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ARTICLE

The *real* work of a leader?

Asking tough *questions*—
not giving all the answers.

Supporting problem
solvers—not solving
problems yourself.

The Work of Leadership

by Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie

New sections to guide you through the article:
- ***The Idea in Brief***
- ***The Idea at Work***
- ***Exploring Further. . .***

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THE IDEA IN BRIEF

WHAT presents your company with its toughest challenges? Shifting markets? Stiffening competition? Emerging technologies? When such challenges intensify, you may need to reclarify corporate values, redesign strategies, merge or dissolve businesses, or manage cross-functional strife.

These **adaptive challenges** are murky, systemic problems with no easy answers. Perhaps even more vexing, the solutions to adaptive challenges *don't* reside in the executive suite. Solving them requires the involvement of people *throughout* your organization.

Adaptive work is tough on everyone. For *leaders*, it's counterintuitive. Rather than providing solutions, you must ask tough questions and leverage employees' collective intelligence. Instead of maintaining norms, you must challenge the "way we do business." And rather than quelling conflict, you need to draw issues out and let people feel the sting of reality.

For your *employees*, adaptive work is painful—requiring unfamiliar roles, responsibilities, values, and ways of working. No wonder employees often try to lob adaptive work back to their leaders.

How to ensure that you *and* your employees embrace the challenges of adaptive work? Applying the following six principles will help.

THE IDEA AT WORK

1. **Get on the balcony.** Don't get swept up in the field of play. Instead, move back and forth between the "action" and the "balcony." You'll spot emerging patterns, such as power struggles or work avoidance. This high-level perspective helps you mobilize people to do adaptive work.

2. **Identify your adaptive challenge.**

EXAMPLE:
When British Airways' passengers nicknamed it "Bloody Awful," CEO Colin Marshall knew he had to infuse the company with a dedication to customers. He identified the adaptive challenge as "creating trust throughout British Airways." To diagnose the challenge further, Marshall's team mingled with employees and customers in baggage areas, reservation centers, and planes, asking which beliefs, values, and behaviors needed overhauling. They exposed value-based conflicts underlying surface-level disputes, and resolved the team's own dysfunctional conflicts which impaired companywide collaboration. By understanding themselves, their people, and the company's conflicts, the team strengthened British Airways' bid to become "the World's Favourite Airline."

3. **Regulate distress.** To inspire change—without disabling people—pace adaptive work:
   - First, let employees debate issues and clarify assumptions behind competing views—safely.
   - Then provide direction. Define *key* issues and values. Control the rate of change: Don't start too many initiatives simultaneously without stopping others.
   - Maintain just enough tension, resisting pressure to restore the status quo. Raise tough questions without succumbing to anxiety yourself. Communicate presence and poise.

4. **Maintain disciplined attention.** Encourage managers to grapple with divisive issues, rather than indulging in scapegoating or denial. Deepen the debate to unlock polarized, superficial conflict. Demonstrate collaboration to solve problems.

5. **Give the work back to employees.** To instill collective self-confidence—versus dependence on you—support rather than control people. Encourage risk-taking and responsibility—then back people up if they err. Help them recognize *they* contain the solutions.

6. **Protect leadership voices from below.** Don't silence whistle-blowers, creative deviants, and others exposing contradictions within your company. Their perspectives can provoke fresh thinking. Ask, "What is this guy *really* talking about? Have we missed something?"

1997

Sometimes an article comes along and turns the conventional thinking on a subject not upside down but inside out. So it is with this landmark piece by Ronald Heifetz and Donald Laurie, published in January 1997. Not only do the authors introduce the breakthrough concept of adaptive change – the sort of change that occurs when people and organizations are forced to adjust to a radically altered environment – they challenge the traditional understanding of the leader-follower relationship.

Leaders are shepherds, goes the conventional thinking, protecting their flock from harsh surroundings. Not so, say the authors. Leaders who truly care for their followers expose them to the painful reality of their condition and demand that they fashion a response. Instead of giving people false assurance that their best is good enough, leaders insist that people surpass themselves. And rather than smoothing over conflicts, leaders force disputes to the surface.

Modeling the candor they encourage leaders to display, the authors don't disguise adaptive change's emotional costs. Few people are likely to thank the leader for stirring anxiety and uncovering conflict. But leaders who cultivate emotional fortitude soon learn what they can achieve when they maximize their followers' well-being instead of their comfort.

The Work of Leadership

Followers want comfort, stability, and solutions from their leaders. But that's babysitting. Real leaders ask hard questions and knock people out of their comfort zones. Then they manage the resulting distress.

by Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie

To stay alive, Jack Pritchard had to change his life. Triple bypass surgery and medication could help, the heart surgeon told him, but no technical fix could release Pritchard from his own responsibility for changing the habits of a lifetime. He had to stop smoking, improve his diet, get some exercise, and take time to relax, remembering to breathe more deeply each day. Pritchard's doctor could provide sustaining technical expertise and take supportive action, but only Pritchard could adapt his ingrained habits to improve his long-term health. The doctor faced the leadership task of mobilizing the patient to make critical behavioral changes; Jack Pritchard faced the adaptive work of figuring out which specific changes to make and how to incorporate them into his daily life.

Companies today face challenges similar to the ones that confronted Pritchard and his doctor. They face adaptive challenges. Changes in societies, markets, customers, competition, and technology around the globe are forcing organizations to clarify their values, develop new strategies, and learn new ways of operating. Often the toughest task for leaders in effecting change is mobilizing people throughout the organization to do adaptive work.

Solutions to adaptive challenges reside not in the executive suite but in the collective intelligence of employees at all levels.

Adaptive work is required when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge. We see adaptive challenges every day at every level of the workplace – when companies restructure or reengineer, develop or implement strategy, or merge businesses. We see adaptive challenges when marketing has difficulty working with operations, when cross-functional teams don't work well, or when senior executives complain, "We don't seem to be able to execute effectively." Adaptive problems are often systemic problems with no ready answers.

Mobilizing an organization to adapt its behaviors in order to thrive in new business environments is critical. Without such change, any company today would falter. Indeed, getting people to do adaptive work is the mark of leadership in a competitive world. Yet for most senior executives, providing leadership and not just authoritative expertise is extremely difficult. Why? We see two reasons. First, in order to make change happen, executives have to break a longstanding behavior pattern of their own: providing leadership in the form of solutions. This tendency is quite natural because many executives reach their positions of authority by virtue of their competence in taking responsibility and solving problems. But the locus of responsibility for problem solving when a company faces an adaptive challenge must shift to its people. Solutions to adaptive challenges reside not in the executive suite but in the collective intelligence of employees at all levels, who need to use one another as resources, often across boundaries, and learn their way to those solutions.

Second, adaptive change is distressing for the people going through it. They need to take on new roles, new relationships, new values, new behaviors, and new approaches to work. Many employees are ambivalent about the efforts and sacrifices required of them. They often look to the senior executive to take problems off their shoulders. But those expectations have to be unlearned. Rather than fulfilling the expectation that they will provide answers, leaders have to ask tough questions. Rather than protecting people from outside threats, leaders should allow them to feel the pinch of reality in order to stimulate them to adapt. Instead of orienting people to their current roles, leaders must disorient them so that new relationships can develop. Instead of quelling conflict, leaders have to draw the issues out. Instead of maintaining norms, leaders have to challenge "the way we do business" and help others distinguish immutable values from historical practices that must go.

Drawing on our experience with managers from around the world, we offer six principles for leading adaptive work: "getting on the balcony," identifying the adaptive challenge, regulating distress, maintaining disciplined attention, giving the work back to people, and protecting voices of leadership from below. We illustrate those principles with an example of adaptive change at KPMG Netherlands, a professional-services firm.

Get on the Balcony

Earvin "Magic" Johnson's greatness in leading his basketball team came in part from his ability to play hard while keeping the whole game situation in mind, as if he stood in a press box or on a balcony above the field of play. Bobby Orr played hockey in the same way. Other players might fail to recognize the larger patterns of play that performers like Johnson and Orr quickly understand, because they are so engaged in the game that they get carried away by it. Their attention is captured by the rapid motion, the physical contact, the roar of the crowd, and the pressure to execute. In sports, most players simply may not see who is open for a pass, who is missing a block, or how the offense and defense work together. Players like Johnson and Orr watch these things and allow their observations to guide their actions.

Business leaders have to be able to view patterns as if they were on a balcony. It does them no good to be swept up in the field of action. Leaders have to see a context for change or create one.

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They should give employees a strong sense of the history of the enterprise and what's good about its past, as well as an idea of the market forces at work today and the responsibility people must take in shaping the future. Leaders must be able to identify struggles over values and power, recognize patterns of work avoidance, and watch for the many other functional and dysfunctional reactions to change.

Without the capacity to move back and forth between the field of action and the balcony, to reflect day to day, moment to moment, on the many ways in which an organization's habits can sabotage adaptive work, a leader easily and unwittingly becomes a prisoner of the system. The dynamics of adaptive change are far too complex to keep track of, let alone influence, if leaders stay only on the field of play.

We have encountered several leaders, some of whom we discuss in this article, who manage to spend much of their precious time on the balcony as they guide their organizations through change. Without that perspective, they probably would have been unable to mobilize people to do adaptive work. Getting on the balcony is thus a prerequisite for following the next five principles.

Identify the Adaptive Challenge

When a leopard threatens a band of chimpanzees, the leopard rarely succeeds in picking off a stray. Chimps know how to respond to this kind of threat. But when a man with an automatic rifle comes near, the routine responses fail. Chimps risk extinction in a world of poachers unless they figure out how to disarm the new threat. Similarly, when businesses cannot learn quickly to adapt to new challenges, they are likely to face their own form of extinction.

Consider the well-known case of British Airways. Having observed the revolutionary changes in the airline industry during the 1980s, then chief executive Colin Marshall clearly recognized the need to transform an airline nicknamed Bloody Awful by its own passengers into an exemplar of customer service. He also understood that this ambition would require more than anything else changes in values, practices, and relationships throughout the company. An organization whose people clung to functional silos and valued pleasing their bosses more than pleasing customers could not become "the world's favorite airline." Marshall needed an organization dedicated to serving people, acting on trust, respecting the individual, and making teamwork happen across boundaries. Values had to change throughout British Airways. People had to learn to collaborate and to develop a collective sense of responsibility for the direction and performance of the airline. Marshall identified the essential adaptive challenge: creating trust throughout the organization. He is one of the first executives we have known to make "creating trust" a priority.

To lead British Airways, Marshall had to get his executive team to understand the nature of the threat created by dissatisfied customers: Did it represent a technical challenge or an adaptive challenge? Would expert advice and technical adjustments within basic routines suffice, or would people throughout the company have to learn different ways of doing business, develop new competencies, and begin to work collectively?

Marshall and his team set out to diagnose in more detail the organization's challenges. They looked in three places. First, they listened to the ideas and concerns of people inside and outside the organization – meeting with crews on flights, showing up in the 350-person reservations center in New York, wandering around the baggage-handling area in Tokyo, or visiting the passenger lounge in whatever airport they happened to be in. Their primary questions were, Whose values, beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors would have to change in order for progress to take place? What shifts in priorities, resources, and power were necessary? What sacrifices would have to be made and by whom?

Second, Marshall and his team saw conflicts as clues – symptoms of adaptive challenges. The way conflicts across functions were being expressed were mere surface phenomena; the underlying conflicts had to be diagnosed. Disputes over seemingly technical issues such as procedures, schedules, and lines of authority were in fact proxies for underlying conflicts about values and norms.

Third, Marshall and his team held a mirror up to themselves, recognizing that they embodied the adaptive challenges facing the organization. Early in the transformation of British Airways, competing values and norms were played out on the executive team in dysfunctional ways that impaired the capacity of the rest of the company to collaborate across functions and units and make the necessary trade-offs. No executive can hide from the fact that his or her team reflects the best and the worst of the company's values and norms, and therefore provides a case in point for insight into the nature of the adaptive work ahead.

Thus, identifying its adaptive challenge was crucial in British Airways' bid to become the world's favorite airline. For the strategy to succeed, the company's leaders needed to understand themselves, their people, and the potential sources of conflict. Marshall recognized that strategy development itself requires adaptive work.

Regulate Distress

Adaptive work generates distress. Before putting people to work on challenges for which there are no ready solutions, a leader must realize that people can learn only so much so fast. At the same time, they must feel the need to change as reality brings new challenges. They cannot learn new ways when they are overwhelmed, but eliminating stress altogether removes the impetus for doing adaptive work. Because a leader must strike a delicate balance between having people feel the need to change and having them feel overwhelmed by change, leadership is a razor's edge.

