

Positive Deviance

Based on a story of Jerry Sternin's work with childhood malnutrition in Vietnam

At the invitation of the Vietnamese government, Jerry Sternin went to Vietnam in the 1990s to work on eradicating malnutrition in the country's villages as a staff member of Save the Children. Building on research by Marian Zeitlin of Tufts University, he held the kernel of an idea and a question: Is it possible to find out why some children might be healthy? This was a very odd question when everyone knew their mission was to fight the problem of malnutrition against near-hopeless odds, with its attendant and well-documented poverty, poor sanitation, limited food distribution systems, lack of access to fresh water, and political bureaucracy. Who in their right mind would ask if anyone was well nourished?

Well, that is exactly what Sternin did. He stood in front of a group of women from a local village who had been trained to chart the growth of the children by age and weight. He asked them if there were any children under three who were from poor families but well nourished. He did not know what would happen next. The answer was like the call and response of birds singing to each other. "Co [pronounced "Gah," meaning "Yes"], co, co."

"You mean it's possible today in this village for a very poor family to have a well-nourished child?" Sternin asked them.

"Co, co, co" was the answer. And then all of them went off to see for themselves. "That's how it starts," said Sternin: The change began with the impulse to see what was happening before anything changed.

What they found was that the families that maintained healthy children adopted, in slight but meaningful ways, habits that were modifications of the norm. The norm in most villages was that families, when faced with limited food, would reduce their number

Contrasting with this pattern, the healthy families ensured that children ate small portions many times a day. They went into the rice paddies to collect tiny shrimp that could be mixed in with the rice, and into the fields to collect sweet potato greens, a food that many looked down upon. They displayed directive and nurturing behaviors, such as making sure the children actually ate the food. And they went against the conventional wisdom by feeding even the children with diarrhea, small portions but consistently. Sternin began to grasp the importance of being specific, understanding exactly what made the outcome work. He was learning from the part of the system that was adapting and becoming successful.

“In every community, organization, or social group,” wrote David Dorsey about the meaning of Sternin’s findings, “there are individuals whose exceptional behaviors or practices enable them to get better results. . . . Without realizing it, these ‘positive deviants’ have discovered the path to success for the entire group—that is, if their secrets can be analyzed, isolated, and then shared with the rest of the group.” For example, the conventional wisdom was to limit feedings, avoid certain foods for reasons of status, and eliminate feedings during bouts of diarrhea. Yet an alternative behavior, found within the group itself, held the possibility of survival.

Sternin wisely chose not to overemphasize the success of the few but rather to treat them as scouts of the collective. The solutions that were necessary could not be reduced to a formula and taught to others by experts. Instead, those who practiced successfully had to be the ones to teach the new behaviors. The guiding question for the methodology was how to enlarge the network. How do you amplify successful behaviors by making the group the “guru” of change?

The emphasis was on productive relationships and encouraging new behavior. As an illustration of this approach, a health

homes. In cases where families did not have success, they were welcomed back for another two-week period. The bias was always toward action, calibration, and remaining true to the actual circumstances of the situation.

“We call conventional wisdom about malnutrition,” Sternin reflected about his learning, “true but useless.” He feels the same way about most organizational change strategies that rely on outside expertise alone. “The traditional model for social and organizational change doesn’t work. It never has. You can’t bring permanent solutions in from outside.” Instead, Sternin works from inside the system, learning what are considered the acceptable behaviors of the majority while continually seeking the “positive deviants” who represent an alternative solution.

When Sternin and his wife went to Vietnam, they were novices, “like orphans at the airport when we arrived. . . . We had no idea what we were going to do.” Without presumption of an answer, they were open to seeking new perspectives and disciplined about paying attention to what was already working. They knew they had to depend on the people closest to the situation and to respect that an appropriate response to malnutrition was already present in the village. From this orientation, they could listen with a kind of beginner’s mind, curious and willing to ask lots of questions. “Our attitude was, Oh my God, what’s going to happen?”