

# Your Organization's "Secret Sauce"

*Discovering Positive Deviant Wisdom and Closing the Performance Gap*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Top performers ("Positive Deviants") have a "secret sauce" that consists of their mental models, subtle cueing mechanisms, action plans, risk management strategies and many other capabilities
- The secret sauce is largely unconscious, but is the real difference between Positive Deviants and less effective personnel
- Discovering the secret sauce can provide significant performance improvement impact
- It is easy to identify the Positive Deviants and motivate them to participate in the Wisdom Discovery™ process
- The Positive Deviant secret sauce consists of:
  - An "ecological survey" that frames the situation
  - Patterned behaviors which are highly efficient actions required to be successful in the situation
- Even for such complex areas as launches of interplanetary vehicles, wisdom discovery takes a maximum of only 30 hours before the content is ready to "coach" less experienced personnel
- It is essential to have a plan to leverage the secret sauce in order to create significant value
- Digital Coach Technology™ is critical to wisdom discovery and reuse
- Companies using DCT™ generate millions in additional sales and profits

*This is Part 1 in a series of articles on the discovery and reuse of Positive Deviant wisdom. This article focuses on the discovery process. Other articles focus on the practical application of Positive Deviant wisdom by non-experts and the use of DCT™ to leverage improvements.*



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## A COUPLE OF QUICK QUESTIONS...

*Do some of your people consistently and systematically outperform others?*

*Is there financial or strategic value in raising the performance of the many to the level of the few?*

If your answer is "yes" to these questions, then gathering and using the "secret sauce" of these top performers, these "Positive Deviants," will be of considerable value to you.

Positive Deviants' secret sauce is their true tacit wisdom. It is their mental models, subtle rules of thumb, early problem detection mechanisms, attention allocation processes, and actual work efforts that enable them to consistently outperform others. In addition, it is a deep, passionate commitment to the success of the process that causes the Positive Deviants to apply their specialized wisdom more intensely and profoundly than non-experts.

Is the Positive Deviants' secret sauce worth exploring? You bet! Companies that systematically discover and apply the Positive Deviants' secret sauce consistently report spectacular performance gains such as:

- 80% reduction in planning time
- 50% reduction in training time
- 30-50% reduction in task performance time

*Surprise!  
Everyone already  
knows who the  
Positive Deviants  
are in any given  
function or  
domain.*

In this article, we are going to provide you with a process to quickly identify the Positive Deviants in your organization, explore the methods that they use (their "secret sauce"), effectively discover this secret sauce, and successfully reuse it to enhance your organization's productivity.

## BUT WHO ARE THE "POSITIVE DEVIANTS?"

Surprise! Everyone already knows who the Positive Deviants are in any given function or domain. People already have an exceptionally rich, highly consistent, comprehensive mental map of the expertise in the organization. Consequently, instead of having to purchase and develop expensive, ineffective profiling systems, all you have to do is identify the area you want to improve and ask a few key managers or senior professionals two simple questions:

- "Who are the people I most respect for their ability to perform in the domain in question?"
- "When these people tell me how to solve a problem, do I both believe them and act on their proposed solution?"

When we asked for a list of Positive Deviants in a performance management process at a semiconductor manufacturing company, the VP of Corporate Human Resources initially said that he couldn't possibly isolate them. However, after a few seconds, he paused and said, "Actually, these are

the Positive Deviants,” and proceeded to list 10 people. This is typical. We’ve found that, to an amazing degree, most people in the organization familiar with the domain in question will come up with a virtually identical list of names.

*It is easy to get Positive Deviants involved if you tap into their intrinsic motivation and professionalism.*

Corporate knowledge of these Positive Deviants has two significant implications for achieving the ultimate goal, an improvement in performance. First, because there is such a high level of agreement on who the Positive Deviants are, their participation in the process creates instant credibility. Just because they are participating, many others will support the initiative.

Second, the content they produce is likely to be more robust and meaningful and will be treated by everyone as more valuable. This quality is critical for acceptance by less effective personnel.

### GETTING THE POSITIVE DEVIANTS INVOLVED

Conventional wisdom says that you must provide Positive Deviants with some incentive to participate. Nonsense! It is easy to get Positive Deviants involved if you tap into their intrinsic motivation and professionalism. You should begin by asking them the following simple questions:

- What percentage of your job is in some way a repetition of previous work? (*Usually the answer is 60-80%.*)
- How do you like doing these repetitive tasks? (*They’re “OK.”*)
- What do you do with the other 20-40% of your time? (*“Meet with people.” “Design things,” etc.*)

- How do you like doing these things? (*“These are fun.”*)
- Which do you think drives your compensation more, the repetitive things that presumably others can do or the creative things where you really add your expert value? (*“The creative things.”*)
- If you could use an approach that allowed you to spend less time doing the repetitive things that you don’t really like and more time doing the creative things that you do like, would you be willing to participate in that approach?

