PD is one of many new interventions for liberating structures and dealing with wicked problems.

Horst Rittel defined the difficulty with wicked problems as follows, in his paper with Webber, 1973: "The classical systems approach ... is based on the assumption that a planning project can be organised into distinct phases: 'understand the problems', 'gather information', 'synthesise information and wait for the creative leap', 'work out solutions' and the like. For wicked problems, however, this type of scheme does not work. One cannot understand the problem without knowing about its context; one cannot meaningfully search for information without the orientation of a solution concept; once cannot first understand, then solve."

For highly complex problems without a clear right/wrong solution Rittel advocates a second generation systems approach, which PD would seem to be. The features of such an approach are:

- Solutions not in one head, but in many
- 'Nobody wants to be planned at'
- Transparency of the planning process
- Moral dimension of wicked problems
- No scientific planning, only political and social
- The planner is not an expert, but a mid-wife
- The planner makes careful, seasoned respectlessness
- The planner has moderate optimism
- A conspiracy model of planning
- Solving wicked problems requires an argumentative process

## EXPLORING WIDER VIEWS ON SCALABLE AND SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

Our participants included both academics and practitioners with experience of different approaches and theories of change – many of which relate to PD in the spectrum painted by Roberto Saco. Keith Ruddle set the scene for four discussions, which were led by change leaders and academic faculty with a particular perspective. Dr Marc Ventresca (Saïd Business School) led a discussion on how PD relates to social network theory, Helen Bevan (Director of Transformation at the National Health Service (NHS) Institute for Innovation and Improvement) one on transformation and social movements, Professor Sue Dopson (Saïd Business School) discussed evidence-based practice and diffusion, and Geoff Gibbons (Deloitte) and Dr Jon Lloyd hosted a group discussing connections with Lean, Six Sigma and related process improvement approaches.

### NETWORKS AND INNOVATION TRANSFER

Social networks are an important way of working with complexity. They enable the rapid transmission of information and practices, provided there is trust within the network. One of the principles in social network science is that when people are better connected, they are more individually and collectively productive, cohesive, and resilient. Points raised in the discussion focused on looking at PD through a social networking lens and vice versa.



- There is a relationship between PD and Paulo Freire's work on community organisation and the empowering of all individuals in a community
- PD happens in an ecosystem – what is it about the ecosystem that matters? What is the value and impact of the local context?
- The concept of networks can help to form/understand more natural communities, particularly in the developed world. Network theory can then answer the question, 'who is the community?' for PD
- PD may be a way of tightening the 'coupling' between individuals in a community. Would on-line social networking through Facebook and the like mean more kinds of community or are they too loose-coupled for PD to work in them?
- One aspect of PD discovery can be the discovery of a network – more 'people like me', which helps discovery and diffusion. The rituals that allow a facilitator to intervene in the network would need to be discovered as part of the set-up of the project
- There is a need to discover the capacity of a social network as part of the PD process. Also, the network is a means of distributing expertise. Diffusion happens through closely connected networks. What does this mean for scaling up in communities and organisations in the developed world, where connections appear to be looser?
- PDs, or indeed negative deviants, may be isolates, and may not be willing to be included. However, the PD invitation, opt-in and engagement process may help to encourage joining in, and thus build a community. Does anthropological fieldwork experience help to deal with these challenges?

## **SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, ENGAGEMENT AND TRANSFORMATION**

The UK NHS is an example of a large, complex system. It includes 1.4 million employees, many thousands of institutions intertwined with patients and public with strong social, political and cultural influences. Many observers see evidence of change for the better (practices, ways of working, technologies, outcomes etc) but attempts managerial to replicate or transfer such change is complex and problematic. Helen Bevan described how mobilisation and social movement ideas can be seen to achieve scalable change – when conditions and influences are favourable. Social movement theory is a useful framework for change in that it makes an emotional connection in working towards 'what's right' and people believe that they are joining a cause.

Connecting with underlying beliefs, purpose and values seem key. The NHS Institute is working with Marshall Ganz (The Kennedy School, Harvard University), Obama's campaign architect, to drive a hearts and minds exercise to deliver change through shared values and experiences. Is this 'PD on a large scale'?

