



# Positive Deviants Rule!

by William Seidman and Michael McCauley

Is continuous innovation important to your organization?

This article presents a methodology for identifying and leveraging “positive deviants” as a simple, readily available means of continuous, effective innovation that can be used by virtually any organization. In fact, it has already created great success in organizations as diverse as high-tech manufacturers, quick service chains, construction companies, and many other environments. So, what are you waiting for? Read on and increase your organization’s innovation capabilities today!

## WHAT IS A POSITIVE DEVIANT?

No doubt you are familiar with the term “deviant.” Merriam-Webster defines it as someone who “departs from an established course or norm.” Most people think of a deviant as someone who does bad things — someone who disrupts the natural flow of society. However, there are also *positive* deviants. These people are at the other end of the performance spectrum; they are the very top performers (see Figure 1).

The term “positive deviant” was first used by Richard Pascale and Jerry Sternin<sup>1</sup> to describe people who, with exactly the same resources and circumstances as everyone else, are consistently and significantly more

successful than the norm. In any population in any organization, whether it be IT project managers, quick service restaurant managers, or insurance agents, some people consistently and systematically outperform others. These are the positive deviants. Positive deviants are a great source of innovation.

What makes positive deviants such an extraordinary source of innovation? Unlike most people, positive deviants transcend the conventional wisdoms, discovering new and innovative ways to function *without* creating conflict. By identifying your positive deviants and discovering their unique capabilities, you can quickly and efficiently transform your organization.

## WHAT DRIVES POSITIVE DEVIANTS TO BE INNOVATORS?

Positive deviants can routinely violate conventional wisdoms without disrupting the organization because they love what they are doing. They bring passion, energy, and commitment to their work. Because they work at significantly higher levels of intensity than most other personnel, they are, in effect, given permission to go beyond conventional boundaries.

In fact, they are so passionate and committed to their work that they focus much more on finding a way to succeed than on the barriers that might limit their effectiveness. In a sense, they are the ultimate “glass is half full” people, always emphasizing and thinking about what is possible. Not surprisingly, if someone spends a lot of time and energy thinking about what is possible, they tend to find innovative ways to make the possible occur.

Our work has shown that the source of this passion and energy is the positive deviant’s commitment to a powerful, underlying social or moral purpose. While most people are merely surviving their jobs, positive deviants are trying to create greater good for society. For example, we had a recent opportunity to work with pharmacy managers at a large drug store chain. We found that positive deviant pharmacy managers thought of themselves as “a critical part of the family emergency response system,” which is in sharp contrast to the

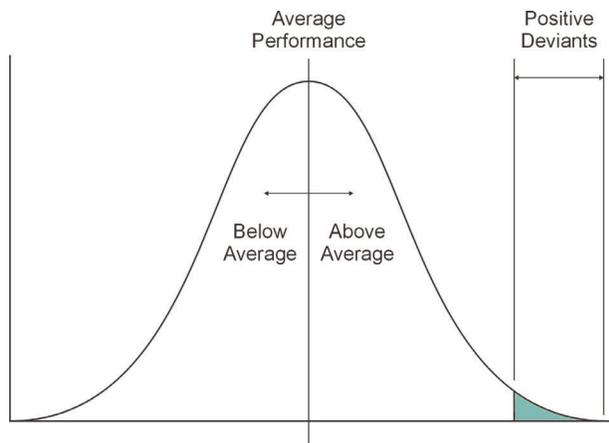


Figure 1 — Positive deviants defined.

less-effective pharmacy managers who thought of themselves as “providing 120 prescriptions a day.” Which perspective would drive greater innovation for you: helping families in distress or filling out insurance paperwork?

To be clear, positive deviants are not rebels and they do not disrupt their organizations. Instead, they consider achieving the social goal more valuable and important than conforming to organizational limitations and conventional wisdoms. However, when they consider the possible, they are acutely aware of the limits and boundaries of the organization, so they factor in such things as political concerns and resource constraints without feeling restricted.