Not surprisingly, the Positive Deviants willingly participate every time.

### THE SECRET SAUCE

The structure and content of the Positive Deviants’ secret sauce is actually quite different from the foundations underlying current systems. In particular, Positive Deviants do not use branching probabilities (the foundation of decision trees, artificial intelligence or expert systems). They also don’t rely on generalized searches of databases for appropriate content (the foundation of most enterprise knowledge management systems).

Instead, Positive Deviants employ a much simpler, more robust and focused model that underlies everything they do. This model has only two elements:

- An “ecological survey” that points them to a limited number of core behaviors
- Patterned behaviors based on the survey results

## ECOLOGICAL SURVEYS

The single most critical aspect of the Positive Deviants' secret sauce is the categorization process they use to organize their work. Typically, Positive Deviants only require about 90 seconds to assess their environment and categorize any situation into one of only three categories. Further, they categorize using just one or two key factors and label the categories using very simple language.

For example, safety inspectors for an insurance company enter a customer's premises through the loading dock, observe the trucks parked there, and quickly categorize the customer as having "clean trucks," "dirty trucks" or "other." Using this "clean truck rule," the inspectors can predict with almost complete accuracy the safety conditions they will find at the customer's site.

*Positive Deviants categorize quickly and efficiently using subtle criteria.*

Similarly, a Positive Deviant in the transfer of family owned business assets from the founders to the next generation, categorizes his customers' businesses into "high trust," "low trust" and "other." In just 10 seconds, based on the tone of voice (e.g. whispering indicates low trust) and the terminology used by the founder, he can categorize the situation and predict how to manage the transition.

Positive Deviants categorize quickly and efficiently using subtle criteria. They are "unconsciously competent" and know from experience both the correct assessment and the implications of the assessment on their follow-up behaviors.

The following questions can help convert the Positive Deviants' unconscious competence into something more tangible. Just ask the Positive Deviant:

- Do you organize your work into a few main categories? (Assuming they said: "yes", use some simple, plain language to label their categories)
- How quickly do you know you are in one of the categories? (Usually "very quickly")
- What tells you that you are in one of those categories?

There is a remarkably consistent pattern in the frequency of occurrence of the categories. For each Positive Deviant, the leading category almost always occurs about 70% of the time, the secondary category 25% of the time, and the remaining category (usually "other," "miscellaneous," or "don't know") only about 5% of the time. To continue the above examples, dirty trucks and low trust environments occurred 70% of the time, clean trucks and high trust environments occurred 25% of the time and some other situation occurred only 5% of the time. To further simplify the analysis, the 25% category is almost always just a derivative of the 70% category. Thus, by mastering the cueing mechanism and associated behaviors of the 70% category, Positive Deviants become extraordinarily efficient at making quick decisions.

If this categorization process is so robust, why do so many people think their situations are completely unique? We humans appear to be genetically wired to focus more on differences in our environment than on similarities. Many knowledge management systems reflect this bias. They are actually focused on managing the 5% "other" category more than the 70% category (which cannot be done cost-effectively in an automated system).

Focusing on differences is a reasonable survival mechanism. However, if we had to uniquely recreate an entire process or function each time we needed it, we would be overwhelmed and would never progress. Instead, we systematically group our work so we can become increasingly efficient at performing it. The Positive Deviants even account for variation in their 70% models.

The message is clear. Identify and concentrate on your 70% category. If you master that, then you master the core of your business.

**PATTERNED BEHAVIORS**

Based on the 70% category, the Positive Deviants have a set of precise, patterned behaviors that make them the Positive Deviants. These patterned behaviors include:

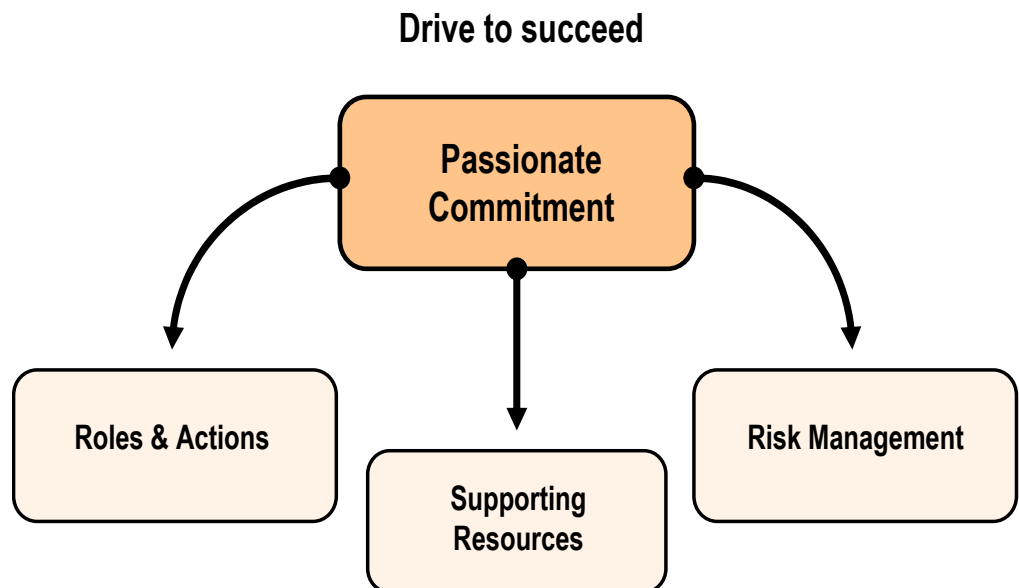
- A passionate commitment to the effort, expressed through a set of mental models about the outcomes of the process
- A strong focus on action
- A set of threat monitoring and management strategies

- An extensive, but highly focused, set of references to supporting materials and resources

**Passionate Commitment**

The single most important element in the Positive Deviants’ patterned behavior is their passionate commitment expressed through their mental model. However, they don’t usually know they have a mental model and it is difficult for the new person to grasp the model because it is both unconscious and defined using highly abstract thinking. Understanding the Positive Deviants’ abstraction is critical to understanding their secret sauce.

Positive Deviants consistently conceive of the ultimate objective of their work in more visionary, moralistic, and exciting terms than less effective performers. For example, the top performing managers at a manufacturing company conceptualized the outcomes of a performance management and pay administration system as “refreshing and energizing the organization,”



while the less effective managers thought of it as doing “pay administration.”

*Positive Deviants refine their mental models by organizing their passion into groupings of work required to achieve the objective.*

Most people would much rather “refresh and energize the organization” than “administer pay!” It is easy to see why the Positive Deviants distinguish themselves.

The Positive Deviants refine their mental models by organizing their energetic objective into groupings of work required to achieve the objective. They further define these groupings using highly compressed vocabulary (what the “Principles” are) and early indicators of problems situations (what to “Avoid”).

For example, two of the work groupings for “refreshing and energizing the organization” are:

- “Leveling” the management “ratings” of individuals
- Creating development plans for the leaders

The principles supporting the first grouping include the definition of a compressed term, “Leveling” (“Creating common agreement on the criteria used to identify leaders”), and something to avoid (Leveling does not mean “arguing for your people regardless of the criteria”). The mental model is completely, if unconsciously, defined from highest-level objective to detailed definition of concepts.

The Positive Deviant mental models are highly organized, effective, filled with passion, and the absolute foundation of actions. If you don’t understand the mental model, you cannot apply the content in any meaningful way.

## Actionable Focus

Based on their mental model, the Positive Deviants always know who is supposed to do what and when. They are very accountability and action-oriented, carrying remarkably comprehensive and accurate, but generic, mental maps of roles and responsibilities, task definition, and work flow. These maps fully define everything required to achieve the objective.

For example, the safety inspectors mentioned earlier know that there will be a “Director of Safety” who will have theoretical responsibility for the safety program and a Vice-President of Operations who will be the real authority. They will also know that implementing a change in safety-related behaviors requires specific activities such as having the Vice-President of Operations “walk the talk” (which needs to occur immediately) and establishing a better metrics system (which can come later).

These generic mental maps enable the Positive Deviants to enter a specific situation and have a complete, applied plan almost instantly by simply substituting the specifics of the situation for the generic. Thus, the generic underlying process, the secret sauce, leads to the creation of an applied project.

## Threats to Success

Positive Deviants know that success is rarely easy. From harsh experience, they have learned what is most likely to go wrong, how to prevent it from going wrong, how to detect when something is about to go wrong, and what to do about it if the problem occurs.



