

Quorum

February 26, 2009

The Power of Positive Deviance – *Stimulating Change by Doing what’s Deviant.*

Most of the work Quorum is involved in entails helping clients address or solve problems that have both a critical strategic or competitive component and a deeply imbedded cultural component. Clients will often say that they need an individual who can effect change, but do so within the cultural norms of the company. That might translate as “Something needs to change, it must come from within, and it needs to happen quickly and effectively, using the resources at hand.” Organizations and or “communities” have a remarkable ability to self preserve, even if doing so mean the perpetuation of damaging or self-destructive behavior. This is one of the major reasons why effecting meaningful long term organizational change is so incredibly difficult. This situation is what many Human Resource Professionals, Organization Development Professionals, and quality Executive Search Consultants, work with on a daily basis. When clients and their HR partners, reach the point where they are looking outside their organization for key talent, there is an unspoken paradox inherent in that effort. They want someone who will be “different and yet the same”.

To effectively resolve this paradox, Quorum engages clients and their HR partners in a dialogue about their strategic or tactical needs. We discuss the problems and issues that need to be addressed, cultural as well as commercial. We are aware that a given “community” will react differently to different candidates, even though they have the exact same credentials and experience. It is the ability of a candidate to be received into and accepted by a “community’s” existing culture that is critical to their success. If this paradox of difference can be resolved, then our experience indicates that the results can be powerful long term positive change.

There is a formal idea, actually a methodology, which uses the power of “different yet the same” to effect substantial, long term change. It is called “Positive Deviance. It comes from work in the field of nutrition, and was first applied in an attempt to address malnutrition in Haiti and subsequently in Vietnam. It is an approach which is consistent with how Quorum approaches client issues and executive search.

Positive Deviance identifies behaviors, existing resources, and effective solutions, which may currently exist in a “community” yet be unobserved or different from “normal” community behavior or practice. Positive Deviance uses these existing alternative behaviors, resources or solutions to solve community problems. It is “deviant” because it applies practices which

Quorum

“deviate” from the norm within a group and or a community. It is called “positive” because it discovers, examines and applies solutions that are already working for a few members of the community. It is an approach that works from the bottom up, from the few to the many. It identifies solutions from within the community rather than having them imposed from without.

Positive Deviance, as first applied in the field of nutrition, entailed a process of inquiry and action that looked for children who are well-nourished in communities where most children are malnourished. Positive Deviance examines the behaviors, beliefs, and practices which enable the well nourished child to cope and thrive, in comparison to the behaviors of the rest of the larger community. Further, this methodology looks for “Positive Deviants”; poor members of the community who have well-nourished thriving children while most of the neighbors do not. This is pretty powerful stuff!

The key questions are: “what enables some members of the community (the “Positive Deviants”) to find better solutions to pervasive community problems than their neighbors who have access to the same resources? Is it possible to establish “normal” community behaviors that are directly related to perpetuating the problem to be addressed? If so, then is it possible to enable the community to discover successful uncommon behaviors/ strategies practiced by the “Positive Deviants”?

The Positive Deviance Initiative (PDI) has learned that “It’s easier to ACT your way into a new way of THINKING, than to THINK your way into a new way of ACTING”. The presence of Positive Deviants clearly demonstrates, to the whole community, that successful solutions exist, within their community and culture, right now, today. Consequently the methodology takes the following six steps. First, define the problem, its perceived causes and related current practices (situation analysis) and define what a successful outcome would look like (described as a behavioral or status outcome). Then determine if there are any individuals/entities in community who already exhibit desired behavior or status (Positive Deviant identification). Discover what uncommon practices/behaviors enable the Positive Deviants to outperform/find better solutions to the problem than others in their “community”. Based on this discovery, design and implement activities enabling others in “community” to access and practice new behaviors (focus on “doing” rather than transfer of knowledge). Follow up by discerning the effectiveness of such activities or projects through ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Lastly, disseminate successful behaviors and process to appropriate “other” individuals or communities (scaling up).

What is wonderful about this approach is that it is not some theoretical academic exercise. It has been and continues to be successfully applied, by concerned organizations and professionals around the globe, to address some of the most difficult problems in the world today; hunger, infant mortality, and AIDS/HIV, to name a few. It works for real people, in the real world, with real problems.

Quorum

Most of the literature on Positive Deviance mentions a few key reasons why Positive Deviance is so effective. Positive Deviance begins with community recognition of a problem and accepting that the means for change may already exist within the community. The solutions are not provided by a “Hero” or “Champion” such as external experts (aid workers, NGO’s, consultants, or corporate headquarters), but rather come from within the individual group or community. The approach is positive and immediate because it uses solutions whose effectiveness is plain to see. It does not externally impose “best practices” which may or may not work in the given situation. It begins with action which encourages understanding that leads to new ways of thinking. It uses behavior/ resources/ knowledge that already exists and are available to all within a group or community. Because it comes from within the existing culture, even though the behaviors are different, it is resistant to negative social system reactions.

The practitioners of Positive Deviance are parallel to the candidates Quorum brings to clients. They can be accepted by the community, find existing solutions within the community, and help the community put those solutions into place. This is much more than simply bringing a technical or experiential expertise to bear. It is about working within the cultures of a community and helping a community find and implement its own solutions.

The first steps in the Quorum Search Process, that define the position, the culture, and the measures of success, comprise the define step in Positive Deviance. We also want to know about the client’s team. Who is successful; defined as gets things done and makes things happen, and why. What are they doing that the client wishes others would do? Is there anyone prepared to challenge the status-quo or institutional orthodoxy? Who has ideas and looks at things differently? These people are the Positive Deviants. Open and honest disclosure of issues and challenges tends to attract a quality candidate. Once hired, they will take the time to find out what each team member does and how they do it. This is often an early measure of success. In doing so, they discover those uncommon practices/behaviors enabling the existing Positive Deviants to outperform/find better solutions than others on the team. This discovery process also identifies those who simply cannot or will not change.

Clear and concrete measures of success establish an understanding of what performance will be measured and how it will be measured. Those practices and behaviors that lead to superior performance and problem resolution can be highlighted, shared with other team members, and integrated in what the others do on a daily basis. This in turn allows other members of the team to be successful. Once they experience success, they will learn. As they learn, they are increasingly motivated to experiment with new ways of doing things or apply these new practices and behaviors to other issues or problems. All this in turn becomes a positive feedback cycle of change and improvement.

At the end of a number of months, when we go back to the hiring manager and ask how the candidate (new employee) has performed; we have specific benchmarks to evaluate the degree by which the candidate has exceeded expectations. Best of all, we get positive feedback about the

Quorum

candidate from others in the company, indicating real change is taking place within the existing larger culture of the “community”.

Pretty powerful stuff!

Francis Goldwyn
Managing Director
Quorum Associates LLC

For more information on Positive Deviance I have included some references for your review. Both of these sites have extensive references to books, publications, and articles about Positive Deviance.

The Positive Deviance Initiative – Website: www.positivedeviance.org

Positive Deviance Resource Center – Website: www.pdrc.or.id