

What is Positive Deviance?

Positive Deviance is a hope-filled solution to creating change and was a large part of the life's work of Jerry Sternin, founder of The Positive Deviance Institute at Tufts University. Sternin was working with the CTA Institute for Teaching on a Positive Deviance project at Merced High School when he passed away in December 2008. Said Sternin, ***"You cannot think your way into a new way of acting, you have to act your way into a new way of thinking."*** These simple but profound words have changed the behaviors of millions of people around the world.

The roots of Positive Deviance go back to the 1960's, involving worldwide research around nutrition and health for those living in poverty. The concept was expanded by Sternin and his wife Monique as a way to deal with other intractable problems.

"In every community, there are certain individuals whose practices enable them to find better solutions to problems than their neighbors do," wrote Sternin. "These people know something we do not; even without our theoretical models, they've fixed something that needed fixing. Which means that within the context of their particular problem, within the specific context of their community, they are the world's greatest experts."

In every community or organization, there are people who, with the same resources and constraints as everyone else, do things differently and better than the norm. Sometimes, it's a matter of degree; the majority is doing all right but there are a few others who really shine. Sometimes the difference is larger, and the practices of the majority aren't working at all. In these cases it makes sense to look at the strategies of the few who are succeeding and to bring their "deviant" behaviors into the mainstream.

But even these methods, wrote Sternin, are just a stopgap. "The causes of poverty run deeper than the coping strategies used by the poor to survive. There are identifiable economic and structural causes underlying poverty—and they must be addressed before sustainable progress can be achieved."

Positive deviance signals the dawn of a new change model, one that flips the standard protocol on its head. Real, sustainable change, according to the Sternins, begins with new behaviors rather than new knowledge. And since these new behaviors come from people within the organization - rather than from the top down or the outside in - there's real ownership of the solution rather than merely a buy-in, a "critical difference."

In the PD process, "the very people whose behavior needs to change to solve the problem are the ones who discover the solution," Jerry explained. "PD is the antithesis of a best-practice rollout."

To learn more go to the CTA Institute for Teaching website- www.teacherdrivenchange.org