

The Power of Positive Deviancy

by Jerry Sternin and Robert Choo



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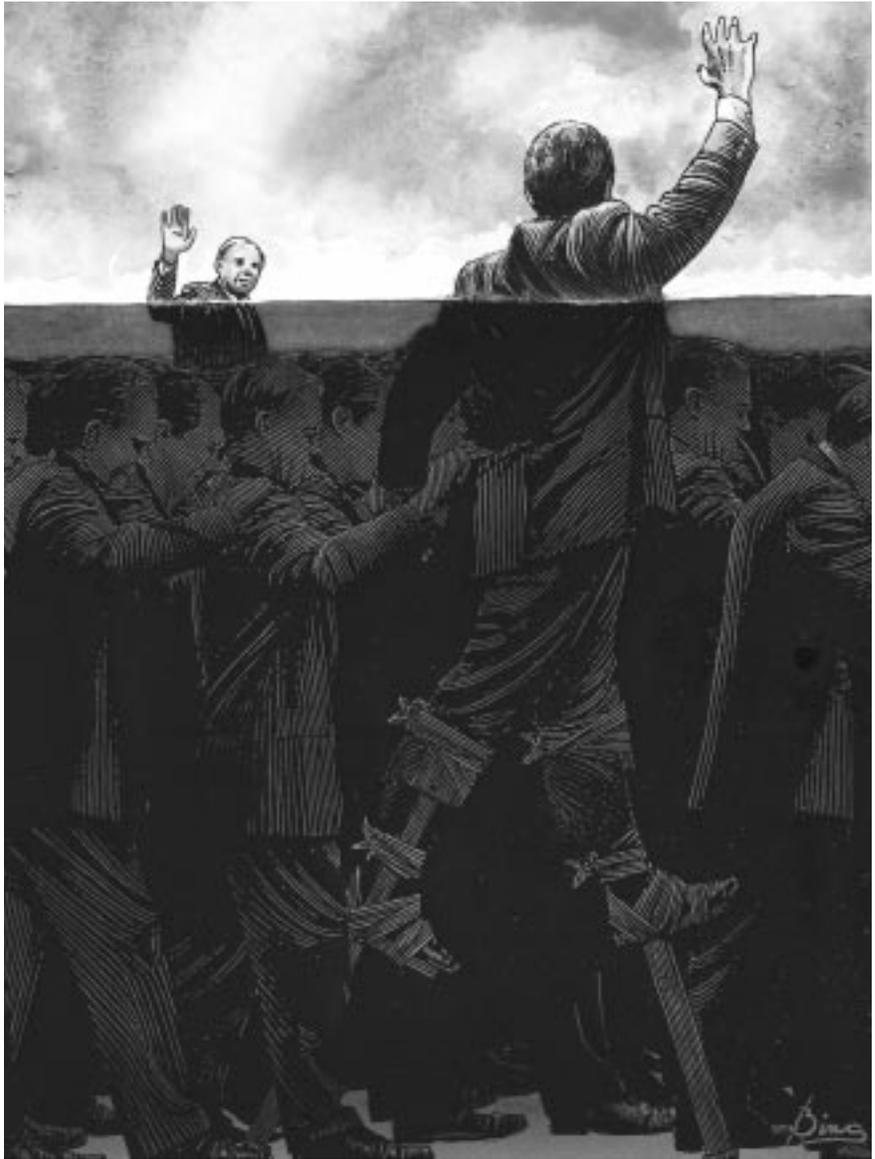
An effort to reduce malnutrition in Vietnam offers an important lesson about managing change.

by Jerry Sternin and Robert Choo

Those of us involved in nonprofit organizations have a lot to learn from the private sector about setting concrete performance goals and measuring returns on investment. But the business world can learn much from our experience as well. After all, nonprofits frequently have to carry out wide-scale change-management efforts under the toughest possible conditions with the highest possible stakes.

A case in point: over the past decade, Save the Children has been involved in an intensive effort to help the people of Vietnam reduce childhood malnutrition in their rural villages. We have created a model program that has had a profound impact on the lives of 2 million people. In the course of the project, we've also learned a lot about what it takes to change the behavior of a community.

Unlike traditional development efforts, which concentrate on bringing needed resources in from the outside, we sought to find the solution to malnutrition *within* the affected communities. Working closely with the residents of several villages in Thanh Hoa province, we first sought out very poor families who



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had managed to avoid malnutrition. Although the parents in those families had access to no more resources than their neighbors, they somehow found enough food to keep their children healthy. By examining the behavior of these people, the *positive deviants* in the community, we hoped to find local strategies for combating malnutrition.

And that's exactly what we did find. It turned out that the mothers in those families were going out every day to

nearby rice paddies and collecting tiny shrimps and crabs, which they were adding, along with sweet-potato greens, to their children's meals. They were also feeding their children three or four times a day, rather than the customary twice a day. The shellfish and greens were both readily available and free for the taking, but the conventional village wisdom held these foods to be inappropriate for young children. It was clear, therefore, that the immediate solution to the mal-

nutrition problem did not require a lot of money or other outside resources; it simply required the community members to change their behavior and to start emulating the positive deviants in their midst.

Building on the results of our study, we launched a program to demonstrate to all the mothers the value of shellfish and greens and frequent feeding. For the first two weeks of the program, the participating mothers were required to forage for shrimps, crabs, and greens and to bring a supply of them to the daily sessions, where they learned to cook them for their children. The hands-on learning paid off: after the two weeks were up, the mothers could see that the new foods did not make their children ill; in fact, they could already see their children becoming healthier. They continued to gather the new foods and incorporate them in their cooking. Within two years, 80% of the children participating in the project were no longer malnourished.

Since then, Save the Children has rolled out this model in many other villages in 20 Vietnamese provinces. In some of the villages, the key foods were the same shellfish and greens, but in others they were peanuts or sesame seeds or dried fish. The type of food isn't what's

important. What is important is identifying the relevant positive deviancy within each local community and then getting everyone to adopt that behavior. The community, in other words, cures itself.

Because the positive-deviance approach creates indigenous solutions, it offers three important advantages over traditional approaches that try to impose solutions from outside. First, progress is made quickly, without requiring a lot of outside analysis or resources. Second, the resulting benefits can be sustained, since the solution to the problem resides within the community. And third, the approach can be broadly applied – positive deviants exist in virtually every community. Save the Children has used the approach to address malnutrition in many other developing countries, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Egypt, Mali, Mozambique, and Nepal. And other development organizations are using the approach to address societal problems as various as ethnic conflict and the spread of AIDS.

Businesses don't suffer from problems as severe as malnutrition. But they frequently do suffer from debilitating problems that are related to the behavior of their people. And they often invest enormous amounts of time and money to

solve those problems. Most corporate change efforts, however, resemble traditional development efforts: they focus on defining the organization's needs, and then they try to fulfill those needs by introducing resources and "best practices" from the outside. Often, though, the members of the organization resist the external solutions, and the desired performance gains prove either unattainable or fleeting.

The experience of Save the Children leads us to suggest a very different approach: look for the positive deviants in your organization – those people who are exhibiting the desired levels of performance – and try to understand what's different about their behavior. That's where you'll likely discover the keys to creating real change – change that is embraced by the organization and brings immediate and sustainable benefits.

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