

# Basic Field Guide to the Positive Deviance (PD) Approach

## Purpose of the Field Guide

This basic guide is intended to orient newcomers to the PD approach and provide the essential tools to get started. It includes a brief description of the guiding principles, methodology, and process that have made PD projects successful. It is recommended as a resource to enable facilitators and apprentices to quickly initiate the PD process using the four basic steps (the four D's: *define*, *determine*, *discover*, and *design*). These comprise an iterative road map for the process.

Its brevity and simplicity are meant to invite curious and intrepid implementers who face complex problems requiring behavioral and social change. It is suitable for those who seek solutions that exist today in their community and enables the practitioner to leverage those solutions for the benefit of all members of the community.

PD is best understood through action and is most effective through practice.

### When to Use Positive Deviance

Positive deviance should be considered as a possible approach when a concrete problem meets the following criteria:

- The problem is not exclusively technical and requires behavioral or/and social change.
- The problem is “intractable”—other solutions haven’t worked.
- Positive deviants are thought to exist.
- There is sponsorship and local leadership commitment to address the issue.

### Guiding Principles of the PD Approach

Remember these basic principles when initiating the PD process in a community:

- The community must own the entire process.
- The community discovers existing uncommon, successful behaviors and strategies (PD inquiry).
- The community reflects on these existing solutions and adapts them to their circumstances.
- The community designs ways to *practice* and amplify successful behaviors and strategies.
- Community members witness that “someone just like me is succeeding against all odds with the same resources that are available to me” (social proof).

- PD emphasizes *practice* instead of knowledge—the “how” instead of the “what” or “why.” The PD mantra is: “You are more likely to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting”. Remember the wisdom of the villagers in Vietnam.
- Involve everyone; go to improbable places and to unlikely people to find solutions.
- “Don’t do anything about me without me.”
- The community creates its own criteria for success and monitors progress.

### Characteristics of the PD Process

The PD process promotes behavioral and social change because:

- It is generative(i.e., it is self-organizing and emergent).
- It is based on strengths and assets.
- It is not “expert” driven. Community members provide culturally appropriate expertise.
- It is embedded in the social context of the community.

The PD process:

- Combines relational and technical considerations.
- Leverages existing formal and informal networks.
- Generates new networks and bridges barriers created by gender, status, expertise and so forth.
- Promotes further change by inviting the community to monitor its own progress.

- Makes the invisible visible (i.e., calls attention to the PDs and the community's own hidden wisdom).
- Enables the community to translate its discoveries into immediate actions.

### Tips for PD Facilitators

Tap the expertise in the group (remember: the people in the community are the experts).

- Ensure the participants talk more than you do. Encourage them to exchange stories and information among themselves.
- Refrain from making suggestions or giving advice (unless *repeatedly asked*).
- Ask open-ended questions (e.g. what, how, what if?) (Avoid questions that elicit yes or no answers.)
- Don't try to exercise control; let the group guide the conversation.
- Invite participants to tell their stories or share their experiences about the issue at hand. Tap into emotions.
- Make the process personal and fun.
- Share relevant personal experience with participants to make them feel comfortable. Develop trust by admitting your own vulnerability.
- Let silence speak! (Pause for twenty seconds after asking a question. That's long enough to sing happy birthday!)
- Stay with the questions. Don't press for quick fixes. Insights often come when one is least expecting them.

- Support a climate where speaking the truth is OK, even when doing so may make the facilitator or a participant look foolish, confused, or unprepared.
- Believe that there will be enough time. “Go fast by going slow.”
- Commit to learn, to be influenced, to be personally changed by the experience.

## The Art of Asking Questions

For the most thoughtful and revealing responses, use open-ended questions that ask what, how, why, why now? Here are some examples of what you might ask or say in specific situations to facilitate or refocus discussions.

To spur continued reflection and thinking within the group, you might ask:

- To answer your question, let me ask a question.
- Can I ask you a question about your question?
- I have a question for you . . .

To generate more interactive discussion among the group:

- Who can answer this question?
- Who wants to answer this question?
- Who has any idea about this?
- How would anyone here answer this question?