Consequently, one key element that makes a positive deviant more successful is a more holistic approach to thinking. For instance, we often hear the comment that an organization is “too politically motivated to encourage innovation.” We respond to that comment with a simple question: “Are there some people in the organization who are more successful than others in managing both the politics and their work?” The answer is always, “Of course.” Naturally, these are the positive deviants, and wherever there are positive deviants, there is innovation.

Not surprisingly, once positive deviants have proven themselves, they are given more latitude within the organization because their positive views are infectious. Organizations want to follow and listen to their positive deviants because they bring so much more energy, excitement, and innovation. They are often the real leaders of an organization.

## HOW DO POSITIVE DEVIANTS GET THINGS DONE?

Do you know someone who has great ideas but can never get anything done? Most of us know people like that. In order to be truly innovative, the innovator must also understand and factor in the practical realities of implementation.

While positive deviants’ social commitment is the driving force of their innovation, they are also extremely practical. They know what actions to take, how to manage risks, and which resources will produce the maximum impact, all in support of implementing their innovations (see Figure 2). In fact, positive deviants are generally more efficient than anyone else at driving change.

This efficiency derives, in part, from positive deviants’ alignment of their specific actions with their social passion. They do the work that promotes the desired

innovation but rigorously reject work that is off target. Everything they do is aligned with their passion. For example, the positive deviant pharmacists described above hired differently, choosing technicians more for their ability to connect with patients than their ability to just fill prescriptions efficiently. They also laid out their pharmacies differently, organizing the pharmacy shelves for particularly easy and quick access to the drugs most frequently used by their patients. Most importantly, they interacted with their patients differently — taking more time with each patient, listening to the patient’s issues, and providing additional solutions, such as pressure bandages for diabetics. Similarly, positive deviant customer service personnel at a large service company used support tools differently and worked more as a team.

A positive deviant’s efficiency at implementing innovation also comes from an ability to identify and manage the risks associated with innovation far more rapidly and completely than others. While thinking holistically mitigates some risks, positive deviants are quite skilled at managing the “devil in the details.” For instance, positive deviant process engineers at a manufacturing company were able to identify the risks associated with shop floor changes by using odors as an early warning sign of imminent machine breakdowns. Within five seconds of entering a fabrication building, they could detect an emerging equipment breakdown from the odor emitted by the failing machine. They could quickly identify the risk and execute an effective mitigation strategy. In fact, positive deviant risk management is so fast that it is not often apparent to most people. In most cases, positive deviants can’t even clearly articulate their own risk management process. When questioned, they often say that it is just an “innate ability they have” or that they “just sensed something.”

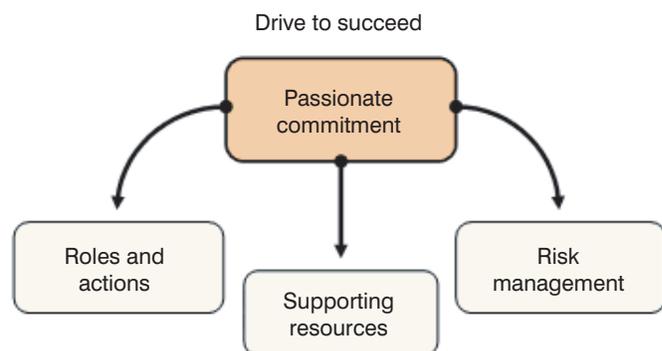


Figure 2 — Positive deviant wisdom.

Finally, positive deviants are intense users of supporting resources because they are open to the idea that, in specific areas, other people and other sources are actually better than they are. “Not invented here” syndrome is rarely an issue for positive deviants. Instead, because they have typically worked with many people and scrutinized a lot of available resources, they are intensely focused on bringing the best resources to bear to achieve their social purpose. Furthermore, positive deviants are better at separating the informational wheat from the chaff. For example, positive deviant product managers at a medical products company were able to point to just three specific sections in three particular reports (out of more than 100 available) as the critical information needed for effective product management. In contrast, less-effective product managers scanned through as many as 50 of the reports to find the required data. In another situation, positive deviant restaurant managers used a single number found buried in a thick stock printout to manage their inventory. Other managers pored over the entire printout for hours trying to manage every aspect of their stock.

