

Welcome to The Deep End

Welcome to chapter 01 of our new [blog series](#) **The Deep End**, information to inspire faithful creativity and spark a new way of looking at your church.

We are conditioned to consume information in short articles, and as a general rule, we stick to that format. However, some topics need to be unpacked in a deeper and more meaningful approach. **The Deep End** is an attempt to go in-depth into topics we feel are relevant to inspiring you and your church to dream new dreams and listen to the Spirit in a new creative way.

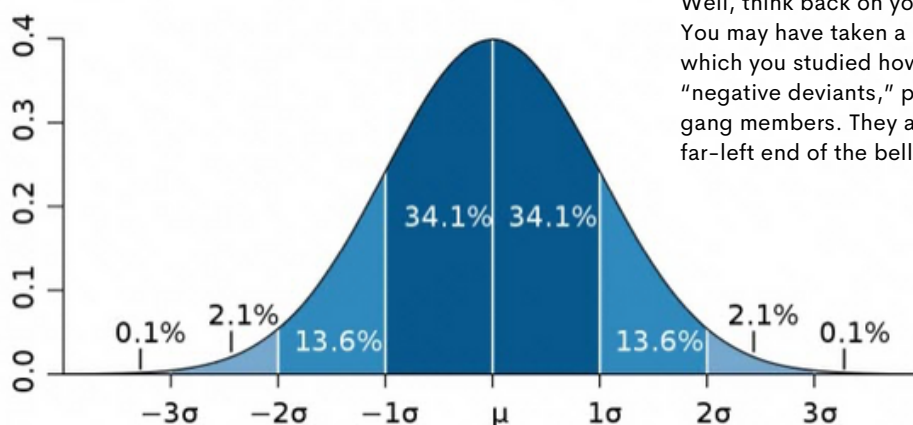


Chapter 01: Positive Deviance Theory: The Church Daring to be Different

Positive Deviance Theory

By listening to voices often ignored by the powers that be, we can hear what their most deeply felt needs are and how they imagine those needs can best be met.

Anyone who has taken a course in statistics or engaged in a quantitative study knows that when you plot the individual data points you've collected, you almost always end up with a bell curve-shaped figure like this one.



Most of the data points will fall in the center 2/3 of the graph (the dark blue area), with the final third tailing out toward either the negative end or the positive end of the graph (the lighter shades of blue).

Okay (you're thinking), this might be helpful for a sociologist or economist, but what does it have to do with ministry?

Well, think back on your own preparation for ministry. You may have taken a course called "Deviant Ministry" in which you studied how the church could minister to "negative deviants," people like prisoners, drug users, or gang members. They are the people represented by the far-left end of the bell curve.

"Positive Deviance encourages us to go outside of the church and into the broader community to hear what other people experience and need."

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Positive Deviance Theory (PD)

What is it and how was it developed...

I'll bet you never heard anything about "positive deviants," the people on the far-right side of the bell curve. Even so, they are the very people we ought to be interested in today, because they are the folks who may be able to lead us through the confusing, liminal time of tremendous change in which we now find ourselves.

There's actually a whole field of study called Positive Deviance Theory (PD) built on this idea that positive deviants are important people. Here's the story of how PD was developed.

Shortly after its war with America, Vietnam had a crisis of infant malnutrition and mortality. Children who were being born thrived for a short while, but then began to lose weight and many of them died.

The health ministry in Hanoi invited a group of former American Peace Corp members into the country to help them figure out what was going on. However, because there was still a lot of anger at Americans, they were going to have to work quietly and quickly. The health minister told them he could provide cover for them for only six months. Normally, their research projects took three years to complete. How in the world would they be able to discover any helpful insights in six months?

The researchers make an early decision to focus their study on the people living most closely with and concerned about infant health issues: the babies' mothers. They went into villages where many children were dying, ran clinics to treat the babies' symptoms, provided short term food supplies, and talked with the mothers about their babies' diets.



A Way Forward

A key question they learned to ask was, "Do you know of any families or any villages where babies are healthy and not dying?" Almost every mother knew of some family in the community or some village a couple of valleys over where babies were not dying.

When the researchers began to talk with these outlier mothers, they made a breakthrough discovery.

The main meal of the day for these families was a stew of meat, vegetables, and broth, eaten from a common pot. Typically, the men and older boys who worked in the rice paddies were given the meat, the mother and older girls ate the vegetables, and the babies drank the broth.

One of the outlier mothers whose babies were thriving told the researchers – with some sense of shame – that she got up early each morning and gathered tiny shrimps and crabs from the paddies (neither of which were not considered food items in their culture) and added them to the broth before feeding it to her babies.

This mother had broken a cultural taboo by fortifying the broth in this way, but it gave her babies the protein that was missing in the diets of the malnourished babies who were drinking only the broth. Because they were getting more protein, they gained weight steadily and stayed healthy.

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Every Voice Is Important

Listening to everyone means that we are more likely also to hear the voice of that individual who already knows the way forward.

The researchers asked the mother if she would be willing to teach her unorthodox recipe to other mothers. They took her to surrounding villages and invited mothers to come see her healthy babies and learn about her new fortified broth recipe. The price of admission to her classes was that the other mothers had to bring their own harvest of shrimps and crabs to go into the stew they would prepare that day.

Everywhere the class was taught, infant health rapidly improved and infant mortality plummeted.

In their book *The Power of Positive Deviance*, three of the researchers tell the story of their study and the theory it helped them develop about how a community, an organization (even a church) can find its way forward when facing a confounding, sticky problem: what we now typically call as an adaptive challenge.