A leader must attend to three fundamental tasks in order to help maintain a productive level of tension. Adhering to these tasks will allow him or her to motivate people without disabling them. First, a leader must create what can be called a *holding environment.* To use the analogy of a pressure cooker, a leader needs to regulate the pressure by turning up the heat while also allowing some steam to escape. If the pressure exceeds the cooker's capacity, the cooker can blow up. However, nothing cooks without some heat.

> *A leader must sequence and pace the work. Too often, senior managers convey that everything is important. They overwhelm and disorient the very people who need to take responsibility for the work.*

In the early stages of a corporate change, the holding environment can be a temporary "place" in which a leader creates the conditions for diverse groups to talk to one another about the challenges facing them, to frame and debate issues, and to clarify the assumptions behind competing perspectives and values. Over time, more issues can be phased in as they become ripe. At British Airways, for example, the shift from an internal focus to a customer focus took place over four or five years and dealt with important issues in succession: building a credible executive team, communicating with a highly fragmented organization, defining new measures of performance and compensation, and developing sophisticated information systems. During that time, employees at all levels learned to identify what and how they needed to change.

Thus, a leader must sequence and pace the work. Too often, senior managers convey that everything is important. They start new initiatives without stopping other activities, or they start too many initiatives at the same time. They overwhelm and disorient the very people who need to take responsibility for the work.

Second, a leader is responsible for direction, protection, orientation, managing conflict, and shaping norms. (See the exhibit "Adaptive Work Calls for Leadership.") Fulfilling these responsibilities is also important for a manager in technical or routine situations. But a leader engaged in adaptive work uses his authority to fulfill them differently. A leader provides direction by identifying the organization's adaptive challenge and framing the key questions and issues. A leader protects people by managing the rate of change. A leader orients people to new roles and responsibilities by clarifying business realities and key values. A leader helps expose conflict, viewing it as the engine of creativity and learning. Finally, a leader helps the organization maintain those norms that must endure and challenge those that need to change.

Third, a leader must have presence and poise; regulating distress is perhaps a leader's most difficult job. The pressures to restore equilibrium are enormous. Just as molecules bang hard against the walls of a pressure cooker, people bang up against leaders who are trying to sustain the pressures of tough, conflict-filled work. Although leadership demands a deep understanding of the pain of change–the fears and sacrifices associated with major readjustment–it also requires the ability to hold steady and maintain the tension. Otherwise, the pressure escapes and the stimulus for learning and change is lost.

A leader has to have the emotional capacity to tolerate uncertainty, frustration, and pain. He has to be able to raise tough questions without getting too anxious himself. Employees as well as colleagues and customers will carefully observe verbal and nonverbal cues to a leader's ability to hold steady. He needs to communicate confidence that he and they can tackle the tasks ahead.

Maintain Disciplined Attention

Different people within the same organization bring different experiences, assumptions, values, beliefs, and habits to their work. This diversity is valuable because innovation and learning are the products of differences. No one learns anything without being open to contrasting points of view. Yet managers at all levels are often unwilling – or unable – to address their competing perspectives collectively. They frequently avoid paying attention to issues that disturb them. They restore equilibrium quickly, often with work avoidance maneuvers. A leader must get employees to confront tough trade-offs in values, procedures, operating styles, and power.

That is as true at the top of the organization as it is in the middle or on the front line. Indeed, if the executive team cannot model adaptive work, the organization will languish. If senior managers can't draw out and deal with divisive issues, how will people elsewhere in the organization change their behaviors and rework their relationships? As Jan Carlzon, the legendary CEO of Scandinavian Airlines System

Adaptive Work Calls for Leadership

Leader's Responsibilities	*Type of Situation*	
	Technical or Routine	*Adaptive*
Direction	Define problems and provide solutions	Identify the adaptive challenge and frame key questions and issues
Protection	Shield the organization from external threats	Let the organization feel external pressures within a range it can stand
Orientation	Clarify roles and responsibilities	Challenge current roles and resist pressure to define new roles quickly
Managing Conflict	Restore order	Expose conflict or let it emerge
Shaping Norms	Maintain norms	Challenge unproductive norms

In the course of regulating people's distress, a leader faces several key responsibilities and may have to use his or her authority differently depending on the type of work situation.

(SAS), told us, "One of the most interesting missions of leadership is getting people on the executive team to listen to and learn from one another. Held in debate, people can learn their way to collective solutions when they understand one another's assumptions. The work of the leader is to get conflict out into the open and use it as a source of creativity."

Because work avoidance is rampant in organizations, a leader has to counteract distractions that prevent people from dealing with adaptive issues. Scapegoating, denial, focusing only on today's technical issues, or attacking individuals rather than the perspectives they represent – all forms of work avoidance – are to be expected when an organization undertakes adaptive work. Distractions have to be identified when they occur so that people will regain focus.

When sterile conflict takes the place of dialogue, a leader has to step in and put the team to work on reframing the issues. She has to deepen the debate with questions, unbundling the issues into their parts rather than letting conflict remain polarized and superficial. When people preoccupy themselves with blaming external forces, higher management, or a heavy workload, a leader has to sharpen the team's sense of responsibility for carving out the time to press forward. When the team fragments and individuals resort to protecting their own turf, leaders have to demonstrate the need for collaboration. People have to discover the value of consulting with one another and using one another as resources in the problem-solving process. For example, one CEO we know uses executive meetings, even those that focus on operational and technical issues, as opportunities to teach the team how to work collectively on adaptive problems.

Of course, only the rare manager intends to avoid adaptive work. In general, people feel ambivalent about it. Although they want to make progress on hard problems or live up to their renewed and clarified values, people also want to avoid the associated distress. Just as millions of U.S. citizens want to reduce the federal budget deficit, but not by giving up their tax dollars or benefits or jobs, so, too, managers may consider adaptive work a priority but have difficulty sacrificing their familiar ways of doing business. People need leadership to help them maintain their focus on the tough questions. Disciplined attention is the currency of leadership.

Give the Work Back to People

Everyone in the organization has special access to information that comes from his or her particular vantage point. Everyone may see different needs and opportunities. People who sense early changes in the marketplace are often at the periphery, but the organization will thrive if it can bring that information to bear on tactical and strategic decisions. When people do not act on their special knowledge, businesses fail to adapt.

All too often, people look up the chain of command, expecting senior management to meet market challenges for which they themselves are responsible. Indeed, the greater and more persistent distresses that accompany adaptive work make such dependence worse. People tend to become passive, and senior managers who pride themselves on being problem solvers take decisive action. That behavior restores equilibrium in the short term but ultimately leads to complacency and habits of work avoidance that shield people from responsibility, pain, and the need to change.

Getting people to assume greater responsibility is not easy. Not only are many lower-level employees comfortable being told what to do, but many managers are accustomed to treating subordinates like machinery that requires control. Letting people take the initiative in defining and solving problems means that management needs to learn to support rather than control. Workers, for their part, need to learn to take responsibility.

Jan Carlzon encouraged responsibility taking at SAS by trusting others and decentralizing authority. A leader has to let people bear the weight of responsibility. "The key is to let them discover the problem," he said. "You won't be successful if people aren't carrying the recognition of the problem and the solution within themselves." To that end, Carlzon sought widespread engagement.

For example, in his first two years at SAS, Carlzon spent up to 50% of his time communicating directly in large meetings and indirectly in a host of innovative ways: through workshops, brainstorming sessions, learning exercises, newsletters, brochures, and exposure in the public media. He demonstrated through a variety of symbolic acts – for example, by eliminating the pretentious executive dining room and burning thousands of pages of manuals and handbooks – the extent to which rules had come to dominate the company. He made himself a pervasive presence, meeting with and listening to people both inside and outside the organization. He even wrote a book, *Moments of Truth* (HarperCollins, 1989), to explain his values, philosophy, and strategy. As Carlzon noted, "If no one else read it, at least my people would."

A leader also must develop collective self-confidence. Again, Carlzon said it well: "People aren't born with self-confidence. Even the most self-confident people can be broken. Self-confidence comes from success, experience, and the organization's environment. The leader's most important role is to instill confidence in people. They must dare to take risks and responsibility. You must back them up if they make mistakes."

Protect Voices of Leadership from Below

Giving a voice to all people is the foundation of an organization that is willing to experiment and learn. But, in fact, whistle-blowers, creative deviants, and other such original voices routinely get smashed and silenced in organizational life. They generate disequilibrium, and the easiest way for an organization to restore equilibrium is to neutralize those voices, sometimes in the name of teamwork and "alignment."

The voices from below are usually not as articulate as one would wish. People speaking beyond their authority usually feel self-conscious and sometimes have to generate "too much" passion to get themselves geared up for speaking out. Of course, that often makes it harder for them to communicate effectively. They pick the wrong time and place, and often bypass proper channels of communication and lines of authority. But buried inside a poorly packaged interjection may lie an important intuition that needs to be teased out and considered. To toss it out for its bad timing, lack of clarity, or seeming unreasonableness is to lose potentially valuable information and discourage a potential leader in the organization.

That is what happened to David, a manager in a large manufacturing company. He had listened when his superiors encouraged people to look for problems, speak openly, and take responsibility. So he raised an issue about one of the CEO's pet projects – an issue that was deemed "too hot to handle" and had been swept under the carpet for years. Everyone understood that it was not open to discussion, but David knew that proceeding with the project could damage or derail key elements of the company's overall strategy. He raised the issue directly in a meeting with his boss and the CEO. He provided a clear description of the problem, a rundown of competing perspectives, and a summary of the consequences of continuing to pursue the project.

The CEO angrily squelched the discussion and reinforced the positive aspects of his pet project. When David and his boss left the room, his boss exploded: "Who do you think you are, with your holier-than-thou attitude?" He insinuated that David had never liked the CEO's pet project because David hadn't come up with the idea himself. The subject was closed.

David had greater expertise in the area of the project than either his boss or the CEO. But his two superiors demonstrated no curiosity, no effort to investigate David's reasoning, no awareness that he was behaving responsibly with the interests of the company at heart. It rapidly became clear to David that it was more important to understand what mattered to the boss than to focus on real issues. The CEO and David's boss together squashed the viewpoint of a leader from below and thereby killed his potential for leadership in the organization. He would either leave the company or never go against the grain again.

Leaders must rely on others within the business to raise questions that may indicate an impending adaptive challenge. They have to provide cover to people who point to the internal contradictions of the enterprise. Those individuals often have the perspective to provoke rethinking that people in authority do not. Thus, as a rule of thumb, when authority figures feel the reflexive urge to glare at or otherwise silence someone, they should resist. The urge to restore social equilibrium is quite powerful, and it comes on fast. One has to get accustomed to getting on the balcony, delaying the impulse, and asking, What is this guy really talking about? Is there something we're missing?

Management needs to learn to support rather than control. Workers, for their part, need to learn to take responsibility.

Doing Adaptive Work at KPMG Netherlands

The highly successful KPMG Netherlands provides a good example of how a company can engage in adaptive work. In 1994, Ruud Koedijk, the firm's chairman, recognized a strategic challenge. Although the auditing, consulting, and tax-preparation partnership was the industry leader in the Netherlands and was highly profitable, growth opportunities in the segments it served were limited. Margins in the auditing business were being squeezed as the market became more saturated, and competition in the consulting business was increasing as well. Koedijk knew that the firm needed to move into more profitable growth areas, but he didn't know what they were or how KPMG might identify them.

Koedijk and his board were confident that they had the tools to do the analytical strategy work: analyze trends and discontinuities, understand core competencies, assess their competitive position, and map potential opportunities. They were considerably less certain that they could commit to implementing the strategy that would emerge from their work. Historically, the partnership had resisted attempts to change, basically because the partners were content with the way things were. They had been successful for a long time, so they saw no reason to learn new ways of doing business, either from their fellow partners or from anyone lower down in the organization. Overturning the partners' attitude and its deep impact on the organization's culture posed an enormous adaptive challenge for KPMG.

Koedijk could see from the balcony that the very structure of KPMG inhibited change. In truth, KPMG was less a partnership than a collection of small fiefdoms in which each partner was a lord. The firm's success was the cumulative accomplishment of each of the individual partners, not the unified result of 300 colleagues pulling together toward a shared ambition. Success was measured solely in terms of the profitability of individual units. As one partner described it, "If the bottom line was correct, you were a 'good fellow.'" As a result, one partner would not trespass on another's turf, and learning from others was a rare event. Because independence was so highly valued, confrontations were rare and conflict was camouflaged. If partners wanted to resist firmwide change, they did not kill the issue directly. "Say yes, do no" was the operative phrase.

Koedijk also knew that this sense of autonomy got in the way of developing new talent at KPMG. Directors rewarded their subordinates for two things: not making mistakes and delivering a high number of billable hours per week. The emphasis was not on creativity or innovation. Partners were looking for errors when they reviewed their subordinates' work, not for new understanding or fresh insight. Although Koedijk could see the broad outlines of the adaptive challenges facing his organization, he knew that he could not mandate behavioral change. What he could do was create the conditions for people to discover for themselves how they needed to change. He set a process in motion to make that happen.