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How is it that positive deviants' use of supporting resources is so focused and efficient? Because positive deviants are intensely committed to their goal, they are more rigorous in evaluating an experience for its impact on achieving the goal. So while others have experiences, positive deviants have experiences that are examined for the extent to which they promote the goal. Over time, sources/resources that add value are more explicitly identified and those that don't are ignored. This ability to hone in on critical resources is also related to both the positive deviants' impatience with bureaucracy and their desire for success. They don't just follow orders, but instead look for ways to be efficient, often transcending standard practice in order to achieve success. When positive deviants look at a voluminous report, for example, they look for what is really important and useful in it. Once they've found what they want, they will avoid everything else in future reports and focus in on the key information — regardless of what the standard practice says to do.

In short, positive deviants really know what they are doing and are often leaders because of their powerful combination of passion and practicality.

## WHO ARE YOUR POSITIVE DEVIANTS?

Finding the positive deviants in your organization doesn't require a lot of time or money. In fact, you already know who they are.

Positive deviants are those highly respected personnel who lead by example without demanding recognition or mindless adherence to their ideas. Instead, they are flexible and thoughtful, quietly ignoring various social norms.

Here is a quick and effective means of identifying your positive deviants. First identify a specific function (office manager, shift supervisor, pharmacist, software architect, etc.) within your organization. Then, ask yourself, “Who are the people I most respect for their ability to perform this function?”

Can you visualize these people? Most executives and managers can immediately visualize their positive deviants. Ask your peers the same question. Can they visualize these people? Are they the same people you thought of?

Now let's test it some more. Ask yourself:

- If I have a problem in this area, are these the people I go to for a solution?
- When these people tell me how to solve the problem, do I both believe them and act on their ideas?

If your answer is “yes” to these questions, you have identified your positive deviants.

As you may already have figured out, “respect” is a very powerful concept. Respect is much more than an ability to drive numbers or be friendly with people. After all, it is possible to drive numbers and make friends in ways that do not support the long-term organizational goals or promote social commitment. While positive deviants have, at some time, driven metrics and are invariably friendly and gracious people, these factors are not the foundation of positive deviance. Positive deviants gain respect by achieving results in ways that are positive, efficient, and energizing for those around them.

The method we've just described for identifying positive deviants may seem simplistic, but it works! It is the result of our extensive experience plus exhaustive,

structured testing. Just to be sure this approach really worked, we conducted several formal statistical analyses of groups to identify their positive deviants. The statistical work took a minimum of three weeks for each organization. The statistical analyses came up with the exact same list of positive deviants as was identified in two minutes using the visualization process above.

During our testing, we also discovered that this visualization process transcends organizational and geographic boundaries. For example, when asked to identify their positive deviants, the 12 regional managers of a quick-service food chain identified the same eight people, even though they were most often in other regions. Similarly, in a worldwide manufacturing company, the executive team identified the same positive deviant engineers even though the engineering function was scattered around the world. Positive deviants have almost mystical qualities that are recognized throughout organizations. Consequently, once you have visualized your positive deviants, you can be confident that you have, in fact, identified them.

## DO POSITIVE DEVIANTS KNOW WHAT THEY KNOW?

Unfortunately, positive deviants are unconsciously competent. In other words, they don't know what they know, and they can't answer the question "What do you do that makes you so innovative?" They just innovate, which is good, but this does not create systematic innovation in an organization.

Fortunately, what they know isn't deeply hidden. You just need to know what questions to ask and how to ask them in order to open up the positive deviant's treasure trove of innovation and "wisdom." Through nearly 11 years of work, we have developed a technique called "Wisdom Discovery" that is designed specifically to access the best of the positive deviants. Here is how Wisdom Discovery works:

- Identify six to eight positive deviants in a particular function. (This is all that is needed, even if there are thousands of people actually performing that function.) We described this process above.
- Bring them together in a workshop-like setting for three days. (It only takes three days to gather all of their expertise.)
- Interview them from the perspective of a "naïve new person" about their passion, organization, work, risk management, and resource utilization. (Taking on the naïve new person role enables you to ask the "stupid

questions" that bring out the complete positive deviant response.)