More specifically, Positive Deviants have a strong, prioritized list of general threats to the success of the process. They can identify the biggest threats and have a predefined set of actions that both reduce the probability and the impact of the risk. In addition, the Positive Deviant monitors subtle triggers of the risk condition. For example, a single phrase by a Vice-President of Sales to a Positive Deviant sales consultant (“We have to get some other people involved.”) cues the Positive Deviant that the company is not supporting the newly implemented program and that an alternative implementation strategy is needed. A critical element of the secret sauce is the ability to quickly detect and manage risks.

### Using Existing Resources

Positive Deviants are tremendously efficient at taking advantage of all the available resources in the

organization, including reference material. However, unlike generalized search engines, the Positive Deviants use this material in a highly targeted way. They say things like, “Now I show them this article,” or “Now I use the manufacturing release check list.” The Positive Deviants know when and how to use specific materials.

Often these materials include extremely detailed process documentation. For example, the Positive Deviants at one computer networking company maintained references to documentation on how to set router switches. Similarly, Positive Deviants from a biotech company kept a mental list of all the federal forms required for FDA certifications of their production line. The secret sauce includes a detailed

list of all of the various supporting references required for success.

## THE TOTAL SECRET SAUCE

As may be apparent, the breadth and strength of the Positive Deviants’ secret sauce is quite remarkable. It begins with passionate commitment and efficient categorization scheme and ends with tightly coupled linkages to other resources that provide extremely specific “how to’s.” It includes the subtle nuances of understanding found in the mental models, the specific work required to be successful and robust risk management capabilities. Best of all, the Positive Deviants have integrated all of these things into a single, unified view of the process that can easily be applied to any specific situation.

## DISCOVERING THE SECRET SAUCE

Are you now saying to yourself, “This looks too difficult”? Don’t be alarmed. It is actually quite easy to quickly discover the Positive Deviants’ secret sauce. Using Wisdom Discovery and established digital coach technology™ (DCT™), even such complex wisdom as analysis and decision-making about interplanetary probes takes only about 30 hours to gather, process and organize. Simpler processes can be discovered in as little as 6-8 hours. Furthermore, the secret sauce is ready for use by less experienced or successful personnel at the end of this time without significant additional work.

Wisdom Discovery™ is best done in a workshop-like setting with a DCT™ application projected onto a screen. The facilitator begins the session by describing herself as the ideal new employee. She is ideal because she is intelligent, competent and motivated.

*It is actually quite easy to quickly discover the Positive Deviants’ secret sauce.*

She just doesn't know how to do it "right" and needs the Positive Deviants to coach her to perform the function correctly. Positive Deviants can't resist coaching an eager naïve person.

*DCT™ applications guide the Positive Deviants to adopt differing perspectives on their expertise, creating cognitive conflicts.*

The facilitator then asks "naïve new person questions" prompted by the projected DCT™ application. These questions are typical of the questions asked when a naïve new person joins an organization. They are virtually universal and evoke a specialized kind of story by the Positive Deviant called a "naïve new person story." The facilitator records the Positive Deviant answers in the DCT™ application, both as a means of providing immediate feedback for the Positive Deviants, and to slow the use of abstractions to a comprehensible pace.

Initially, the naïve new person story told by the Positive Deviant is almost always an "official" version and does not yet contain their secret sauce. Official stories use relatively bureaucratic language and lack vision and energy. Most people will detect these "official" stories immediately and consistently reject them as unrealistic. In contrast, DCT™ is designed to cause people to question themselves and switch from the official story to the "real" story. Real stories are more colloquial, have a less formal syntax and are bursting with energy, vision and passion. This conversion almost always occurs approximately 22 minutes into Wisdom Discovery™. These "real" stories are the heart of the secret sauce.

However, the secret sauce in story form is too raw to be easily consumed by less experienced personnel. DCT™

applications guide the Positive Deviants to adopt differing perspectives on their expertise, creating cognitive conflicts, which the Positive Deviants resolve by asking themselves: "What is the *right* thing to do?" Focusing on doing the "right thing," drives them both to a deeper interpretation of the secret sauce and the conversion of the sauce to a repeatable best practice. When developed this way, the best practice is highly useable by less experienced personnel.

Once the Positive Deviants become completely engaged in Wisdom Discovery™ (this takes about 3 hours), it is actually quite difficult to get them to stop talking. As one Positive Deviant put it: "This is the best work I have done in five years! I don't want to stop!" In some instances, the facilitator has had to turn off the projector and get extremely forceful to get the Positive Deviants to break for lunch or end the day. Positive Deviant participation has never been a problem.

Wisdom Discovery™ generates several deliverables and one great opportunity. The deliverables are:

- A significantly improved Positive Deviant process
- Documentation of the Positive Deviant secret sauce
- A DCT™ database which stores the Positive Deviant content

The DCT™ database provides the opportunity for improved organizational performance by enabling the use of the secret sauce by less skilled or successful personnel.