Their core insight was that when a community faces an adaptive challenge, "at least one person in (the) community, working with the same resources as everyone else, has already licked the problem that confounds others. ... In most cases, this person does not know he or she is doing anything unusual.



Yet once the unique solution is discovered and understood, it can be adopted by the wider community and transform many lives." (pg. 3)

Several aspects of PD provide helpful ways for us to work through adaptive challenges in church life as well.

The first is that PD invites us to listen to as many people in the community as possible, even though they may not add anything to the conversation. Listening to everyone means that we are more likely also to hear the voice of that individual who already knows the way forward.

Not only can this help us discover the positive deviants in our community, but a broad conversation also improves buy-in to the process by the community as a whole. This is why both CHC and PneuMatrix base their visioning work on conversations with the whole congregation no matter what the church's polity. Sharing ideas and experiences around a table gives someone with a new insight a place to be heard and for others to help spread her/his/their insight to the broader community. It's also easier to walk into the frightening unknown if we are holding hands with others on the journey.

Bubbling Up From Below

Whatever God is trying to say to the church today, we similarly believe it is bubbling up from below and is generated in conversation through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As a process based on broad participation and not on looking to typically acknowledged experts, PD assumes that answers to the community's problems will not come from the top down but arise from that broad conversation. Whatever God is trying to say to the church today, we similarly believe it is bubbling up from below and is generated in conversation through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This is an especially hopeful word for congregations who realize there is little help coming their way from national or regional offices.

At the same time it is a bottom-up process, PD also moves from the outer edges of the community toward its center rather than assuming some normative center will tell those on the edges what to do.

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The Risk of Listening

We may just discover new ways...

By listening to voices often ignored by the powers that be, we can hear what their most deeply felt needs are and how they imagine those needs can best be met. Remember, that person who comes into your office every other month with a self-described "crazy idea" may be the prophet through whom the Holy Spirit is seeking to speak to you.

In some cases, following PD theory will mean giving the work of innovation to the people who care the most about a particular part of the church's overall ministry. Are there leaders who wonder why participation in the church's Sunday School continues to fall? Give them the task of talking with families with children to learn why it's hard for them to participate in the current Sunday School format and to ask what they hope for their children's Christian formation and how that formation might be accomplished.

When the PD researchers were working with a VA hospital to try to bring infection rates under control, it was a janitor tasked with cleaning up germ-laden hospital rooms who developed a new way of removing the protective gear the staff were wearing that minimized the risk of spreading germs from one patient to another.

In other cases, PD encourages us to go outside of the church and into the broader community to hear what other people experience and need.



It is hard, for example, for the pastoral and music staff of a church to dream up new forms of worship that will attract the spiritual but not the religious. But what if we were to take the risk of sitting with those non-institutional types and asking them to tell us about their own experiences of awe and wonder and how those experiences shape them? It might help us discover ways to partner with them and co-create new ways to facilitate what we in the church refer to as the experience of being in God's presence in worship.

A PD approach also creates curiosity in the community, because everyone comes to understand no one has a ready-made answer and everyone's voice counts. When people are genuinely curious about the way forward, they are more eager to engage in the process, less anxious about where it will lead, and less resistant to any changes that may be needed to develop new forms of church life.

PD is a practice-based model. Once you discover a new way forward, you teach it to everyone in the community until it becomes the new norm. "It's easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting." (p.38). Or as people in 12-step programs will often say, "Fake it until you can make it." If you act as if you are sober, you will eventually wake up one morning to discover you actually are sober.

In one of our recent webinars [CHC Assistant Director, Matt Cook](#) made the case that "at different moments of great change in the history of the church, the new forms that the Christian community took and the new ways that the community embodied and spread the gospel always first appeared at the periphery of the church rather than at its center."

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Learn and Let Go

With Positive Deviance Theory

We are, as church futurist Phyllis Tickle put it, at one of those moments at which the church has a rummage sale: deciding what of the tradition to keep, what needs to be given away, and what new things need to be added. PD provides a helpful orientation we can take to help us learn what to let go of and what to add in order to faithfully spread the good news of God's grace in our own time and context.

Along with other perspectives, like those provided by emotional intelligence, adaptive change theory, appreciative inquiry, and a missional understanding of God's purpose for the church, PD is a valuable tool to help us re-imagine the church for a new age. We would all be well served to learn a little more about the theory and its implications for church life.

The quotes in this article are from The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems by Richard Pascale, Jerry Sternin, and Monique Sternin, Harvard Business Press, 2010



Chapter By: Jim Kitchens

In 2011, he and long-time friend and colleague Deborah Wright founded PneuMatrix, a non-profit consulting group that helps congregations and judicatories engage in adaptive challenges. Jim is the coordinator of the CHC-West region. He can be reached at JimK@chchurches.org

How We Can Help

The **Center for Healthy Churches** and **PneuMatrix** exists to build up the church of Christ by offering hope, help, and healing to churches and clergy members in need. We believe that local churches can and should be a source of light and life in their communities.

Congregations face a lot of pressure as they embrace life in the 21st century. When trying to determine the best course of action, or how to respond effectively to change, congregations find that our impartial but invested perspective can provide meaningful direction and encouragement.

Through consultation, we help churches face a variety of challenges from both inside and outside the congregation. Coaches and Consultants are trained in helping staff, deacons, boards, elders, councils, or other leadership groups during these challenges.

We welcome the opportunity to discern with you how our abilities and your needs or interests might intersect.



What Sets Us Apart

The Church Comes First

We Start with a Hopeful Spirit

Humble Expertise from our Coaches

We Cultivate an Innovative Mindset

We Keep our Fees Affordable

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