To start, Koedijk held a meeting of all 300 partners and focused their attention on the history of KPMG, the current business reality, and the business issues they could expect to face. He then raised the question of how they would go about changing as a firm and asked for their perspectives on the issues. By launching the strategic initiative through dialogue rather than edict, he built trust within the partner ranks. Based on this emerging trust and his own credibility, Koedijk persuaded the partners to release 100 partners and nonpartners from their day-to-day responsibilities to work on the strategic challenges. They would devote 60% of their time for nearly four months to that work.

Koedijk and his colleagues established a strategic integration team of 12 senior partners to work with the 100 professionals (called "the 100") from different levels and disciplines. Engaging people below the rank of partner in a major strategic initiative was unheard of and signaled a new approach from the start: Many of these people's opinions had never before been valued or sought by authority figures in the firm. Divided into 14 task forces, the 100 were to work in three areas: gauging future trends and discontinuities, defining core competencies, and grappling with the adaptive challenges facing the organization. They were housed on a separate floor with their own support staff, and they were unfettered by traditional rules and regulations. Hennie Both, KPMG's director of marketing and communications, signed on as project manager.

As the strategy work got under way, the task forces had to confront the existing KPMG culture. Why? Because they literally could not do their new work within the old rules. They could not work when strong respect for the individual came at the expense of effective teamwork, when deeply held individual beliefs got in the way of genuine discussion, and when unit loyalties formed a barrier to cross-functional problem solving. Worst of all, task force members found themselves avoiding conflict and unable to discuss those problems. A number of the task forces became dysfunctional and unable to do their strategy work.

To focus their attention on what needed to change, Both helped the task forces map the culture they desired against the current culture. They discovered very little overlap. The top descriptors of the current culture were: develop opposing views, demand perfection, and avoid conflict. The top characteristics of the desired culture were: create the opportunity for self-fulfillment, develop a caring environment, and maintain trusting relations with colleagues. Articulating this gap made tangible for the group the adaptive challenge that Koedijk saw facing KPMG. In other words, the people who needed to do the changing had finally framed the adaptive challenge for themselves: How could KPMG succeed at a competence-based strategy that depended on cooperation across multiple units and layers if its people couldn't succeed in these task forces? Armed with that understanding, the task force members could become emissaries to the rest of the firm.

On a more personal level, each member was asked to identify his or her individual adaptive challenge. What attitudes, behaviors, or habits did each one need to change, and what specific actions would he or she take? Who else needed to be involved for individual change to take root? Acting as coaches and consultants, the task force members gave one another supportive feedback and suggestions. They had learned to confide, to listen, and to advise with genuine care.

Progress on these issues raised the level of trust dramatically, and task force members began to understand what adapting their behavior meant in everyday terms. They understood how to identify an adaptive issue and developed a language with which to discuss what they needed to do to improve their collective ability to solve problems. They talked about dialogue, work avoidance, and using the collective intelligence of the group. They knew how to call one another on dysfunctional behavior. They had begun to develop the culture required to implement the new business strategy.

Despite the critical breakthroughs toward developing a collective understanding of the adaptive challenge, regulating the level of distress was a constant preoccupation for Koedijk, the board, and Both. The nature of the work was distressing. Strategy work means broad assignments with limited instructions; at KPMG, people were accustomed to highly structured assignments. Strategy work also means being creative. At one breakfast meeting, a board member stood on a table to challenge the group to be more creative and toss aside old rules. This radical and unexpected behavior further raised the distress level: No one had ever seen a partner behave this way before. People realized that their work experience had prepared them only for performing routine tasks with people "like them" from their own units.

The process allowed for conflict and focused people's attention on the hot issues in order to help them learn how to work with conflict in a constructive manner. But the heat was kept within a tolerable range in some of the following ways:

- On one occasion when tensions were unusually high, the 100 were brought together to voice their concerns to the board in an Oprah Winfrey–style meeting. The board sat in the center of an auditorium and took pointed questions from the surrounding group.
- The group devised sanctions to discourage unwanted behavior. In the soccer-crazy Netherlands, all participants in the process were issued the yellow cards that soccer referees use to indicate "foul" to offending players. They used the cards to stop the action when someone started arguing his or her point without listening to or understanding the assumptions and competing perspectives of other participants.
- The group created symbols. They compared the old KPMG to a hippopotamus that was large and cumbersome, liked to sleep a lot, and became aggressive when its normal habits were disturbed. They aspired to be dolphins, which they characterized as playful, eager to learn, and happily willing to go the extra mile for the team. They even paid attention to the statement that clothes make: It surprised some clients to see managers wandering through the KPMG offices that summer in Bermuda shorts and T-shirts.
- The group made a deliberate point of having fun. "Playtime" could mean long bicycle rides or laser-gun games at a local amusement center. In one spontaneous moment at the KPMG offices, a discussion of the power of people mobilized toward a common goal led the group to go outside and use their

As a result of confronting strategic and adaptive challenges, KPMG task forces identified $50 million to $60 million worth of new business opportunities.

collective leverage to move a seemingly immovable concrete block.

• The group attended frequent two- and three-day off-site meetings to help bring closure to parts of the work.

These actions, taken as a whole, altered attitudes and behaviors. Curiosity became more valued than obedience to rules. People no longer deferred to the senior authority figure in the room; genuine dialogue neutralized hierarchical power in the battle over ideas. The tendency for each individual to promote his or her pet solution gave way to understanding other perspectives. A confidence in the ability of people in different units to work together and work things out emerged. The people with the most curious minds and interesting questions soon became the most respected.

As a result of confronting strategic and adaptive challenges, KPMG as a whole will move from auditing to assurance, from operations consulting to shaping corporate vision, from business-process reengineering to developing organizational capabilities, and from teaching traditional skills to its own clients to creating learning organizations. The task forces identified $50 million to $60 million worth of new business opportunities.

Many senior partners who had believed that a firm dominated by the auditing mentality could not contain creative people were surprised when the process unlocked creativity, passion, imagination, and a willingness to take risks. Two stories illustrate the fundamental changes that took place in the firm's mind-set.

We saw one middle manager develop the confidence to create a new business. He spotted the opportunity to provide KPMG services to virtual organizations and strategic alliances. He traveled the world, visiting the leaders of 65 virtual organizations. The results of his innovative research served as a resource to KPMG in entering this growing market. Moreover, he represented the new KPMG by giving a keynote address discussing his findings at a world forum. We also saw a 28-year-old female auditor skillfully guide a group of older, male senior partners through a complex day of looking at opportunities associated with implementing the firm's new strategies. That could not have occurred the year before. The senior partners never would have listened to such a voice from below.

Leadership as Learning

Many efforts to transform organizations through mergers and acquisitions, restructuring, reengineering, and strategy work falter because managers fail to grasp the requirements of adaptive work. They make the classic error of treating adaptive challenges like technical problems that can be solved by tough-minded senior executives.

The implications of that error go to the heart of the work of leaders in organizations today. Leaders crafting strategy have access to the technical expertise and the tools they need to calculate the benefits of a merger or restructuring, understand future trends and discontinuities, identify opportunities, map existing competencies, and identify the steering mechanisms to support their strategic direction. These tools and techniques are readily available both within organizations and from a variety of consulting firms, and they are very useful. In many cases, however, seemingly good strategies fail to be implemented. And often the failure is misdiagnosed: "We had a good strategy, but we couldn't execute it effectively."

In fact, the strategy itself is often deficient because too many perspectives were ignored during its formulation. The failure to do the necessary adaptive work during the strategy development process is a symptom of senior managers' technical orientation. Managers frequently derive their solution to a problem and then try to sell it to some colleagues and bypass or sandbag others in the commitment-building process. Too often, leaders, their team, and consultants fail to identify and tackle the adaptive dimensions of the challenge and to ask themselves, Who needs to learn what in order to develop, understand, commit to, and implement the strategy?

The same technical orientation entraps business-process-reengineering and restructuring initiatives, in which consultants and managers have the know-how to do the technical work of framing the objectives, designing a new work flow, documenting and communicating results, and identifying the activities to be performed by people in the organization. In many instances, reengineering falls short of the mark because it treats process redesign as a technical problem: Managers neglect to identify the adaptive work and involve the people who have to do the changing. Senior executives fail to invest their time and their souls in understanding these issues and guiding people through the transition. Indeed, engineering is itself the wrong metaphor.

In short, the prevailing notion that leadership consists of having a vision and aligning people with that vision is bankrupt because it continues to treat adaptive situations as if they were technical: The authority figure is supposed to divine where the company is going, and people are supposed to follow. Leadership is reduced to a combination of grand knowing and salesmanship. Such a perspective reveals a basic misconception about the way businesses succeed in addressing adaptive challenges. Adaptive situations are hard to define and resolve precisely because they demand the work and responsibility of managers and people throughout the organization. They are not amenable to solutions provided by leaders; adaptive solutions require members of the organization to take responsibility for the problematic situations that face them.

Leadership has to take place every day. It cannot be the responsibility of the few, a rare event, or a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. In our world, in our businesses, we face adaptive challenges all the time. When an executive is asked to square conflicting aspirations, he and his people face an adaptive challenge. When a manager sees a solution to a problem – technical in many respects except that it requires a change in the attitudes and habits of subordinates – he faces an adaptive challenge. When an employee close to the front line sees a gap between the organization's purpose and the objectives he is asked to achieve, he faces both an adaptive challenge and the risks and opportunity of leading from below.

Leadership, as seen in this light, requires a learning strategy. A leader, from above or below, with or without authority, has to engage people in confronting the challenge, adjusting their values, changing perspectives, and learning new habits. To an authoritative person who prides himself on his ability to tackle hard problems, this shift may come as a rude awakening. But it also should ease the burden of having to know all the answers and bear all the load. To the person who waits to receive either the coach's call or "the vision" to lead, this change may also seem a mixture of good news and bad news. The adaptive demands of our time require leaders who take responsibility without waiting for revelation or request. One can lead with no more than a question in hand.

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ARTICLE

"Whatever Happened to the Take-Charge Manager?" by Nitin Nohria and James D. Berkley (*Harvard Business Review*, January–February 1994, Product no. 94109)
This article shares with Heifetz and Laurie the conviction that the fundamental responsibility of leadership cannot be outsourced. In the 1980s, U.S. business experienced an explosion of new managerial concepts unparalleled in previous decades—all claiming to have unlocked the secret to staying competitive in increasingly challenging marketplaces. Many managers felt that the emergence of these new managerial ideas signaled a rejuvenation of U.S. business. By readily adopting innovations such as total quality programs and self-managed teams, managers believed that they were demonstrating the kind of decisive leadership that would keep their companies competitive. But their thinking didn't correspond to the facts. American managers didn't take charge in the 1980s; they abdicated their responsibility to a burgeoning industry of management consultants. If business leaders want to reverse this trend, they must reclaim managerial responsibility—and pragmatism is the place to start. Pragmatic managers, like leaders of adaptive work, are sensitive to their company's context and open to uncertainty.

BOOK

***The Will to Lead: Running a Business with a Network of Leaders* by Marvin Bower (Harvard Business School Press, 1997, Product no. 7587)**
This book provides another perspective on the negative aspects of command-and-control leadership, and the positive aspects of a "network of leaders." Such networks effectively respond to adaptive challenges that require the involvement of people throughout an organization. Bower, longtime leader of McKinsey & Company, emphasizes that while command-and-control leadership once contributed to building America's might, it is no longer the best system for today's intensely competitive global market. Command-and-control management breeds rigidity and excessive reliance on authority. In contrast, Bower sets forth his vision of a leadership model that replaces hierarchy with a network of leaders and leadership groups placed strategically throughout a company. The goal? Helping individual workers learn to lead, work more efficiently, have more ideas, and exercise more creativity and initiative.

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Your Company's Secret Change Agents

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Some business problems—employees working at half their potential, endlessly escalating health care costs, conflicts between departments—never seem to get fixed, no matter how hard people try. But if you look closely, you'll find that the tyranny of averages always conceals sparkling exceptions to the rule. Somehow, a few isolated groups and individuals, operating with the same constraints and resources as everyone else, prevail against the odds.

Bridging the gap between what is happening and what is possible is what change management is all about. The traditional process for creating organizational change involves digging deep to uncover the root causes of problems, hiring experts or importing best-of-breed practices, and assigning a strong role to leaders as champions of change. We believe there is a better method, one that looks for indigenous sources of change. There are people in your company or group who are already doing things in a radically better way. The process we advocate seeks to bring the isolated success strategies of these "positive deviants" into the mainstream. Ordinary change management methods don't do a very good job at that: Managers either overlook the isolated successes under their noses or, having spotted them, repackage the discoveries as templates and disseminate them from the top. This seldom generates the enthusiasm necessary to create change. (For a look at the pitfalls of best practices, see the sidebar "Best Practices Are Hard to Copy.")