A key issue, however is that for any acceleration of 'movement or mobilisation', particularly the transfer and replication of change efforts, change agency needs to be at work. Can such a change agency itself be started, developed, mobilised and scaled up to deal with such a large complex system? Helen herself described the ambitious target of mobilising and connecting thousands of change agents across the system. Could these be the kind of PD expert facilitators seen in PD field work – but replicated at scale?

It was here that participants raised some challenges:

- Was this 'scalable' approach to creating an army of change agents/facilitators a realistic goal in such a complex system with many 'standard models' and accountability structures to fragment it?
- Who (such as the NHS Institute?) has the legitimacy to lead and start such an effort, and in what way is this an effort from within the system versus another external intervention? As with much of this workshop discussion – who is the WE?
- How was this particularly initiative connecting or indeed not connecting with many other change and practice improvement initiatives in the NHS? Was it in fact too connected to a 'top down' imperative from the NHS Management Board rather than connecting to other and many bottom up and local engagement processes?

## EVIDENCE-BASED CHANGE AND DIFFUSION

Sue Dopson highlighted the strong institutional beliefs in the requirement for evidence, for example in NHS evidence-based practice, as a means of justifying an approach to a change initiative. PD does not have a strong academic pedigree, being based primarily on empirical work in the field, and an approach that has evolved over time that is documented only recently in the Pascale and Sternins new book. Is there an evidence base in PD?

The group's thoughts were:

- PD bridges the knowing-doing gap, that is, it looks at concrete practices, as opposed to being a normative-educative approach. The maxim 'Act your way into a new way of thinking, rather than think your way into a new way of working' underlines the importance of concrete practice in this approach
- PD is bathed in data and this social proof supports diffusion
- Leverage and sustainability exists by definition as PD works with solutions that already exist in the community

Some questions also emerged:

- Is an evidence-based approach enough, in situations where people do not agree about what works and what does not, particularly where there are boundaries between social groups?
- What constitutes an acceptable form of evidence, particularly to those stakeholders that are accountable to others for the performance of a system? Do asset-based approaches such as PD create evidence that management will believe?
- Who decides on the 'right' problem to address?

## LEAN, SIX SIGMA AND BEST PRACTICES

The group looked at some of the different dimensions of the rich repertoire of improvement strategies such as Lean and Six Sigma. The discussion was around finding an appropriate strategy for a particular intervention – rather than having a 'try them all' approach!

- Using PD to approach a technical problem that does not require a behavioural change is a waste of time. Likewise using Six Sigma or Lean technique to approaching a behavioural problem would not only be unsuccessful but could cause some mischief
- 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
- The challenge for the instigator is to become really good at defining different interventions and being able to understand technical versus behavioural issues



## CONCLUSIONS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The workshop, whilst not setting out to promote positive deviance as such, concluded that it was not simply a repackaging of existing knowledge. PD's combination of facilitation, use of community and organisational dynamics and social learning was potentially novel and could add value in the right circumstances. However what happened in PD practice could be explained by tried and tested theories.

### Some important insights about PD

A number of common and related themes emerged from the discussions that took place throughout the day. These identified some interesting attributes of the Sternin's Positive Deviance approach and some factors that would be critical to the success of a PD project. These include:

#### FROM SUPPLY TO DEMAND

PD works by stimulating people to want to learn more about the solutions and also to propose their own solutions, as opposed to them waiting for solutions to come from elsewhere.

#### SOCIAL PROOF IS KEY

It is observable behaviours that are used in a PD intervention. Records and data, collected by the community, are vital to demonstrate to the community that PD behaviours are effective. Learners must then enact the behaviour for it to spread and become anchored in their daily lives.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE AND LANGUAGE

In some cases, the positive deviants tell their stories and this is what convinces others to follow their behaviour. Language can also be used to help other people change their behaviour or that of others as it modifies the prevailing cultural norms e.g. young girl prostitutes encouraged to call their older male clients 'brother' in order to get them to use condoms. Learning behavioural strategies from others can be helped through the use of activities, drawings, and metaphors.

