



Dear ODyssey,

We launched our innovation portal three months ago. However, the current participation rate is only 30 per cent, far below the target of 60 per cent. My CEO has thus tasked me to improve usage rates.

I am planning to gather feedback from employees in order to understand why we are not able to achieve our target usage rate, and thereafter figure out how to improve the situation. What advice would you offer to address this situation?

Yours sincerely,  
Practitioner

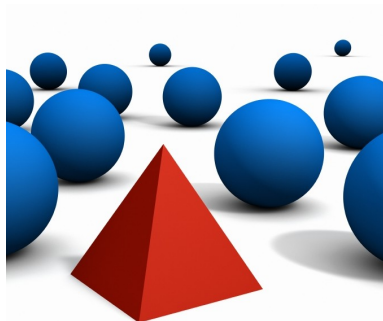
# Positively deviant

## Three steps to **collecting effective feedback**

By Alexia Lee and Geraldine Ling

Dear Practitioner,

In addressing any performance gap – in your case the low usage rate – it is important that we start by diagnosing the situation first, and not jump too quickly into taking action. Otherwise, you may fall prey to action-oriented bias – that is, the tendency to take action less thoughtfully than we should.<sup>1</sup>



Action-oriented bias often rests on a 'just do it' mentality. We plunge into action simply because we have an excessive optimism about the future and our own ability to influence it.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "A language to discuss biases", McKinsey Quarterly, accessed August 10, 2011, <https://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/files/article/PDF/BiasSpread.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "The case for behavioral strategy", McKinsey Quarterly, accessed August 10, 2011, [http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/The\\_case\\_for\\_behavioral\\_strategy\\_2551](http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/The_case_for_behavioral_strategy_2551)

## SEGMENT TO UNDERSTAND YOUR STAKEHOLDER

To understand the situation, a good practice is to first segment your key stakeholder groups. There can be many ways to segment your stakeholders – common dividers include demographic profile, seniority and functional roles. For your case, you could consider segmenting your stakeholder by demographics if you suspect that younger employees are posting and commenting more often than the older ones. Or you could segment by functional roles if you think employees involved in customer service roles are more participative than those involved with management roles.

Segmenting your stakeholders provides you with a clearer understanding of the groups that are doing well and those that are not. In doing so, you can also be more selective in employing an appropriate feedback collection method depending on the profile of the group.



## PAY ATTENTION TO WHERE IT IS WORKING

In collecting feedback, there is often a tendency to look out for what is wrong, that is, questioning why the change effort is not taking off. However, looking for deficiencies alone will not provide you with any practical solutions. Instead, it merely tells you that something is wrong – and you already know that.

A more valuable move here would be to also pay attention to where the change achieves a positive hit in the organisation. In your case, it would be the stakeholder groups which have the highest participation rate. This concept is known as positive deviance.

Consider the tale of how positive deviance helped fight against child malnutrition in a third-world country.<sup>3</sup> The year was 1991 and Jerry Sternin, the director of Vietnam's Save the Children initiative was given a seemingly insurmountable task by the government. He was to combat child malnutrition, and to show results within six months. No mean feat considering that over 65 per cent of Vietnamese children were malnourished then.

What Sternin – who was later acknowledged as the father of applied positive deviance – did was to invite the Vietnamese community to identify four families who had managed to avoid malnutrition despite all odds.

These families had faced the same challenges as the ones with malnourished kids – limited access to resources and help.

Sternin's discovery was eye-opening. Families that avoided malnutrition did something the other families did not do.

Parents, or caregivers, had collected tiny shrimps and crabs from paddy fields, and added those, along with sweet potato greens, to their children's meals. Such foods were accessible to everyone, but most community members avoided feeding their kids these foods because they were thought to be inappropriate for young children.

Sternin also discovered that these families were feeding their children more often, between three to four times a day, rather than the normal practice of feeding twice a day.

Because of their ability to thrive when everyone floundered, Sternin termed these families the positive deviants – "positive" because they managed to achieve success and "deviants" because they behaved in ways that most others did not.

The message behind Sternin's story is this: In every community, there are certain groups whose uncommon behaviour or strategies enable better solutions to problems.

“ Looking for deficiencies alone will not provide you with any practical solutions. Instead, it merely tells you that something is wrong - and you already know that.

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<sup>3</sup> "Positive deviance case studies", Positive Deviance, accessed August 10, 2011, [http://www.positivedeviance.org/about\\_pd/case\\_studies.html](http://www.positivedeviance.org/about_pd/case_studies.html)

To apply it to your situation, you need to locate where your positive deviants are. As you conduct your stakeholder analysis, keep an eye out for the groups with exceptionally high participation rates.

When you have identified them, speak to them – through interviews or focus group discussions – to find out what is contributing to their interest in using the portal. Observe them at work to see what they are doing differently or experiencing differently from the rest in the organisation. The key is to identify specific behaviours that are unique to these positive deviants, which others in the organisation do not perform. Are they, for example, using the portal more because their supervisor encourages them to do so?



## DON'T TELL, SHOW INSTEAD

So what do you do after discovering these positive deviant behaviours?

"The next step is critical," says Stenin in a 2000 interview with innovation magazine Fast Company.<sup>4</sup> "Once you find deviant behaviors, don't [just] tell people about them.... It's about changing behavior. You design an intervention that requires and enables people to access and to act on these new premises. You enable people to practice a new behavior, not to sit in a class learning about it."

Another suggestion offered by Stenin is to let the positive deviants themselves spread the word. In your case you could engage these deviants as your change champions who can serve as role models and help share tips on the use of the innovation portal to their fellow colleagues.

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## Key takeaways

### To spread change messages effectively:

Segment your stakeholders to better understand them.

1

Look out for positive deviants' specific behaviours that are different from others.

2

Replicate the deviant behaviours in others.

3

*Dear Practitioner,*

*As you can see, in collecting feedback there can be tremendous value in keeping an eye out for positive deviance. By identifying these deviant behaviours and then replicating them throughout the organisation you will find yourself being well on your way to increasing the usage rate in the innovation portal.*

*Yours sincerely,  
ODyssey*

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## NOTES