It's time for a radical break. Isolated success strategies can indeed be brought into the mainstream, but doing so requires a departure from the notions of benchmarking and best practices with which we are all familiar. The key is to engage the members of the community you want to change in the process of discovery, making them the evangelists of their own conversion experience. This means that as a leader, you will take on a very different role from the one you have played in previous change management scenarios.

During the past 14 years, we have been

working to uncover these positive deviants—usually individuals on the periphery of their organizations or societies who are far removed from the orthodoxies of mainstream change endeavors. These innovators' uncommon practices and behaviors enable them to find better solutions to problems than others in their communities. They are the key to this approach to change.

Change in Action

Skeptical readers may be inured to overheated claims of "the next new change model." Fasten your seat belts. Far from basing our case on esoteric and isolated incidents, we have derived our conclusions from some of the largest, messiest, most intractable change problems on the planet: malnutrition in Mali and Vietnam, catastrophic dropout rates within rural schools in Argentina, the trafficking of girls in East Java, the spread of HIV/AIDS in Myanmar, and the widespread practice of female circumcision in Egypt.

The positive deviance approach has also begun to penetrate the corporate consciousness. Goldman Sachs used it to transform the practices of its nationwide force of investment advisers. Engineers at Hewlett-Packard used it to tackle technical challenges. At Genentech, two positive deviants outperformed the median results of the company's national sales force by a factor of 20:1. Merck and Novartis are experimenting with the model as well. In short, the positive deviance model works. Its results are verifiable, replicable, and scalable. Millions of individuals around the world have been its beneficiaries. (For a look at the differences between the positive deviance model and the traditional approach, see the exhibit "Uncommon Sense?")

Based on inductive research, we developed the following six-step positive deviance model, which upends standard notions of the way change works.

Step 1: Make the group the guru. The literature on change management universally emphasizes the importance of "champions" and leaders. They matter, of course, but too often, these individuals generate unconstructive dependency from their teams. This absolves the community from owning the solutions it must adopt for change to succeed. In the positive deviance model, problem identification, ownership, and action begin in and remain with the community. Because the innovators are members of the community who are "just like us," disbelief and resistance are easier to overcome.

Consider what happened at a village in Mali, where prevailing beliefs attributed widespread childhood malnutrition to the village sorcerer. The will of the sorcerer was like an immutable law of nature that the villagers unquestioningly accepted. Nothing could prevail against the sorcerer's spells. Change seemed impossible.

Representatives from Save the Children who were working to solve the problem of malnutrition began a positive deviance inquiry—the jumping-off point for the process—with a simple question: "Has the sorcerer put a spell on *every* child in the village?" A few children in the community were, in fact, rarely sick or lethargic. It became clear that their parents engaged in behaviors that were different from those of the sick children's parents. They provided their children with several additional daily snacks, and all the members of the household washed their hands with soap and water. The fathers of the healthy children were also actively involved in mealtimes and helped decide whether their youngsters needed to go to the clinic (normally that decision was left to grandfathers). Perhaps, the villagers reasoned, these actions kept the sorcerer's spell at bay.

As the parents of the malnourished children began emulating their neighbors' counterconventional behaviors, their own children grew healthier. The villagers experienced a communitywide epiphany: They could be the agents of change. Malnutrition was no longer beyond their control. A wizened grandmother summed up the villagers' sense of triumph when she proclaimed, "We have vanquished the sorcerer!"

The field conditions in Mali have parallels in the corporate world. How often do we encounter conventional wisdom that shifts blame—along with the responsibility for fixing the problem—to those in authority? Contemporary superstitions such as "Headquarters will never let us do it" or "Don't bother; the boss already has the answer" create *Dilbert*-like echoes of villagers resigned to obeying the sorcerer.

At Hewlett-Packard, a seemingly intractable computer design problem was solved and turned into a competitive advantage when a positive deviant decided to take on the chal-

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Best Practices are Hard to Copy

Best practices and benchmarking share one trait with positive deviance: They strive to utilize success models to stimulate learning. But the similarities end there. Best practices rely on an external authority, not on the community itself, to identify and introduce a superior template. That, in part, is why best practices are often interpreted as code for "Why aren't you as good as the other guy?" With best practices, onlookers view the circumstances that fostered the success as being quite different from their own—it's easy to accuse advocates of having incubated success under exceptional and unreplicable conditions. Best practices are a foreign import. No surprise, then, that they suffer a dismal replication rate.

Recent events at top biopharmaceutical firm Genentech illustrate both the opportunities of positive deviance and the pitfalls of best practices. In 2003, Genentech introduced Xolair, a miracle drug for many chronic asthma sufferers. Unlike standard treatments, which arrest asthma attacks after they occur, Xolair modulates the histamines in the immune system and addresses asthma preventatively. The patient can lead a normal life, free from the fear of debilitating attacks. But despite Xolair's pharmacological superiority, sales remained well below expectations six months after launch.

As the company sought an explanation for the disappointing results, managers spotted an anomaly. Two salespeople among a national force of 242 were selling 20 times more Xolair than their peers. Here were classic positive deviants. Two women, responsible for the Dallas and Fort Worth territories, had successfully overcome resistance in the target audience.

Upon closer investigation, executives could see why this was happening. Genentech's traditional stronghold was in cancer medicine. Whereas oncologists and pulmonary specialists routinely administer chemotherapy—an infusion procedure—in their offices on an outpatient basis, allergists and pediatricians—the target market for asthma drugs—do not. Infusion protocols (delivering medication in the form of an intravenous drip) require infusion rooms, infusion couches, and infusion nurses—all of which were unfamiliar for this segment of physicians and their nursing staffs. The positive deviants from Dallas and Fort Worth understood that product acceptance would not happen through a standard sit-down physician call. Nor could resistance be allayed with yet more data demonstrating Xolair's pharmacological superiority. The hidden obstacles were fear of seemingly exotic procedures, concerns about time-consuming insurance approvals, and worries that patients would be exposed to unnecessary risks. At the heart of the matter was a need to alter the doctors' mindsets and the front-office culture.

The two women guided doctors and nurses through the process of readying the drug for infusion and administering it to patients. They taught administrators how to fill out the specialized paperwork. They pitched the drug's lifestyle impact and described how children who took Xolair could own pets and participate in outdoor sports. In expanding the horizons of doctors, nurses, and administrators, the two salespeople had discovered what armies of Genetech's market researchers had missed. They were successful because they had morphed into change agents.

Our narrative seems headed for the predictable successful conclusion. But what actually unfolded provides a sobering counterpoint. The aberrant sales results actually evoked consternation and scrutiny. Management's initial assumption was that the sales team had an unfair advantage and that territories or the quota system needed to be reconfigured. Belatedly, after retaining an external market research firm, the company accepted the merits of the change agent strategy. It then implemented a conventional best practices rollout. The manager of the Dallas and Fort Worth reps described the techniques to other managers during a conference call. The result? Partial acceptance by some members of the sales force. Implementation at modest velocity.

When identification of a superior method is imposed, not self-discovered, cries of "We're not them" or "It just won't work here" predictably limit acceptance. By contrast, a design that allows a community to learn from its own hidden wisdom is, among other things, respectful. Innovator and adopter share the same DNA. Community members invest sweat equity in discovering the positive deviants, and, in the process, they become partners to change.

lenge. The problem: When computers are left running—as most computers are—they get hot, which accelerates their failure rate. This is known as thermal transfer. Periodically, management would vaguely declare that something needed to be done about the issue. But the company's engineers, rewarded for tackling more intellectually demanding challenges, regarded the problem as a low-status janitorial job. The sorcerer, in this instance, was the fixed idea that thermal transfer was a fact of life; every computer on the planet built up heat, and there was little that could be done about it. Another fixed notion was that real computer engineers worked on more glamorous problems.

Uncommon Sense?

Traditional change efforts are typically top-down, outside in, and deficit based. They focus on fixing what's wrong or not working. They also assume a reasonable degree of predictability and control during the change initiative. Unintended consequences are rarely anticipated. Once a solution is chosen, the change program is communicated and rolled out through the ranks. The positive deviance approach to change, by contrast, is bottom-up, inside out, and asset based. It powers change from within by identifying and leveraging innovators. This method diminishes the social distance that often blocks acceptance.

TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO CHANGE	POSITIVE DEVIANCE APPROACH TO CHANGE
Leadership as Path Breaker Primary ownership and momentum for change come from above.	**Leadership as Inquiry** Leader facilitates search; community takes ownership of the quest for change.
Outside In Experts identify and disseminate best practices.	**Inside Out** Community identifies preexisting solutions and amplifies them.
Deficit Based Leaders deconstruct common problems and recommend best-practice solutions. Implication: "Why aren't you as good as your peers?"	**Asset Based** Community leverages preexisting solutions practiced by those who succeed against the odds.
Logic Driven Participants think into a new way of acting.	**Learning Driven** Participants act into a new way of thinking.
Vulnerable to Transplant Rejection Resistance arises from ideas imported or imposed by outsiders.	**Open to Self-Replication** Latent wisdom is tapped within a community to circumvent the social system's reaction.
Flows from Problem Solving to Solution Identification Best practices are applied to problems defined within the context of existing parameters.	**Flows from Solution Identification to Problem Solving** Solution space is expanded through the discovery of new parameters.
Focused on the Protagonists Engages stakeholders who would be conventionally associated with the problem.	**Focused on Enlarging the Network** Identifies stakeholders beyond those directly involved with the problem.

A program within HP's research division exposed a cadre of engineers to the concept of positive deviance. One of them, Chandra Patel, decided to take on thermal transfer in earnest. He set about identifying shards of a solution. Scattered around HP's global engineering fraternity were a few positive deviants who had dabbled in the problem and who had developed various ideas and prototypes. Ultimately, the inquiry galvanized 100 engineers and resulted in some unprecedented solutions. Today, HP enjoys unchallenged leadership in the thermal-transfer domain—an advantage that funnels millions to the bottom line as the result of savings generated from cooler and less-failure-prone machines. Patel was rewarded with increased opportunity and accelerated career advancement, as well as with peer recognition.

In short, some problems can be solved only by those in the trenches. When change agents work together to discover others just like them who are doing things differently, they can step up to being accountable for their own solutions.

"Learn from the people, plan with the people… when the task is accomplished, the people all remark, we have done it ourselves"
—Lao-tzu

Step 2: Reframe through facts. Inside-the-box definitions of problems guarantee inside-the-box solutions. Restating the problem shifts attention to fertile new ground and opens minds to new possibilities. If there is an art form to facilitating a positive deviance inquiry, it lies in ferreting out and framing the real challenge at hand, as opposed to reverting to tired clichés and pseudochallenges. By casting a problem in a different light and by using hard data to confront orthodoxies, a community can be encouraged to discover whether there are exceptions to the status quo and, if so, how those exceptions came about.

Reframing a problem entails three steps. First, grasp its conventional presentation ("The sorcerer's curse makes our children sick.") Second, find out if there are exceptions to the norm, people in identical circumstances who seem to be coping especially well. Third, reframe the problem to focus attention on the exceptions.

Reframing through facts was essential in addressing the elevated dropout rates in Argentina's rural elementary schools. A workshop on positive deviance sponsored by the World Bank brought together two dozen teachers and principals. They shared a strong suspicion that the nation's Ministry of Education was trying to implicate them in the high dropout rates and deflect attention from the ministry's accountability for a woefully underfunded education system. Although 86% of children in Argentina completed elementary education, only 56% of children in the rural province of Misiones did so.

Imagine the setting: a stark cafeteria with concrete floors and steel chairs. The teachers and principals are seated, with their arms folded across their chests. Their body language speaks volumes: "OK, dazzle us with your expertise. This problem involves a whole bunch of things we can't control. We're angry. We haven't been paid in six months. We don't want to be here." Blame for the dropout problem lay elsewhere, in lazy students, uninterested parents, and lousy facilities.

The atmosphere changed when workshop participants turned their attention to the question of whether any schools plagued by the same constraints had a better track record. This reframing was reinforced by dropout statistics for all 120 schools in the Misiones district. Working in small groups, the educators found plenty of schools clustered near the median. But they were flabbergasted to discover that one school had retained 100% of its pupils through sixth grade and that ten had retained nearly 90%. "How," they asked themselves, "do these schools retain so many students?" After all, their teachers presumably hadn't been paid either. The mood shifted from self-righteous anger to surprise and curiosity.

The workshop participants visited the high-retention schools and discovered that the differentiating factor had little to do with what was happening in the classroom. The teachers there were negotiating "learning contracts" with rural parents before the beginning of each school year. In effect, the teachers were enrolling illiterate parents as partners in their children's education. As the children learned to read, add, and subtract, they could help their parents take advantage of government subsidies and compute the amount earned from crops or owed at the village store. With parents as partners, students showed up at school and did their assignments. The teachers and principals who had participated in the workshop began negotiating similar contracts with families of at-risk children. One year later, dropout rates in Misiones had reportedly decreased by half.