To involve more stakeholders, ask:

- Whose problem is it?

- Who else should be involved?
- How might we involve them?

To uncover or identify PD individuals or groups:

- Are there any groups of individuals who have overcome (or prevented) the problem?

You can also use the somersault question:

- So if I understand correctly, nobody here is (or has achieved) *X*?
- So, there are no people in your community who have overcome this problem?

Once the group realizes that PDs actually exist in their own community, then follow up with some direct questions, such as:

- How can we learn from them?
- When is a good time to meet with them?

To discover PD behaviors and strategies, ask probing questions:

- You said that you did *X*; how were you able to do that?
- Most other people have had problems with *X* and *Y*; how have you been able to overcome them?
- Many people have explained to us how difficult it is to do *X* because of busy schedules, high costs, conflict with community customs or traditions, etc. I was wondering what you do to overcome these barriers or challenges encountered by others in your community?
- How are you able to overcome these common challenges and barriers?
- Can you show us how?
- What do you do when *X* problem happens or you are faced by the challenge of *Y*?

- Encourage participants to repeat what they've heard or understood to get more specificity: "So, if I understand correctly, you do *X* only during the day and you do not do *Y* at all during the day or night?"
- Do you know other individuals like you?

To help define or target actions to be taken, ask:

- What are our next steps?
- Who is going to do what?
- What will it take to accomplish this?

To ask permission to make a suggestion:

- Can I make a suggestion?
- Would it be possible for . . . ?
- You are the experts, but would it make sense if . . . ?

## Commitment of Leaders and Sponsors

Before the PD process can begin, the first step is to identify a sponsor as noted below. This leads to assembling those who might potentially be interested in tackling an intractable problem. To do this:

- Introduce the PD concept and approach to potential sponsors.
- Extend invitations for involvement beyond the "usual suspects."
- Once potential participants are assembled and the PD concept is described through examples, ask: "Does this make sense? If so, is there anyone here who would like to become involved?"
- It is essential that this initial orientation to PD authentically allows potential participants to opt in or opt out.

- Enroll a resource team of volunteers that is diverse and includes members of the community as well as local leaders.
- Allow the group to invent the forms of organization and work processes that best suit it.
- Invite others who are willing, and at times eager, to become involved. Each person is valuable to the process

Basic steps:

Step 1. *Define* the problem and desired outcome.

Step 2. *Determine* common practices.

Step 3. *Discover* uncommon but successful behaviors and strategies through inquiry and observation.

Step 4. *Design* an initiative based on the inquiry findings.

**STEP 1: THE COMMUNITY DEFINES OR  
REFRAMES THE PROBLEM BY:**

- Involving members of the community in generating or reviewing data that measures the magnitude of the problem
- Articulating a preferred future that is different from the past
- Exploring the issues impacting the problem and current behavioral norms
- Listing common barriers and challenges related to the problem
- Identifying all stakeholders who should be involved
- Sharing the group's findings in a community wide meeting

**TOOLS OR ACTIVITIES FOR DEFINING THE PROBLEM:**

- Creating or using baseline data (mapping, creating visual scoreboards)
- Establishing a time-framed goal known and agreed by all (e.g., eradicate childhood malnutrition in our community within two years)

**STEP 2: THE COMMUNITY DETERMINES  
COMMON PRACTICES BY:**

- Conducting discussions with various groups in the community to learn about common practices and normative behaviors
- Using participatory learning and action (PLA) activities such as mapping, improvisation, Venn diagrams, transects, prioritizing, and discovery and action dialogues (DAD) to engage various members of the community.

**STEP 3: THE COMMUNITY DISCOVERS THE  
PRESENCE OF POSITIVE DEVIANTS BY:**

- Identifying individuals, families, or entities in the community who exhibit desired outcomes.
- Establishing exclusion criteria. Select only those individuals or entities who face the same or worse challenges and barriers as others.
- Conducting in-depth interviews and observations by the community and PD facilitator(s).
- Identifying uncommon practices that correlate with better outcomes (having established common practices in step 2).
- Vetting the results with the whole community.

