

# The Positive Deviance Approach to Behavioral and Social Change

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## ABSTRACT SUMMARY

Positive deviance (PD) is an innovative behavior change approach that is used to solve difficult problems by discovering and amplifying solutions that already exist within a community.

Positive deviance recognizes that in every community there are individuals and groups whose uncommon but successful strategies enable them to find better solutions to a problem than their peers, despite all odds. An example of a positive deviant individual would be a person who, despite living in a household where processed and refined foods dominate, and despite facing other barriers, manages to incorporate a significant amount of whole grains into their diet. An example of a positive deviant institution would be a school that regularly integrates whole grains into the school lunch menu despite barriers such as extra prep time.

Positive deviance challenges us to look at problem solving through a different lens, focusing on amplifying what's already working rather than focusing on what's not working.

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## History

The term "positive deviance" initially appeared in nutrition research literature with the publication of a book entitled *Positive Deviance in Nutrition* by Tufts University nutrition professor, Marian Zeitlin, in the 1990s, where she compiled a dozen surveys that documented the existence of positive deviant children in poor communities who were better nourished than others. In this book, Zeitlin and her colleagues advocated for the use of this concept to address childhood malnutrition issues at the community level by identifying what was going right in the community in order to amplify it, as opposed to focusing on what was going wrong in the community and fixing it.

In the early 1990s, Jerry Sternin, a visiting scholar at Tufts University, and his wife, Monique, experimented with Zeitlin's ideas and operationalized the PD concept as a tool to promote behavior and social change to organize various PD-centered social change interventions around the world.

The Sternins helped to institutionalize PD as a social change approach by demonstrating its successful application, first to childhood malnutrition, and then expanded its successful ap-

plication to a variety of seemingly intractable problems in diverse sectors, such as public health, education, and child protection, among others.

Based on these early successes, the approach was scaled up both locally and internationally with the development of a community-based nutrition rehabilitation model called PD/Hearth which was promoted by USAID and other international organizations such as UNICEF. The PD approach has been used to address issues as diverse as childhood malnutrition, neonatal mortality, girl trafficking, school dropout rates, female genital cutting (FGC), hospital acquired infections (HAI), and HIV/AIDS.

## Why PD Works

The PD approach works by engaging the community to take full ownership of the entire process. All individuals or groups who are part of the problem are also part of the solution and hence the PD process involves all parties who affect the problem. It is the community that discovers and designs ways to practice existing uncommon, successful behaviors and strategies. The PD process is based on deep respect for community, its members, and its culture, and focuses on interactive engagement. By involving a wide range of community members in the process, PD expands existing networks and creates new ones, creating more space for innovative solutions to emerge.

## When to Use PD

Positive deviance works best for problems where:

- Behavioral and/or social change are required
- Many in the community are affected
- The problem is seemingly intractable: "wicked" or "last mile"
- The presence of PD behaviors (individuals, groups) is suspected
- PD has the strong support of leadership

## Methodology

PD methodology consists of five basic steps carried out by members of the community:

1. Define the problem, current perceived causes, challenges and constraints, common practices, and desired outcomes.
2. Determine the presence of PD individuals or groups.
3. Discover uncommon but successful behaviors and strategies through inquiry and observation.

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4. Design activities to allow community members to practice the discovered behaviors.
5. Monitor and evaluate the resulting project or initiative which further fuels change by documenting and sharing improvements as they occur, and help the community

discern the effectiveness of the initiative.

#### **References**

1. Basic Field Guide to the Positive Deviance Approach.
2. Positive Deviance Initiative website, [www.positivedeviance.org](http://www.positivedeviance.org)