A corporate example that illustrates reframing through hard data—although it's not part of a positive deviance inquiry—comes from Billy Beane, the celebrated general manager of the Oakland A's. In 1997, Beane took over a losing baseball team and a low-budget franchise. Instead of badgering the owners for more recruiting dollars or arguing with talent scouts over the prospects of high school superstars, Beane looked for great players by mining professional baseball's near-inexhaustible vein of statistics. In doing so, he shifted management's focus from religious wars over the potential and value of players to an actuarial examination of the factors that most highly correlated with winning games. On-base percentage turned out to be a far better predictor than long-shot bets on who would be the next Barry Bonds. Beane's approach transformed the A's into a frequent title contender, though he had one of the smallest budgets in the game. The moral? There's value in looking at things in a different way and getting beyond gut feelings to hard facts.

Step 3: Make it safe to learn. People get attached to the status quo, even when it's not good for them. Problems often go unresolved because the path to the solution is littered with potential losses and other risks. It is essential to acknowledge that journeying into terra incognita is a danger sport. Positive deviants may fear being exposed, ridiculed, or subjected to retaliation if their newly enhanced influence challenges the status of others. Authority figures may feel threatened by a process that invites them to learn rather than just have all the answers or, as in the case of Mali's sorcerers, that disempowers them altogether. Likewise, the others in the group may fear that acknowledging a problem implicates them in it. Few hospitals, for example, want to tackle the predictive indicators of malpractice because doing so might be misconstrued as having foreknowledge. What's more, discussions might be discoverable in legal proceedings. Only when people feel safe enough to discuss a taboo and when the community is sufficiently invested in finding solutions can the prospect of an alternative reality appear.

In Indonesia, the need for psychological safety underscored the difficult topic of human trafficking. A local nongovernmental organization (NGO) had observed the worrisome trend among poor East Javan families of "exporting" young village girls to urban centers. Silence enshrouded the practice. Parental shame was compounded by fear of repercussions if procurers' supply channels were disrupted.

The NGO convened a low-profile positive deviance workshop for villagers to explore "safe" problems such as school dropout rates. As the workshop leaders talked about how positive deviance had helped communities find solutions for sensitive challenges such as HIV/AIDS-risk reduction in other countries, the group became less guarded. One outspoken volunteer raised the issue of girls "going out"—a euphemism for trafficking. The oblique approach to the undiscussable topic eventually led the villagers to broach the problem of girls being sent away by their poverty-stricken parents.

The participants organized an inquiry and visited poor families that had resisted the temptation to send their girls away. Six months later, community watch groups had identified the homes of high-risk girls. Local leaders, who had previously ignored regulations regarding submission of "travel papers," began to enforce the rules. Today, this early warning system dispatches volunteers to counsel the families of all girls planning to leave the village and provides access to positive deviant families that have addressed their economic shortfalls through other means, such as creating home gardens and purchasing fewer packs of cigarettes. The approach has halved the number of documented trafficking incidents in the area.

Corporations have their own sets of unspoken taboos that, if not addressed, can develop into problems of Enronesque proportions. Richard Pascale, one of the authors of this article, has worked with companies such as Coca-Cola, Ford, BP, Shell, and BAE Systems to surface "undiscussable" issues using a four-step "organizational CAT scan." The centerpiece of this process is a one-day workshop, set up and conducted by an external facilitator. The group consists of 50 to 100 key stakeholders deemed critical to organizational change. The convening executive kicks off the event by emphasizing the importance of confronting problems squarely and of learning from past failures. The focus is on identifying and removing obstacles, not killing messengers. Candor is crucial to this work. The group members read blind and blunt quotes from one another that talk about the problems in the company. The group then divides into subgroups, each of which delves into the identified issues and reports back in an hour or two with its analysis. In a span of six hours, an organization can generate a penetrating, real-time case study of itself. On the heels of this exercise, teams can examine the identified problems and return with action plans and milestones within 30 to 60 days.

Step 4: Make the problem concrete. Corporations are awash in meaningless discourse. While words are exchanged and heads are nodded, a great deal of signal distortion is happening between sender and receiver. Because of unwritten social codes meant to keep individuals from being put on the spot, people aren't forced to speak concretely—in fact, they're often discouraged from doing so. These abstractions do a lot to obscure insight. Consider, for example, how the format of PowerPoint can blur or hide hard facts: Before NASA's devastating loss of the Columbia space shuttle, engineers from Martin Marietta and Boeing buried the imminent risks to the spacecraft's protective ceramic tiles within the complicated, nested, ten-point-font bullet points of their PowerPoint presentation.

A firm grasp of reality obliterates vague assumptions and helps focus attention on what's really working. Dealing directly with an uncomfortable truth requires stating it concretely so that there is no way to duck the challenge at hand. This is not merely a matter of being specific. It also entails portraying or dramatizing a pivotal issue in a compelling way. An example of this type of framing occurred during a positive deviance workshop devoted to finding practices to curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS in Myanmar. The group consisted of prostitutes—nearly all of whom insisted that she faithfully made her clients use condoms. The moment of truth occurred when each participant was asked to apply a condom to a banana. Varying degrees of dexterity quickly differentiated the pretenders from the practitioners. The positive deviants, once identified, began sharing the negotiation strategies they used to persuade their partners to use condoms. Soon the others in the group became adept at overcoming their partners' objections. With the right exercises, many organizations could profit from appropriate reincarnations of the "banana test."

Step 5: Leverage social proof. The old adage "Seeing is believing" has particular potency when it comes to change. Take Alcoholics Anonymous. In the 1930s, two positive deviants stumbled onto the notion of holding weekly get-togethers to help keep themselves sober. Others joined. An inductive process of reflection and learning gave rise to the 12-step program—a protocol that was decades ahead of any intervention that had been devised by professional psychiatry. The approach is enshrined today in the worldwide success of AA and its application to many afflictions. Social proof is the lifeblood of the support group movement.

Let's turn to a far more dramatic example of the power of social proof. Envision a frightened child struggling in the grip of her mother and aunt against the assault of a barber and his straight razor. In Egypt, female genital mutilation (FGM) or female circumcision is a 4,000-year-old practice used by Christian Copts and Muslims alike to deprive women of sexual enjoyment and to ensure faithfulness. Ninety percent of Egyptian girls, usually between the ages of nine and 13, undergo the painful and sometimes dangerous procedure, often without understanding what is happening to them or why. Girls sometimes die from infection or blood loss. The practice is tightly woven into the fabric of Egyptian life and, as such, is strongly resistant to change. Traditionally, it hasn't been seen as a problem; it's simply "the way it is."

Could women's advocates find families in Egyptian villages that did not circumcise their girls—and would such families be willing to talk? Eventually, advocates in one village identified a few exceptions to the norm. The first interviews—with uncircumcised women, mothers and fathers who were against the practice, and husbands who had knowingly married uncircumcised women—were held in a remote, guarded monastery to ensure anonymity. The half-dozen families that came forward provided additional contacts who were willing to give testimony. A year into the project, more than 100 families had been identified and interviewed.

For victims, their mothers, and other female relatives, discussing the trauma of the practice spawned a therapeutic cycle of catharsis, forgiveness, and healing. The women gave poignant testimony: "We are butchering our girls." "Cutting out the tongue does not deny the experience of hunger." "Desire is in the mind, not the organs." "I could never trust my mother again." As the conversation progressed, a new consciousness began to form. Word spread, and communities began to more openly discuss female circumcision. Other families expressed their willingness not only to be interviewed but also to be advocates within their communities.

Over time, the village experienced a contagion of spontaneous initiatives. In one case, an 18-year-old girl gathered her peers in the dusty shade of a village tamarisk tree. Together, they relived the horror of their experiences and their feelings of betrayal. All agreed to return home and beg their mothers not to subject their younger sisters to the same fate. In another case, a sheik, speaking in the mosque during prayers, asserted that circumcision was not required by Islam. Soon, mainstream village voices began to join the chorus of dissenters. An alternative possibility—rejecting the practice of FGM—was gaining legitimacy.

In the past five years, tens of thousands of ordinary villagers have proven that it is possible for a woman to be uncircumcised and still be virtuous. More than 1,000 circumcisions have been averted in a few villages alone. More remarkable, the Egyptian government is initiating its first nationwide anti-FGM campaign.

Step 6: Confound the immune defense response. Newton was right: Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. In organizations, that reaction comes in the form of avoidance, resistance, and exceptionalism. But when you fan the embers within a community rather than rely on firebrands from headquarters or outside the group, change feels natural. Internally developed solutions circumvent transplant rejection, since the change agents share the same DNA as the host. The trick is to introduce already existing ideas into the mainstream without excessive use of authority. Why use a sledgehammer when a feather will do?

Five years ago, Goldman Sachs's Private Wealth Management (PWM) business unit had experienced a string of top-down change initiatives. Its field force of more than 300 investment advisers felt strong pressure to adopt an unproven business model imposed by New York's far-reaching policy shifts and top-down edicts. Headquarters felt thwarted in achieving the pace of change needed to stay in step with the marketplace.

Investment professionals (IPs) in the field historically operated independently or as two-person teams. Each unit evolved highly idiosyncratic approaches to the work of persuading high-net-worth clients to entrust it with the management of their money. Success depended on performance, of course, but also on the creation of deep, trusting relationships with clients that often lasted for generations. Investors often invited IPs to weddings, bar mitzvahs, and graduations, extending relationships from anchor clients to heirs.

By late 2000, PWM's top management was deeply concerned that the industry was undergoing a transformation of seismic proportions. Investment firms were under pressure to deliver greater transparency and compliance oversight while simultaneously reducing their brokerage fees. How could Goldman Sachs retain its clients, improve its profitability, and grow its assets in a depressed but increasingly competitive environment? Management's solution was to transform the IPs' approach from a model that relied heavily on brokerage income to one focused on fee-based advice. But the IPs, having built their individual franchises on a well-proven formula, were passionate advocates of the "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" maxim.

One of the leaders of the PWM unit at the time was at the center of the impasse. His chosen path was to relinquish the conventional role of authority figure and let go of top management's deep attachment to its solution. Instead, he exercised a stealth brand of leadership, asking the IPs one arresting question: "Are some teams, with similar territories and prospects, able to thrive in this difficult climate?"

A six-person council of influential IPs (selected as guerrilla leaders from nationwide field offices) spearheaded a "sales force effectiveness" inquiry. The council's task was to identify exceptionally successful approaches. Its members assured the rank and file that any findings would be subjected to an acid test of relevance and scalability—what was working for the best team in Boston would have to be transferable to teams everywhere else.

Phase one of the project began in 2000 with a two-month discovery period that identified five positive deviant practices among the most successful IP teams. Phase two expanded the

People are much more likely to act their way into a new way of thinking than to think their way into a new way of acting.

community of discovery by creating five rollout squads (again made up of informal leaders selected from around the country) for each of the five practices. The squads were charged with coming up with a template that every IP team in the country could adopt and implement on a voluntary basis.

When it was time to roll out the new templates and train others, these squads became the pointed end of the spear. They visited each office and explained why and how their particular practices worked. There was one person on each squad from each office, so one of the presenting IPs could double as a local resource on the topic. When local IP teams had questions, they turned to the resource person. This dynamic generated an amazing buzz throughout the PWM unit.

Phase three of the process involved building a system to measure progress toward goals and to track trends. Each of the 11 regional offices were ranked by their incorporation of the five practices, and the results were publicized. The process relied exclusively on transparency and peer review. No sanctions for nonadoption were imposed. People automatically felt good about being on top or bad about being on the bottom. This sustained attention when backsliding might have otherwise set in.

During the course of this endeavor, old rivalries between teams subsided. For the first time in memory, a sense of "We win together" emerged as the new ethic. Skepticism gave way to conviction as the IPs overcame their own exceptionalism. The positive deviance approaches, implemented over 18 months, shifted behavior, practice, and performance. The PWM unit got a jump on the competition. Three years later, it has gone from being a source of tumult and marginal economic returns to being a major contributor to overall firm earnings. The average productivity per IP has nearly doubled, team size has increased from 1.7 to the near-optimal three IPs per team, and the fee-based model has achieved almost universal acceptance. Today, Goldman Sachs reports that high net-worth assets under management have reached an astonishing $130 billion.

The Leader's New Role

The positive deviance approach requires a role reversal in which experts become learners, teachers become students, and leaders become followers. Leaders must relinquish to the community the job of chief discoverer. This isn't easy, for it requires leaders to set aside their egos and habitual identities (being the go-to guy, the decision maker who knows what to do). What, then, becomes of the leader?