#### PD WORKS WITH EXISTING POWER STRUCTURES, SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND ON DIFFERENT LEVELS

In many cases PD works by identifying leaders who go against the social norms or traditions and stand up for alternative practices (e.g. Imams that are against female circumcision, doctors who are active in preventing MRSA) and using them to convince their peers as well as to oblige the rest of the community to try the new behaviours. Also, an experienced facilitator will work with leaders and managers, to use their power to create 'space' for the PD process to work. PD at the same time works bottom up, with individuals and their stories, to diffuse their behaviours. As part of the process, social networks are discovered and strengthened.

#### PD RESULTS CANNOT BE USED AS BEST PRACTICE TO BE COPIED ELSEWHERE

Often, there is a false assumption that other communities face the same problem and thus can just copy the behavioural change activities devised by the community. It is the process of engaging various members of a community that empower the community to discover and own their own existing wisdom. The other units in the system (villages, hospitals, business units) have to go through the whole process and invent their own solutions. They need to understand in their hearts and not in their heads. However, how broadly the 'system' or 'community' is defined may enable better and faster transfer.

## **PD IS NOT EXPERTISE FREE, BUT IT RELIES ON DIAGNOSTIC AND FACILITATIVE EXPERTISE NOT EXPERTISE IN THE PROBLEM ITSELF**

PD requires strong diagnostic and facilitation skills. Examples of skilful intervention in the process are:

- Enabling the community to define the identified problem, ensuring that it is an issue that is significant enough for the population concerned, intractable and yet manageable. In some cases this means bringing the community to the point of recognising a practice as being a problem – e.g. FGC.
- ‘Sitting in the marketplace’, that is, diagnosing the cultural system in order to work out who is involved in the problem and what the power structures are
- Guiding people into a solution space
- Inspiring innovative and creative approaches from community members (e.g. chocolate spread to represent MRSA infection) to defining the problem during PD meetings but yet reining back innovation. Especially in the western mindset of immediately jumping to problem solving, a huge challenge to the PD process is the enabling of uncovered but successful behaviours to be amplified before innovation takes over
- A critical element to being a facilitator is to enable community members to believe in themselves

These skills enhance success and sustainability.

## **PD AS ENGENDERING A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE**

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 (cf. social network diagrams showing clusters of relationships before PD, then extended networks after). Particularly in corporate environments and organisations with strong silo mentalities, PD could be considered to reinforce a sense of community. In a community setting, the need to invite and woo all members of the community can help to promote inclusion and cohesion.

## **Some possible paths for research and investigation**

The workshop produced a list of questions that were debated on the basis of anecdotal evidence from the day during the break-out sessions. It was agreed that there were many questions about the theory and practice of scalable change and positive deviance that would benefit from further investigation. From the point of view of Saïd Business School, the key questions are likely to be the following:

### **PD AS A MODEL OF CORPORATE CHANGE**

- What is distinctive about the corporate environment that makes PD more difficult to implement there?
- What are the benefits of using a PD approach and would the benefits of PD outweigh the difficulty of implementation?
- What are the factors that determine the continued existence of ‘standard models’ despite evidence that they do not (always) work? Could PD become a ‘standard model’?
- How effective would a change programme be that mixed PD and another method?
- How to rein in the impulse to create innovation? Essential to the PD process is giving a voice, sufficient time and value to those existing behaviours discovered that have provided a few members of a community with better outcomes to the existing problem
- A long-term study of effectiveness of PD in organisations

## SCALING, DIFFUSING OR AMPLIFYING PD

- Given the need for communities and groups to go through the whole PD process for each issue, what are the key elements that enable PD to spread to other areas? What theories can shed light on this and facilitate scaling up?
- What are the politics of power, authenticity and identity where the local solution is important, and how does this affect scaling up?
- Is it possible for an organisation or community to learn how to do PD on their own, and thereby tackle new problems using the same process?

