

The Positive Deviance Approach to Social Change, a talk by Dr. Arvind Singhal



Are positive solutions to social problems difficult to attain? Where are they and how can we find them? These questions were addressed in an educational and inspiring talk at Sehgal Foundation on June 14, 2018, by Dr. Arvind Singhal, a Samuel Shirley and Edna Holt Martson endowed professor and the director of the Social Justice Initiative at the University of Texas, El Paso, who shared positively deviant

ways of finding solutions to social problems.



The Positive Deviance Approach to Social Change

Simply put, the Positive Deviance Approach to social change is about identifying individuals, groups, and communities who have succeeded in overcoming social challenges against all odds using uncommon behaviors and/or strategies. The premise of the approach is that the wisdom to solve problems lies with people and innovations hiding among the least-likely suspects, which counters the

traditional top-down approaches to social change. Often the simplest and even the poorest people can find better solutions without extra resources.

Three Stories, Three Life Lessons

Dr. Singhal's discussion of the Positive Deviance Approach included three stories, wherein he laid out three life lessons with great subtlety and simplicity. The first was a Sufi story of Nasreddin Hodja who announced that he will be smuggling stuff and dared the authorities to catch him. He smuggled every day for days, months, years, and decades, and every day he was found clean even after rigorous frisking and thorough checks of all his belongings laden on donkeys. When finally the customs officer who had checked Nasreddin daily decided to retire, so did Nasreddin who made up his mind to stop smuggling. Now that he was no longer in uniform, the customs officer asked Nasreddin to disclose what he had been smuggling all that time. Nasreddin answered, "I used to smuggle donkeys." The lesson—solutions to complex problems exist, but we often do not see them. We do not know where to look or what to look for because our "looking" glasses are often fogged by expertise, arrogance, and ignorance.

The next story was from Mother Teresa. On a trip to Washington DC in 1974, she had a private visit to Missionaries of Charity. The Vietnam War was going on, and one person asked Mother, "Would you march with us against the Vietnam War?" She answered, "My child, I am so sorry. For a march in Washington *for peace*, I will be the first to lead." Lesson—although there is nothing wrong with the first solution, that was not the only way of doing things. As problem solvers, we begin with the problem (a deficit and a gap), and we try to fill that gap. Mother Teresa's response illustrates thinking about what we are *for* (vs. what we are against) and what is working *for* us.

The third story, with a crucial lesson, was about Mahatma Gandhi who embraced a very simple lifestyle and preferred to stay with the most marginalized people. He led the march against taxes levied on salt by the British (the Salt March) because he knew that salt was a basic need of the masses, the poorest of the poor. The lesson—look for what is working with the poorest of the poor; the answers lie right there.

Dr. Singhal cited cases where the positive deviance approach was applied and tested with the malnourishment of children in Vietnam and high violence rates in maximum-security Danish prisons. Field-tested examples in communities from across the world show how this approach to social change works.

In discussions and questions that followed the talk, Sehgal Foundation staff shared recent research compiled in Nuh, Haryana, on *mahila sangathans* (women's collectives) and agricultural interventions based on the Positive Deviance Approach that have been successful.

Positive deviance provides solutions. Small things make the difference.

(Compiled by Arti Manchanda Grover, program leader, Communications, S M Sehgal Foundation)