While he or she seemingly abdicates the traditional role of discoverer, important work remains to be done. This includes four primary tasks: management of attention, allocation of scarce resources, reinforcement to sustain the momentum of inquiry, and application of score-keeping mechanisms to sustain attention and ensure progress toward goals once the community has chosen its course of action.

Instead of being the "CEO"—chief expert officer—the leader becomes the "CFO"—chief facilitation officer—whose job is to guide the positive deviance process as it unfolds. This role is as radically different from traditional leadership practices as the technique itself is from standard approaches.

The classic KAP (knowledge, attitude, practice) behavior-change model holds that knowledge changes attitudes, which in turn change practice. Positive deviance facilitators turn this upside down and employ a PAK (practice, attitude, knowledge) approach instead. Once you help the community discover who the positive deviants are and identify their practices, you help change people's attitudes through action. Why? Because people are much more likely to act their way into a new way of thinking than to think their way into a new way of acting.

• • •

Should the positive deviance approach be applied to every change initiative? Of course not. When there are proven remedies to technical problems—the Salk vaccine to polio, supply-chain management practices, hardware and software solutions—companies can use them to work harder, faster, or smarter. And problems that rely on brainpower but that don't require major behavioral adjustments, as in the case of portfolio rebalancing, are unsuitable for the positive deviance approach.

The method works best when behavioral and attitudinal changes are called for—that is, when there is no apparent off-the-shelf remedy and successful coping strategies remain isolated and concealed. In such cases, change from within, discovered, celebrated, and implemented by the people who need to do the changing, is a surefire win.

The Taoist sage Lao-tzu captures the essence of the positive deviance approach with eloquent simplicity:

Learn from the people
Plan with the people
Begin with what they have
Build on what they know
Of the best leaders
When the task is accomplished
The people all remark
We have done it ourselves

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Organizations as Machines, Organizations as Conversations

Two Core Metaphors and Their Consequences

Anthony L. Suchman, MD, MA

Abstract: One factor contributing to the limited success of organizational change initiatives is the use of an outmoded conceptual model: the organization as machine. This metaphor leads to the creation of detailed blueprints for desired changes; invites unrealistic expectations of control; and creates anxiety, blame and defensiveness when events inevitably do not proceed according to plan, thus hindering the work.

An alternative conceptualization—the organization as conversation—portrays an organization not as a reified object upon which we can act but as self-organizing patterns of thinking (organizational identity and knowledge) and relating (organizational culture) that exist in the medium of human interaction in which we participate.

Principles of complexity dynamics (self-organization) have important implications for organizational change practices. (1) Organizational change requires mindful participation—reflecting on and talking about what we are doing together here and now, what patterns of thinking and interacting we are enacting, and what new behaviors might interrupt old patterns or give rise to new ones. (2) Diversity and responsiveness favor the emergence of novel patterns. Skilled facilitation can enhance these characteristics when novelty is desirable; checklists and protocols can diminish these characteristics when consistency and reliability are needed. (3) We cannot know in advance the outcomes of our actions so we need to hold plans lightly, value "not knowing" and practice emergent design.

The organization-as-conversation perspective also has important implications for T3 translational research, redefining its purpose, suggesting new methodologies, and requiring new approaches for evaluating proposed and completed projects.

Key Words: organizational change, organizational improvement, administration, management, complexity, health services research, quality improvement, hospital administration

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In 2002, my consulting partner and I received a call from the Indiana University School of Medicine (IUSM) seeking help in changing the school's culture so that the day to day interactions among students, faculty, and staff (the "informal curriculum"[1]) would reinforce rather than undermine the values of the school's formal competency-based curriculum.[2]

Our first reaction was delight. As long–time advocates of incorporating communication and relationship skills as core components of medical education, we had dreamed of such an opportunity—a school–wide focus on relationship–centered care.

Closely following our first reaction was a second one—panic! IUSM is the second largest medical school in the United States—1100 medical students, 1200 faculty members, 9 campuses around the state, and thousands of staff members. How could we possibly create change on such a large scale? Here we were, offered the chance of a lifetime, with no idea how to plan and implement such a huge change project.

Change leadership is becoming a core competency for healthcare managers and executives. Healthcare organizations face unprecedented demands for major change in many quarters simultaneously: improving quality and safety; enhancing the patient's experience of care; embracing new roles for patients, family members, and professionals; responding to new publicly reported performance measures and financial incentives; and others. The limited success[3] and widespread cynicism[4] associated with change initiatives suggest that we still have much to learn about this process.

One improvement opportunity is to change the conceptual model that guides most change projects. Working with many healthcare leaders, I have observed that notwithstanding recent developments in the field,[5–7] the prevailing view of organizations is still that of the organization-as-machine, a control-oriented manager-centered approach dating back to Frederick Taylor more than a century ago.[8] In this paper, we will explore how inadequate this mechanical model is for what is a fundamentally social process; it can actually impede change. We'll then consider an alternative conceptualization—the organization-as-conversation—that is less structural and more dynamic, focusing attention on how ideas and relationships form, propagate and evolve in the medium of human interaction. This model leads to very different actions and expectations on the part of change agents, ones more conducive to success.

ORGANIZATIONS AS MACHINES

The machine metaphor is ubiquitous. We can hear it in everyday speech: “things are humming,” “well-oiled,” “on autopilot,” “firing on all cylinders,” “re-engineering,” and “I’m just a cog in the wheel.” Viewing an organization as a machine shapes our perceptions, expectations, and actions profoundly. We can design and operate machines to do exactly what we want. Each part has a precise function which it carries out repetitively and without variation resulting in reliable overall performance. To modify a machine’s function, we make a new blueprint and build exactly according to specification. The machine does not participate; change comes only from the engineers who expect and are expected to be in complete control of the design, implementation, and results. Unexpected results imply culpability for deficiencies in design or execution.

This is a problematic way to view organizations, comprised as they are of people. Unlike machine parts, people think about their work. Repetition breeds boredom; we’re curious, stimulated by novelty, always tinkering. Managers working as engineers do not notice this vast creative capacity of their “machine” or harness its ever present spontaneous experimentation. We dislike being told what to do, preferring to work more autonomously[9] and we tend to avoid change because it is often associated with uncomfortable emotional responses such as fear and grief.[10] The machine model does not address these important phenomena.

Most problematic are the unrealistic expectations of control. Organizational work is inevitably uncertain and unpredictable, yet not knowing what to do is seen as a deficiency, giving rise to anxiety. When things do not go as planned, there is an implicit assumption that someone screwed up. Our efforts to avoid blame and preserve self-esteem divert considerable energy and attention from the work itself.

ORGANIZATIONS AS CONVERSATIONS

An alternative perspective shows us an organization not as a reified object, separate from us, that we can manipulate and control, but as a set of ongoing interactions—a conversation—of which we are an inseparable part. Not just a metaphor, this is literally true.[11,12] Think of how an organization comes to be. Someone envisions an undertaking she cannot accomplish alone. As she starts talking with others a shared notion of collective action begins to form. When this shared notion gains sufficient coherence and commitment, people begin to act in concert and the organization starts to function. The conversation spawns work processes, physical facilities, organizational charts, budgets, and all the other trappings of an organization. As the conversation changes buildings are torn down or new ones are built; budgets and organizational charts change; people are hired or laid off; products come and go; work processes change. The conversation precedes and gives rise to everything.

The organizational conversation includes everyone who is aware of, involved with or affected by the organization: workers, managers, leaders, customers (actual and potential), payers, regulators, competitors, and neighbors. It includes myriad subconversations that vary in such characteristics as numbers of participants, duration (from longstanding to one-time events), formality and legitimacy (from officially scheduled meetings to water-cooler gossip), influence (the likelihood that it will affect the net activity of the organization), and the medium of communication (eg, spoken words, memos, legal documents, procedure manuals, human resource policies, board resolutions, and symbolic gestures).

We approach the work of organizational change differently when we view organizations as conversations rather than machines. We change a conversation not by creating a new blueprint but by changing the way we participate and encouraging others to do likewise. We pay attention to the quality of the conversation, believing that the best path to a good outcome is good process. Accordingly, the core value is not to be in control but to be in right relation.[13] Without unrealistic expectations of control, there is less anxiety and defensiveness opening more space for curiosity, experimentation, dialog and critical reflection—ideal circumstances, as we shall see, for adaptability and innovation.

SELF-ORGANIZING PATTERNS IN CONVERSATIONS

Within organizational conversations there are 2 kinds of patterns: patterns of meaning and patterns of relating (this is, of course, an oversimplification but helpful for clarity). Patterns of meaning (what people are saying and thinking) include organizational identity (purpose, mission, vision, values), knowledge (intellectual capital, how to organize and carry out the work), and strategy (current thinking about the future and what to do now to prepare for it). Patterns of relating (how people are interacting) constitute the organization’s culture—for example, how people treat each other, how they talk and dress, what can or cannot be discussed openly, who makes which decisions, and the whole panoply of power relations.

Patterns of meaning and relating in a conversation are continuously under construction; they must be re-enacted in each new moment or they will cease to be patterns, just as musicians in a performance must keep on playing new notes or the piece comes to an end. If we describe an organization’s culture as hostile, or as collaborative, that means that people keep on acting in a hostile or collaborative fashion time after time. While the patterns of any given moment tend to repeat and carry forward the patterns from the moment before, this is not inevitable. A new pattern can be enacted at any time; each new moment holds the potential for change.

The patterns of meaning and relating in a conversation can emerge without anyone’s intention, direction or control; they are self-organizing.[14] (Self-organization can occur when 2 or more entities simultaneously influence and are influenced by each other in the course of ongoing back and forth interaction). Self-organization can yield both stable and novel patterns. As an example of stability, think of a time when you joined a new group—perhaps your first day at a new job, on a new committee or in a new class. You probably attended closely to how the other people were acting so you would know how to fit in. Our neurobiology demands this of us:

attachment is an important regulator of the opioid levels in the brain.[15] Being excluded from the group would produce the endogenous equivalent of opiate withdrawal—a discomforting state we seek to avoid—so we act like the others to be included. At a subsequent group meeting, someone else was the new person, and that person looked to you to see how to behave. Over time, the composition of the group might turn over completely yet the behavior patterns continue unchanged. In this way, group norms and traditions endure (sometimes persisting across generations) without anyone's guiding hand; it just happens: hence, the self-organization of stable patterns, continuity in patterns of relating.

New patterns can also self-organize; in the course of iterative reciprocal interactions very small changes or disturbances can amplify and spread. This phenomenon is popularly known as the Butterfly Effect, referring to the potential for miniscule air currents from the beating of a butterfly's wings to interact with adjacent air currents, thus amplifying and spreading, ultimately resulting in a tornado half-way around the world.[16]

For an example closer to conversations and organizations, think of a moment when someone inadvertently said something to you that jogged your thinking and stimulated the germ of a new idea. Perhaps it was a particular turn of phrase he used or the serendipitous juxtaposition of his comment with a book you happened to be reading or a movie you just saw. Whatever the circumstances, that small accidental disturbance in your pattern of thinking sparked a new thought which you then expressed to your partner. He, in turn, grew excited by your idea and took it a step further. As the idea ping-ponged between you, it rapidly grew into a transformative new theory or project, or a whole new way of doing something. This new pattern of meaning emerged spontaneously. It was not on your agenda to create it; no one was in charge or in control of the process. It just happened.

Not all small disturbances propagate in this way; in fact, very few do. If we consider another self-organizing complex system, a sand pile onto which we are dropping individual grains of sand, we observe that most grains just stick where they land causing little or no disturbance. But occasionally just that 1 grain causes an avalanche. Far from being freak events, avalanches are intrinsic to the system, but it's not possible to predict which grains will cause one.[17] No matter how fine the measurements we can make of a grain's shape and momentum, the sand pile's structure or the air currents through which the grain will fall, even finer differences can amplify and cascade, altering the outcome for the entire system.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The organization-as-conversation perspective and its underlying principles of self organization (complexity dynamics) offer us a more accurate understanding of organizations than that provided by the machine metaphor, and leads us to approach the work of organizational change in very different ways.

Emergent Design

The most important implication is that while our work can and should be guided by an overall direction or vision (itself a self-organizing theme that emerges and evolves in conversation), we need to hold specific plans lightly, letting go of expectations of control. The Butterfly Effect and Sand Pile Model show us just how unpredictable is the work of organizational change and why an organization can never be like a machine. We cannot know in advance the consequences of what we do. Patterns may propagate themselves despite our most diligent efforts to change them, and transformative ideas and interactional patterns may emerge spontaneously from a single word or action. So creating and holding fast to a detailed blueprint that specifies every step in advance is futile, and worse, it creates its own obstacles in the form of tunnel vision, anxiety, blame and defensiveness, as we have seen previously.