TOOLS OR ACTIVITIES TO IDENTIFY AND LEARN ABOUT COMMON BEHAVIORS (STEP 2) AND IDENTIFY BEHAVIORS AND STRATEGIES FROM POSITIVE DEVIANTS (STEP 3):

- In-depth interviews
- On-site visits for structured observations
- Discovery and action dialogues; as described in chapter 4, these brainstorming sessions serve to surface new, untried ideas once a community has been mobilized to address intractable problems
- Community feedback sessions on PD findings (see [www.positive-deviance.org](http://www.positive-deviance.org) for examples of PD inquiry tools)

STEP 4: THE COMMUNITY DESIGNS AND DEVELOPS ACTIVITIES TO EXPAND THE PD SOLUTIONS BY:

- Expanding the solution space by engaging multiple stakeholders in applying the discovered existing PD behaviors and strategies
- Starting small to demonstrate success
- Connecting people who haven't connected before
- Targeting the widest range of appropriate community members
- Creating opportunities to practice and “learn through doing” in a safe environment with peer support
- Using imaginative approaches to involve the community in the work (e.g., feeding workshops in Vietnam, Healthy Baby Fairs in Pakistan)

**TOOLS OR ACTIVITIES FOR DESIGNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR  
COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO PRACTICE THE DISCOVERED  
BEHAVIORS AND STRATEGIES:**

- Community meeting to share PD inquiry findings
- Creation of an action team involving the resource team and self-selected volunteers who have participated in the process
- Develop an action plan; pin down roles and responsibilities

The community measures, monitors, and evaluates the effectiveness of its initiatives based on the PD findings by:

- Developing a way to monitor progress of initiative (assess, analyze, and act on information)
- Making progress real by engaging the community in developing its own indicators to monitor progress (quantitative and qualitative indicators of behavioral and social change)
- Creating culturally appropriate ways to communicate the data to the community as a whole
- Evaluating initiatives at regular, frequent intervals

As the process evolves and has a successful impact on the problem, other communities and groups will hear about the process and may want to learn more. Suggestions for dissemination might include

- Documenting, evaluating, and sharing results
- Honoring and amplifying the success stories by storytelling
- Creating a living university for other communities to discover how the PD process could help them solve the same problem

## Useful Definitions for Practitioners

The *PD concept* is based on the observation that in every community or organization, there are a few individuals or groups who have found uncommon practices and behaviors that enable them to achieve better solutions to problems than their neighbors who face the same challenges and barriers.

The *PD approach* is grounded in the assumption that communities have assets or resources they haven't tapped. The PD process enables a community or organization to identify and amplify those practices and behaviors, measure outcomes, and share their successful strategies with others. The PD approach is used to bring about sustainable behavioral and social change by identifying solutions already existing in the system.

A *PD individual or group* demonstrates special or uncommon behaviors and strategies that enable the person or group to overcome a problem without special resources. However, a person is defined as a PD only in the context of a specific problem.

*PD design or methodology* consists of four basic steps (the four D's: *define, determine, discover, and design*). These comprise an iterative road map for the process.

*PD inquiry* refers to the stage in the process whereby the community seeks to discover demonstrably successful behaviors and strategies among its members.

*PD process* refers to the entire journey encompassing the skillful use of experiential learning methods and skilled facilitation applied to the four steps of the PD design. It results in community mobilization and ownership, discovery of existing solutions, and emergence of new solutions as a result of community initiatives.

The Positive Deviance Initiative (PDI) would love to hear about your project. Please send us the following information:

Name of your organization

Contact information

Name of the project

Location of the project

Problem statement

Project impact

Population impacted by the project

Special target group

Any documentation that might be shared on our web site  
(stories, videos, photos, reports, articles, etc.)

Send this information to [contact@positivedeviance.org](mailto:contact@positivedeviance.org), or The Positive Deviance Initiative, Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, 150 Harrison Avenue, Room 135, Boston, MA 01742, USA.

The Positive Deviance Initiative greatly appreciates your participation in documenting the ways the PD approach is being implemented worldwide.

This guide was developed by the Positive Deviance Initiative. For more information, go to our web site at [www.positivedeviance.org](http://www.positivedeviance.org).