## USING THE SECRET SAUCE FOR PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

Do you plan to use the secret sauce you just gathered? This is not a frivolous question. Too many people become overly focused on gathering wisdom with little regard for its use. Yet, the benefit of the secret sauce only occurs when it is used to improve performance.

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to get people to use the secret sauce. In most cases, a naïve person judges the value of new wisdom in only 90 seconds, stopping further use if the content is found wanting. To get past that 90-second barrier, the user must immediately perceive that the content is credible and begin to apply it to their situation. Credibility for the content comes from the “real” stories that have been polished into best practices.

*In most cases, a naïve person judges the value of new wisdom in only 90 seconds.*

Application of the content occurs when DCT™ guides the naïve user to emulate the Positive Deviants’ process for converting the generic to the specific. DCT™ “coaches” them to become introspective about the application of the best practice to their own situation in a way that increases the users’ “ownership” of the best practice, which, in turn, results in behavioral changes consistent with the secret sauce.

Typically, this change occurs very quickly, usually in about eight minutes or less. The naïve users lean forward more, concentrate their focus on the content, increase their respiration, and use more intense language. Effective DCT™ can drive behavioral change.

## ALTERNATIVES APPROACHES

Are there alternatives to focusing on the secret sauce or the approach to gathering it presented here? We don’t think so – at least not today! Many things have been tried in the recent past, but few have succeeded.

The most common past approaches have been lengthy interviews (often videotaped), and/or following the Positive Deviants around with extensive process mapping during the data-gathering period. These labor-intensive approaches have produced thick process binders and lengthy training courses. These have failed for many reasons, including:

- They only capture and display the “official” story (which is rejected by users)
- At best they capture the actionable portions of the Positive Deviant behavior and consistently miss the critical categorization schemes, mental models and cueing mechanisms
- They are fairly rigid and therefore difficult to apply to real situations
- They are both disruptive of the Positive Deviant behavior and invasive of their professional domain, and are therefore resisted by the Positive Deviant
- They are extremely labor intensive and therefore quite expensive, often taking many months of work

For all of these reasons, and many others, most prior efforts to simply “capture wisdom” have not been successful.

Two other, more indirect approaches to discovering and using the Positive

*Does this matter?  
Yes, the positive  
impacts of  
discovering and  
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Positive Deviant  
Wisdom are  
remarkable!*

Deviants' secret sauce have been tried as well; the establishment of "communities of practice" and the use of personnel profilers. In communities of practice (CoP), an electronic bulletin board is established in which the Positive Deviants theoretically come together to share their Positive Deviantise. When a naïve person needs some critical information, they join a CoP talk session and pose a question to the community. The presumption is that an Positive Deviant participating in the CoP will respond with at least a portion of his secret sauce.

Personnel profilers are based on a similar core assumption, that the Positive Deviants are willing to participate. In personnel profilers, each Positive Deviant has a profile describing their area of Positive Deviance. When the naïve person needs assistance, they initiate a query into the profiler, which provides a match between the naïve person's question and the Positive Deviant's profile, usually using some form of key word search capability. The system then asks the identified Positive Deviant if they would accept a question on the topic. Assuming the Positive Deviant is willing to participate, they respond, providing some of their secret sauce to the questioner.

Unfortunately, neither of these approaches has worked. In both cases the Positive Deviants drop out of the system quickly. They get bored with the low level of content in the CoP or they become inundated with simplistic questions in the personnel profilers. In both cases, they quickly realize that they are being pulled away from their main functions and that their compensation is likely to suffer. Their

initial interest and participation rarely lasts more than a few months.

In contrast, using DCT™, the Positive Deviants' participation is usually limited to a three-day session (or less) that they enjoy, from which they benefit, and that produces superior content.

## **BENEFITS OF THE SECRET SAUCE**

Does this matter? YES, the impacts are remarkable! For example, by applying the DCT™ processes described here:

- A semi-conductor manufacturing company reduced training time 66%
- A photography company said that they, "Took three days to accomplish what had previously taken six months."
- An audiology consultant has boosted revenues in a string of clinics from the industry average of \$400k per year per clinic to \$1.3M per year per clinic
- A fast food chain projects that it will increase the sales in its less effective restaurants \$2,000 per restaurant per week

Discovering and reusing the Positive Deviants' secret sauce does make a difference. Now, go discover the wisdom of your own Positive Deviants and begin reaping the benefits!

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