An alternative approach is "emergent design,"[18,19] a dignified way of saying "making it up as we go along." Emergent design involves a mindset of curiosity, flexibility and experimentation; "not knowing" is a virtue, not a deficiency. We take 1 step at a time, planning the next step only when we have seen the results of the previous one. This gives us the opportunity to identify and make use of emergent new patterns that we never could have anticipated. We introduce numerous small changes (disturbances) in the hope that some of them might ripple, stimulating further change, mindful that any one disturbance is unlikely to have much effect. Others have advocated similar approaches for rapid cycle change in waste and error reduction, and for achieving sustainable success in large corporations.[20–22]

Paradoxical as it may seem, there is an important role for planning in emergent design. Even though a plan may evolve considerably over time, we need its content at any one point to help us coordinate our individual actions in that moment. Also, planning occasions conversations that are the medium for the emergence and evolution of shared ideas and relationships, and for the continuous renewal of shared understanding, common purpose, alignment, and trust.

Focusing Attention on the Here and Now

Another important implication of the organization-as-conversation perspective is to approach large scale organizational change at the level of everyday behaviors. It shifts our attention from what we should be doing (the grand blueprint) to what we are doing (the pattern-making that is taking place here and now) (see reference 6, p. 412).[6] Our principal work as change agents is to engage everyone (not just the leaders) in reflecting on what ideas and cultural patterns we are enacting together, and to foster mindful participation, each person asking, "What am I doing in this very moment that contributes to those patterns? How can I act differently to interrupt existing patterns and start new ones?" An important form of leadership is to be first to disturb an existing pattern, putting our opioids and attachment at risk, in the hope of instigating a change. Gandhi expressed this perfectly when he said, "You must be the change you want to see in the world."

Attending closely to the here and now of the organizational conversation also allows us to recognize and strengthen unheralded desirable patterns that are already present or are emerging. What opportunities might they offer? What might sustain or inhibit them? Methods such as Appreciative Inquiry and Positive Deviance use storytelling, positive feedback and cohesive group dynamics (attachment behavior) to reinforce such virtuous patterns.[23–26]

We can also notice the constraints that are shaping patterns in the organizational conversation. Self-organization requires the simultaneous presence of order and disorder, freedom and constraint. Constraints place conditions or limits on what each entity does within an ongoing interaction and bounds the range of possible patterns that might emerge. Some constraints are absolute and immutable (gravity, for example—we cannot have meetings on the ceiling). Others are more susceptible to change (for example, role expectations or systems of financial incentives). There is still freedom in the presence of a constraint—there are many ways it can be satisfied. We saw above how powerfully the risk of opioid withdrawal constrains the behavior of individuals in a group, yet there are any number of possible behaviors by which that constraint can be satisfied. We can better understand the ongoing process of pattern-making by noticing what physical, biologic, psychological, social, financial, regulatory, and other constraints are present in a given situation and which ones seem to be having the greatest effect. We can then consider how these constraints might be satisfied in other ways, or if the constraints themselves can be modified.

This detailed attention to process—to communication and relationship dynamics—differs sharply from the machine metaphor's focus on outcomes, both actual and desired, and on blueprints for closing the gap between them. The organization-as-conversation perspective shows us that to change broad organization-wide patterns there is nowhere to work other than at the level of here-and-now interactions.

Diversity and Responsiveness

A third implication for the work of organizational change is to recognize the importance of diversity and responsiveness in the emergence of new conversational patterns (see reference 6, pp 386–395).[6] An organization's diversity—the multiplicity of perspectives arising from differences in roles, personal histories, and professional backgrounds—seeds novelty; it is the main source of serendipitous differences and disturbances that instigate new patterns. When new patterns are desirable, we can think about how to enhance the expression of diversity, seeking participants with more varied perspectives, and/or using appropriate facilitation methods to help people feel sufficiently safe and supported to disclose their differences.

Differences are necessary but not sufficient. There must also be responsiveness; people in conversation must be susceptible to being changed by one another. If I am holding rigidly to a pre-existing belief, or worse, not even listening to you, it doesn't matter how rich is the difference you are trying to introduce; a new pattern will not be able to take hold and grow. So it's important to notice the quality of listening and to help the participants work with their differences constructively. A variety of facilitation skills and meeting practices can support this goal.[27,28]

We should note that there are situations where new patterns are undesirable and where a high degree of control and consistency is essential. These tend to be situations with technical solutions—in which what needs to be done is already known—and that are complicated rather than complex.[10,29] If someday I need cardiac bypass surgery or a joint replacement, I do not want novel patterns emerging in the operating room; I want things to be done exactly according to protocol. In such situations, we want to reduce the expression of difference and diminish our capacity to change each other. Checklists and protocols focus conversation along relatively narrow channels and constrain the behavioral patterns that can emerge. We can manage diversity and responsiveness according to whether we need novelty or stability, bearing in mind that most organizational change scenarios do not have technical solutions; the way forward is not known.

On my flight to Indianapolis for the first meeting of the culture change project at IUSM, my worries about not knowing how to conduct this project intensified. A whole scenario played out before me: feeling the need to have a master plan, the project team would create a grand 3-year design involving lots of training sessions and quarterly milestones that we would fail to meet, making us increasingly anxious that we would blow this historic opportunity, causing us to try even harder to control things which would only push us farther off course. No, we had to avoid that whole direction; we would go down in flames.

Then it dawned on me that not knowing how to plan this big project was not a problem, it was the answer. Embracing not-knowing would release us from the tunnel vision of our own solutions and open us to more possibilities. It would remind us to engage more people in shaping the project and to trust IUSM as the best source of its own answers. Rather than telling people how to implement the new culture, we could invite them to reflect on the patterns of relating they enact in each moment, how they are participating, and what opportunities they have to participate differently.

Not-knowing would also free us from the unrealistic expectation that we could design and control this whole project. The only thing for us to design was the first step, and only when that was done—when we could see what happened, who was drawn to the project, and what ideas they had—could we discern the next step. We had to let this project emerge.

As our first step, we chose to conduct an Appreciative Inquiry, assembling a team of faculty, residents, and students who gathered stories from 80 people about moments when IUSM's culture was at its best. We analyzed the stories and presented the results back to the IUSM community, setting in motion waves of next steps that we never could have planned. The practice of appreciative storytelling spread widely, helping people become more mindful of relational process. They started to see their organization in a more positive light (the organizational identity began to change). Many people were attracted to the project, bringing with them all kinds of ideas *that never would have occurred to us: the Admissions Committee redesigned its interviewing and selection process; the deans changed the process for allocating discretionary funds; the Academic Standards Committee changed the way it responded to unfavorable course evaluations. Thanks to these and many other changes that rippled out from that initial disturbance, the organizational culture at IUSM really did begin to change.*[18]

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Issues of access, quality, and unsustainable costs are driving a growing demand for studies at the organizational/implementation (T3) end of the research spectrum.[30] The leading edge of health services research has already moved well beyond the organization-as-machine perspective. For example, Aiken et al have been studying the effect on clinical outcomes of workplace environments that encourage more participatory (as contrasted with top down) decision-making.[31] Marvel et al, and Safran et al are exploring the relational patterns of everyday administrative conversation.[32,33] Gittell and her associates have developed a measure of teams' capacity for constructive self-organization.[34] Glouberman and Zimmerman, Greenhalgh and Russell, Dopson and Fitzgerald, and Gabbay and le May show clearly that the translation of evidence into practice and policy is not simply a matter of synthesizing research findings and drawing up care maps (blueprints) but rather an emergent social process subject to the unpredictable influence of local political and contextual factors.[29,35–37]

Notwithstanding these and other innovations, the main body of organizational/implementation research might further embrace implications of the organization-as-conversation perspective. First, the process and content of research must not inadvertently reinforce the machine model. Recognizing that we can act within but not upon organizations, we can abandon the fiction of the detached scientific observer and instead implement consistently the principles of participatory and action research.[38,39] We can also abandon the expectation that research will provide generalizable context-independent solutions for changing organizations. Its purpose is not to provide the answer but to provide insights and innovations of help to local actors who must find their own local answers.

Accordingly, in the design and peer-review of organizational change research, we should not be looking as much to methods that attempt to eliminate local contextual factors (notably the randomized controlled trial) as to processual and qualitative methods that explicate these factors in detail.[40] We need rich accounts of how the patterns that constitute organizational knowledge and culture form and spread, and explorations of the nature, impact and mutability of the many various constraints in that process. Understanding organizational change projects as stories-in-progress (themes and relationships under continuous construction) and research reports as stories about these stories, we can recognize the essential role of case studies and the need for narrative analysis, rigorously applied.[41,42]

A new grant-review process will be needed to support projects based on emergent design, for which a method cannot be prespecified. Such a process might focus instead on establishing the need for the project and opportunities it presents, the receptivity of the setting, and the capacity of the project team to undertake emergent work.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

We have reviewed the assumptions of the machine metaphor and seen its limitations as a guide for action in a world of self-organizing ideas and relational patterns. We have considered what it means to see an organization as a conversation: understanding that we are always acting within and not upon the organization; recognizing that organizational identity, knowledge and culture are being created continuously here and now in the process of human interaction; cultivating a discipline of reflecting on the patterns we are creating in each moment so we can participate more mindfully; fostering diversity and responsiveness to favor the emergence of new patterns; and taking an emergent approach to organizational change that values planning but holds plans lightly.

Changing how we think about organizational change is itself a change project. This article is one of various attempts on my part to introduce disturbances in the current self-propagating patterns of thinking about organizations. My hope is that these ideas will spread into your thinking and conversation, and as you develop them further, they will come back to change me.

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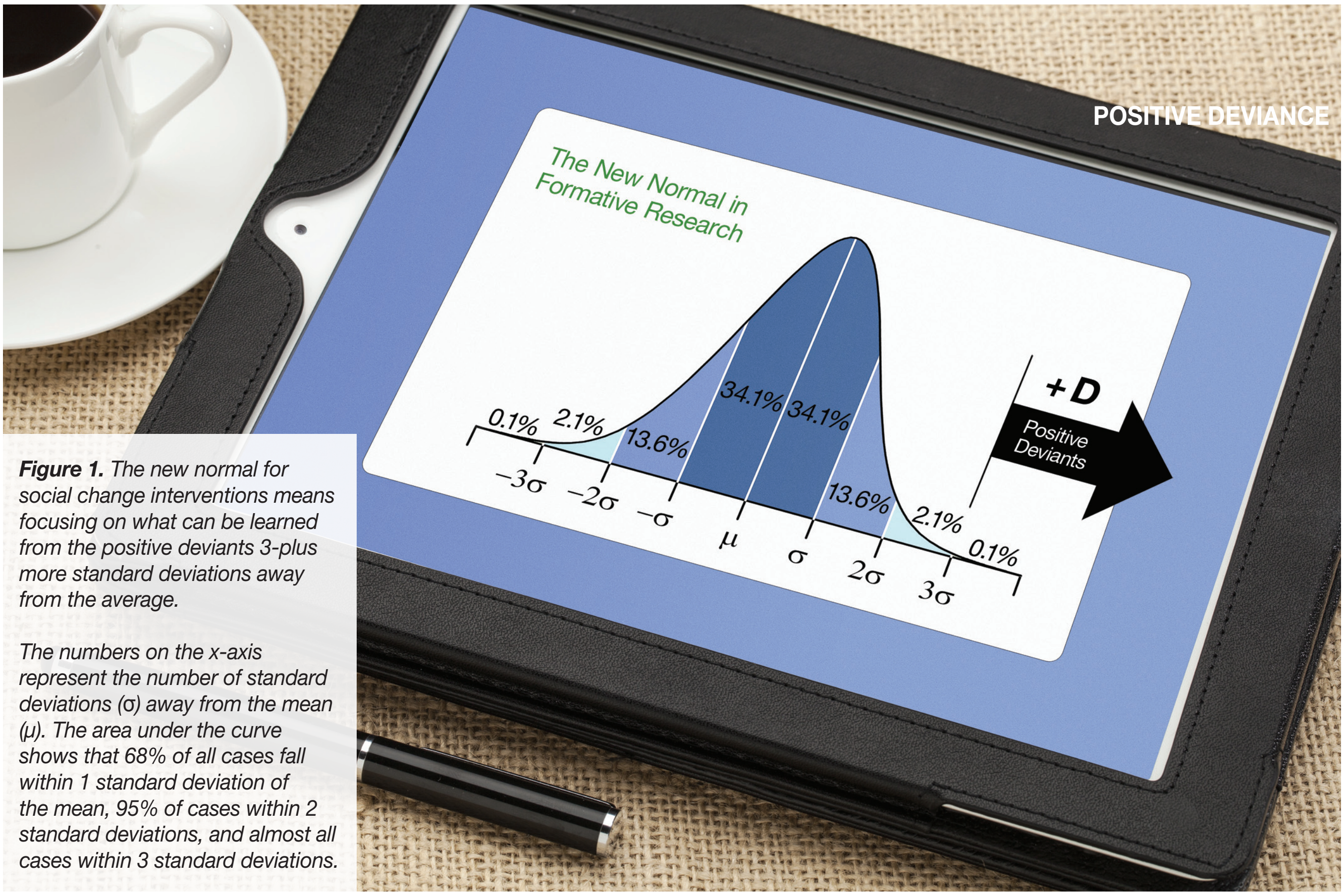

Figure 1. *The new normal for social change interventions means focusing on what can be learned from the positive deviants 3-plus more standard deviations away from the average.*

The numbers on the x-axis represent the number of standard deviations (σ) away from the mean (μ). The area under the curve shows that 68% of all cases fall within 1 standard deviation of the mean, 95% of cases within 2 standard deviations, and almost all cases within 3 standard deviations.