- Record their responses to your questions in real time and display them by projecting them in large format. (This enables the positive deviants to see what they have said and self-correct instantly, producing still more profound content.)

At the end of Wisdom Discovery, a wide range of innovative ideas will have emerged, as well as specific action plans to implement the innovations.<sup>2</sup>

## WHAT IS THE VALUE OF INNOVATION THAT NOBODY USES?

Of course, if nobody uses the innovation provided by the positive deviants, then its value is zero. While this may seem obvious, many organizations have difficulty with implementation.

A few years ago, we worked with a group of aerospace engineers to discover their positive deviants' wisdom. The discovery process worked like a charm — the organization's management was amazed at the innovations that had been "discovered" in just three days. When we asked them what they were going to do with these new innovations, they looked at us and said, "Interesting question — we never thought about that!" This organization was disbanded a few months later, primarily because the organization as a whole was not generating and implementing sufficient numbers of innovations. Discovering wisdom isn't enough to ensure that an organization becomes innovative. Here, too, positive deviants can help.

Recall the importance of respect in the process used to initially identify the positive deviants. When an innovation is presented to the organization as coming from one of its positive deviants, it is always treated with greater seriousness than if it came from other sources. For example, when an insurance company recently implemented a highly innovative agency management program — the brainchild of a number of the company's positive deviants — the program was presented to the organization as coming from those deviants, not from "corporate." The agents who were asked to implement this new program reacted by saying (and we quote): "This came from Larry? I can't wait to see what he has to say" and "This is how Mary does it? Then I'm in. Just tell me what to do." The respect given positive deviants is a powerful force for driving the adoption of innovation.

Does the initial motivation to try an innovation produce sustained use of the innovation? Unfortunately, no. While innovations do not get adopted without some positive motivation, positive motivation alone is not sufficient to sustain their use. Here again, the positive deviants provide guidance on how to produce a sustained impact. Research on brain function indicates that repetition of the innovation is essential for creating a long-term impact.<sup>3</sup> As part of Wisdom Discovery, the positive deviants identify the practices required to produce long-term impact and the frequency of repetition of these practices to ensure complete integration with each individual's attitudes, behaviors, and skills. As one initially less-effective customer service person said, "I used to think of the positive deviant ideas as just more work. But then I realized they were actually teaching me how to think differently. Now I realize that the positive deviant ideas and actions are my real job, and I do it this way everyday."

### **INNOVATION FROM THE BOTTOM UP OR THE TOP DOWN?**

Which is more effective: a bottom-up, grassroots pull for innovation or a top-down, forced push for innovation? You may say that the answer is obvious — grassroots pull is better. So why do some many companies try to force innovation from the top down? It's probably because most organizations don't know how to utilize their positive deviants.

As may be apparent, when organizations combine all of the elements of positive deviant innovation, they feel as though innovation is grassroots — pulled by each person's requests for improvement and not driven by executive pressure. Not surprisingly, when innovation is pulled by the organization, it is adopted much more rapidly, completely, and without the disruption usually associated with radical change.

### **IS POSITIVE DEVIANT-LED INNOVATION FOR YOU?**

The question really is, "How can it not be?" Over the past 11 years, we have implemented this process throughout numerous organizations across diverse industries. The results have always been the same. For those organizations that truly adopt this new paradigm and follow through, the change is rapid and transformational. In just 12 weeks, one company saw a 5% increase in sales at their stores that utilized this process. Another company saw one of their development cycles shrink

from 24 months to just eight months when they used their positive deviants' wisdom to drive innovation.

These results are typical. Similar results can be seen in your organization. So, what are you waiting for? Go out and find your positive deviants today, and begin reaping the rewards of transformational innovation!

### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Pascale, Richard Tanner, and Jerry Sternin. "Your Company's Secret Change Agents." *Harvard Business Review*, May 2005.

<sup>2</sup>If the discovery process interests you, there is a more complete description of this process in a white paper entitled "Harvesting the Experts' Secret Sauce" at [www.cerebyte.com](http://www.cerebyte.com) (in the Articles Library).

<sup>3</sup>Schwartz, Jeffrey, and Sharon Begley. *The Mind and the Brain*. Regan Books, 2002.

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