## HOW BEST TO FOSTER SOCIAL LEARNING?

- How do we create social situations that enhance engagement in a social goal, so that the community goes on a journey together? This could build on work already done on learning networks
- What is the role of leadership in social learning? How can leaders create 'space' for social learning in initiative-crowded organisations and communities? Who decides on purpose, what is right, what the group needs to aim for?
- How does PD's mantra of 'acting your way into a new way of thinking' stand up to a detailed examination of the social learning process?
- Does PD offer a new way of using social networks to unlock social capital?

## THE THEORETICAL PLACING OF PD AND ITS ADDED VALUE

- The placing of PD in the family of asset-based approaches, and links to the theoretical background. What aligns PD with other asset-based change approaches as well as what differentiates it from them?
- What are the ethics of PD? Is it manipulative, and is that a bad thing? (c.f. Denis Bourgeois' research on the ethics of the change consultant)

## NEXT STEPS

The attendance at the workshop and the interest levels of the participants, together with the number of potential areas for further research indicate that Saïd Business School could use its close association with Positive Deviance as a fertile source of research and executive education material.

Given the level of interest and feedback from participants, and the success of the workshop format, it has been proposed to hold further practice research workshops at Saïd Business School.

PD will continue to be taught as part of the joint Saïd Business School/HEC Consulting and Coaching for Change programme.

Saïd Business School could investigate funding sources to underpin further academic research into positive deviance.

# SUPPORTING INFORMATION

## The Positive Deviance Initiative

The Positive Deviance Initiative (PDI) is a network organisation which is dedicated to amplifying the use of the Positive Deviance (PD) approach to enable communities worldwide to solve seemingly ‘intractable’ problems which require behavioural and social change. By offering workshops, training, and meetings, as well as technical support and online resources. The PDI collaborates with many different organisations in various sectors to improve the lives of vulnerable people around the world.

To achieve its mission, The Positive Deviance Initiative offers the following services:

- Workshops, seminars and training programmes
- Technical support for new applications of the PD approach
- Convening of regional forums and meetings
- Support for research on the efficacy of the approach and evaluation of PD projects
- A web-based community of practice, including information from PD projects and resources

The work of the PDI is grounded in the belief that community transformation can be realised by the discovery of innovations and wisdom that already exist within a community.

As a network organisation with a mission to amplify and disseminate the use of the PD approach, the foundation of our work is to connect organisations and communities which are either already using, or would like to use, the PD approach. This website has been designed by the PDI as a space in which organisations and communities are able to access resources, ask advice, and share results with other communities that are on the journey of using the PD approach.

The PDI is currently located at the Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy. The PDI has collaborated with a variety of institutions including ministries of health and hospitals, corporations, foundations, local and international NGOs, UNICEF, Peace Corps, USAID, and the World Bank, among others.

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- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUBmyVZTCq4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUBmyVZTCq4) (Jerry Sternin Interview, Part 1, July 2008)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzW5j8WbeP8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzW5j8WbeP8) (Jerry Interview, Part 2, July 2008)
- [www.positivedeviance.org/resources/wisdomseries.html](http://www.positivedeviance.org/resources/wisdomseries.html) (PD Wisdom Series)

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#### **SAID BUSINESS SCHOOL**

The Saïd Business School is one of Europe's youngest and most entrepreneurial business schools. An integral part of The University of Oxford, the School embodies the academic rigour and forward thinking that has made Oxford a world leader in education. The School is dedicated to developing a new generation of business leaders and entrepreneurs and conducting research not only into the nature of business, but the connections between business and the wider world.

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Executive Education at Saïd Business School draws on thought leadership from the entire resource base of Oxford University, as well as the Business School, to offer executive development that both inspires individuals and creates significant business impact. Ambitious leaders and organisations benefit from the challenge of working with world experts to mine rich insights into the complex realities of global management, and to envisage and anticipate the future. Rising in the Financial Times international ranking of Executive

Education programmes, Saïd Business School's programmes for clients such as Telefonica, BMW Group and Standard Chartered lead to lasting change at both the organisational and individual level. And with a fast-growing, forward-facing portfolio of pioneering leadership and practitioner programmes, such as The Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme [celebrating its 28th year in 2010], Diploma in Financial Strategy, and The Oxford Advanced Management and Leadership Programme, it supports and inspires the business leaders of today and tomorrow.

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