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The Value of Positive Deviations

▸ Look **beyond the curve** and you'll find the real key to social change lies at the edge.

By **Arvind Singhal**, Samuel Shirley and Edna Holt Marston Professor and Director of Social Justice Initiative at The University of Texas at El Paso

AFTER PUBLISHING its 2010 edition, packaged in 32 leather-bound volumes that weighed 130 pounds, *Encyclopedia Britannica* ended its 244-year print-run rather unceremoniously.

Its competitive disrupter: the web-based Wikipedia. In early 2013, Wikipedia offered 26 million articles in 286 languages free of cost to anyone who could access its site.

In contrast to *Britannica's* cadre of centralized editors and "expert" writers, Wikipedia is edited and authored by tens of thousands of volunteers from across the globe. This allows Wikipedia to both expand and update its offerings in real time.

Wikipedia's disruptive dominance holds important lessons for social change practitioners. Its success reminds us that wisdom lies with ordinary people and is distributed widely; that there is value in inviting and including all constituents; and that the dominant hegemony of expert-driven command and control systems should be questioned. Simply stated, *old normal* ways of doing things should pave the way for a *new* normal.

Social change practitioners need to question normative ways of thinking, especially the bell curve. What is needed instead is an alternative conceptualization of social change: one that turns the classical expert-driven approaches on their head, valuing the wisdom that lies with unusual suspects.

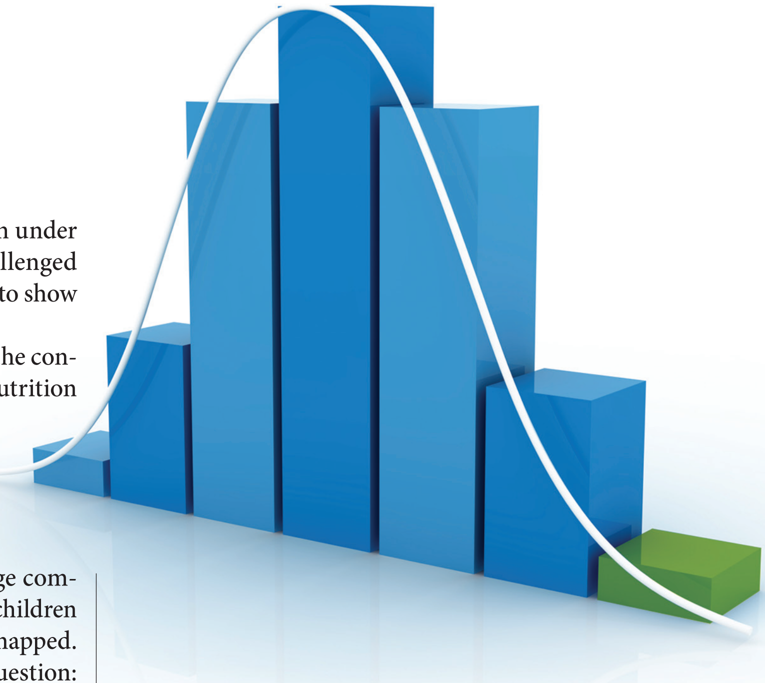
This alternative is known as the positive deviance (PD) approach to social, organizational and individual behavior change. It is premised on the belief that in every community there are certain individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having access to the same resources and often facing worse challenges.

Simply stated, old normal ways of doing things should pave the way for a new normal.

Over the past two decades, the PD approach has been employed in over 40 countries to address a wide variety of complex social problems: solving endemic malnutrition in Vietnam; decreasing neo-natal and maternal mortality in Pakistan; reducing school dropouts in Argentina; reintegrating returned child soldiers in northern Uganda; and controlling the spread of hospital-acquired infections in U.S. hospitals.

Childhood malnutrition in Vietnam

In 1990, Save the Children U.S. sent Jerry and Monique Sternin to Vietnam to implement a large-scale program to combat child- ▸



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hood malnutrition. With 65% of all Vietnamese children under the age of five malnourished, Vietnamese officials challenged the Sternins to come up with a sustainable solution, and to show positive results within six months.

Tasked with the impossible, the Sternins wondered if the concept of positive deviance, codified by Tufts University nutrition professor Marian Zeitlin, might hold promise. Zeitlin was investigating why some children in poor households were better nourished than others. What were they doing that others were not?

Because childhood malnutrition rates were high in Quong Xuong District south of Hanoi, four of its village communities were selected for a nutrition survey. Some 2,000 children under the age of three were weighed and their locations mapped.

The Sternins posed the quintessential whodunit PD question: *are there any well-nourished children who come from very, very poor families?*

The response: Yes.

Indeed, there were some children from very poor families who were well-nourished. Those that had managed to avoid malnutrition without access to any special resources represented the positive deviants.

Through a process of community-led self-discovery, it became apparent that the PD families were practicing a few simple behaviors that others were not:

- Family members collected tiny shrimps and crabs from paddy fields and added them to their children's meals. These foods are rich in protein and minerals.
- Family members added greens of sweet potato plants to their children's meals. These greens are loaded with micronutrients. While these foods were accessible to everyone, most community members believed they were inappropriate for young children.
- PD mothers and caregivers were feeding their children smaller meals three to four times a day, rather than the customary two big meals twice a day; and
- PD mothers and caregivers were actively feeding their children, rather than just placing food in front of them. This made sure there was no food wasted.

After some trial and error, a two-week nutrition program was designed in each of the four intervention villages. Mothers whose children were malnourished were asked to forage for shrimps, crabs and sweet potato greens. The focus was not on information-transfer, but rather on action, practice and embodied experience.

In the company of positive deviants, non-PD mothers of malnourished children learned how to cook new recipes using the foraged ingredients. These mothers practiced the behaviors that the PD families had discovered on their own.

Before feeding their children, mothers weighed them. No food was wasted as the children were actively fed. Upon returning home, the non-PD mothers were encouraged to feed their children three or four small meals a day instead of the traditional two meals.

Such feeding and monitoring continued throughout the two-week program. Mothers could actually see their children becoming noticeably healthier. The scales were tipping!

Then the project expanded to another 10 adjacent communities. Community members engaged in a process of self-discovering the PD behaviors, as opposed to importing them from neighboring communities. The process of self-discovery was found to be as important as the actual behaviors that were uncovered.

Research showed that malnutrition decreased by an amazing 85% in the first 14 PD communities.

The program was scaled up by building a *living university* around these 14 PD communities. Teams from other communities with high rates of malnutrition spent up to two weeks directly experiencing the essential elements of the PD process. When they returned home, they would implement the PD nutrition program in at least two local communities.

"We dance round in a ring and suppose, but the secret sits in the middle and knows."

—Robert Frost

Through this lateral expansion, the PD intervention became a nationwide program in Vietnam, helping over 2.2 million people improve their nutritional status, including over 500,000 children. A later study, conducted by researchers at Emory University, showed successive generations of impoverished Vietnamese children in the program villages were well-nourished.

Centralized distributions and standard deviations

The normal (or Gauss) distribution, signified by the bell curve, is the most important distribution in the social sciences. Symmetrical and clustered around the mean, the curve allows us to specify the number of observations that fall under specific sections (see Figure 1 on page 17). While initially applied to describe measurement errors, the normal curve is now routinely used to describe variation in human phenomena such as weight, height, IQ or other health and lifestyle parameters.

Social scientists use the normal curve to make inferences about populations from sample statistics. By paying attention to the mean values and standard deviations with a representative sample, one can predict—with a high degree of confidence—the odds of solving a problem.

Normal bell curves, for instance, can tell social change practitioners that most African-American children who grow up in poor inner-city neighborhoods in a single parent household are highly unlikely to finish high school in a timely manner. Or that most Pashtun women living in mountainous communities of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province are at high risk for pregnancy-related complications. Or that most poor, uneducated and newly-married women in rural areas of India's Bihar State are highly unlikely to control their use of contraceptives.

In other words, social change practitioners can gain insights on the nature and scope of a social problem in a population, including what is normative—that is, what is the most likely case, scenario or outcome for most of people.

Such data, when collected and analyzed before designing an intervention, can help social change practitioners gauge the severity of a problem in a community. Actionable intervention strategies can then be employed to plug gaps and deficits.

Unfortunately, our record in solving social problems is highly dismal when normal distributions are used to gauge what ails most of the population.

Nassim N. Taleb, author of *The Black Swan*, has extensively written about the pitfalls of overly relying on the bell curve, especially in social spheres. The bell curve glorifies mediocrity, disregarding the promise lurking in large deviations and outliers. By focusing attention on what is most probable, the unusual, the implausible and the exceptional are routinely ignored.

In contrast, in the positive deviance approach, the identification of the *exceptional* represents a starting point. In PD, the normal and normative are of secondary interest. The seemingly impossible and implausible are of most interest.

In calling for a new normal to solve complex social problems we ask to focus not on what is wrong with most people, but rather what is working with the very few, the exceptional, the positive deviants.

In Vietnam, this new normal was exemplified in the implausible ▶

question: are there *well-nourished* children who come from very, very poor families?

In the past two decades, this type of implausible PD question has been asked repeatedly to tackle a large number of intractable social problems.

For instance, in summer 2012, in collaboration with a dozen field researchers, I led a formative research inquiry in the urban slums of New Delhi. Our purpose was to provide data-driven inputs to the design of a mass media health campaign to promote small family size, emphasizing delay of first child and spacing between children, countering the preference for male children, and encouraging adoption of contraceptive methods.

Instead of gathering deficit-based "normative" data, we used new normal sensibilities to guide our fieldwork. *Were there individuals, couples, or health workers who had found better family planning solutions than most of their peers without access to any extra resources? If so, what did they do?*

By analyzing archival data and key informant interviews we identified several positive deviants. What were they doing that resulted in highly successful outcomes?

One respondent, a married woman, significantly reduced the risk of pregnancy by closely tracking her menstrual cycle and avoiding sex during the days she was likely to conceive. During these "no, no days" she employed a variety of excuses to avoid penetrative intercourse. She would tell her husband, "I am keeping a fast for a few days for your health." On her "yes, yes days" she coyly noted, "I go out of my way to please him."

While most married women in this setting would be unable to negotiate sex, our positive deviant had found a creative, culturally-appropriate way to reduce the risk of pregnancy. After all, how could a husband overrule his wife's sacred fast—one undertaken for *his* sake!

We also met a health worker who employed certain uncommon practices that yielded high rates of male vasectomy. When he organized vasectomy camps in rural areas, several men who previously had agreed to a vasectomy either did not show up on the appointed day or hesitated to be the first to undergo the procedure. Their dilly-dallying negatively impacted other participants' motivation and many assembled men would dissipate to the chagrin of camp organizers.

To overcome this problem, our health worker arranged for a few men who were already highly motivated vasectomy seekers to stride up—in open view of other men—and *demand* that they be the first to undergo the procedure. Post-procedure, they were purposely urged to stride out like a stallion, boasting about the ease and painless nature of the vasectomy. Such purposive planning and orchestration of vasectomy prospects by the health worker delivered significantly better vasectomy completion rates, in comparison to his peers.

While most health workers would shrug their shoulders when vasectomy prospects walked away, the PD health worker had hit upon an effective practice: present examples of proud, confident men in full view of others as social proof of the value of the procedure.

The important point here is that the fasting strategy of the married woman and the purposive social proof practice of the health worker represent exceptional, non-normal actions. These practices were discovered because we actively sought to find the statistical outliers, the positive deviants.

Our understanding of how to solve complex social problems faces an epistemological crisis. Existing ways of knowing and intervening have proved highly inadequate in addressing intractable problems.

Normal distributions hold social scientists in their seductive stranglehold. In glorifying the normative and the most probable, they disregard the exceptions, the improbable outliers. Thus social change practitioners are unsuspecting victims of their own trained incapacities.

The new normal, exemplified by the positive deviance approach, acknowledges that wisdom to solve complex social problems exists locally, albeit hidden from plain view. In seeking the exceptional among the ordinary and the improbable among the probable, social change practitioners hold the promise to uncover tacit wisdom and solutions that cost little and are more inclusive, adaptable and culturally appropriate.