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Positive Deviance Dynamics in Social Systems

Keith W. Ray and Joan Goppelt

Emergent Deviance: Development of an Informal Coalition

Abstract

This article is based on a case story of collaboration and leadership development within an organization that took place over 6 years. We explore this case in the light of positive deviance, and have coined the term *emergent deviance* as a noteworthy concept related to organizational change. It is part case study, part theory-building of how a coalition of middle managers exhibited positive deviance in their actions and reactions within an organization. We describe how the group reacted resiliently when faced with challenges to their methods. We also explore the role we played as external consultants and researchers in influencing the emergence of the coalition.

1. Introduction

We are external organization development practitioners who started our careers in technical fields; Joan in computer science and Keith in physics. Our early experience in science helped us develop critical perspectives around our own practice. We have evolved our organization development practice over the years, and find ourselves in the space today where we are discarding many of the traditional theories we learned about change and systems. Upon reflection of our experience and trying to make meaning of that experience, we have come to embrace complexity theory, informal coalition theory, and social constructionism. We have become acutely aware of how our role as consultant is neither outside observer nor expert but as co-constructor and co-learner. What we say and do cannot be separate from what the client(s) are saying and doing (Goppelt, Ray, & Shaw, in press) as we both change and are reciprocally changed by our interactions with our clients. Often, as in this case story, we assume a role as both researcher and consultant. We identify

as both scholars and practitioners as we use and co-construct theory toward co-constructing pragmatic changes with our clients.

We have been engaged with a large research and development organization for several years to help with subjects ranging from leadership development to increasing collaboration. As described below, a group of people in this organization involved in creating the collaborative work culture was successful at deviating from widely held norms and organizational discourses about creating positive change. We present this case story and reflectively explain successes using theories of complex responsive processes (Stacey, 2001), informal coalition theory (Rodgers, 2007), and positive deviance in organizations (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003). As we recreate this story, we will highlight our reflections, thoughts, and retrospective associations to theory in italics.

In order to frame our view of positive deviance we first turn to Spritzer and Sonenshein, who define positive deviance as "intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways" (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003, p. 209). They further describe psychological conditions that facilitate positive deviance: sense of meaning (caring deeply about something), focus on the other (focusing on the needs and perspectives of others), self-determination (autonomous and free to choose), personal efficacy (potential for success outweighs risk of failure), and courage (willingness to confront risk to do what is right). Though their focus is on individual conditions we hope to show that, in this case we are presenting, it applied to a group as well.

A second frame in which to view this case is Chris Rodgers' Informal Coalition Theory (Rodgers, 2007) in which organizational dynamics are seen as naturally complex and fundamentally unpredictable. Rodgers describes informal coalitions as a mode of change in organizations that "sees outcomes arising from the coalescing of people around particular 'themes' that emerge from the informal networks of conversations that take place spontaneously around the organization" (Rodgers, 2007, p. 12). Informal coalitional activity is a natural reaction to change efforts that are imposed by those in power or occur through other means. These networks of conversations arise as a way to

make meaning of what is happening and are part of the unavoidably political processes emerging from differences of view, identity, and power.

2. The Beginning

Matt, a mid-level manager who was working to increase collaboration between a set of teams, asked if we knew of 360-degree feedback tools that would expose behaviors that influence the ability to collaborate. The efforts to increase collaboration were one strand of an overarching mandate to consolidate and gain efficiencies in a large portion of the organization through restructuring. Matt's philosophy was that in addition to re-structuring, efficiencies could also be gained through increased collaboration between existing projects. Our task was to present Matt with options and a recommendation for feedback processes. We suggested a leadership development vendor that we felt had a unique approach. Matt agreed and we contracted with the vendor, who then provided a feedback process and seminars with a trial set of managers.

3. A Possible Ending

During this pilot process of the feedback and seminars, a manager two levels above Matt informed the pilot group that the larger organizational change mandate was now halted. There would be no need for Matt and his team of managers to continue their efforts to gain efficiencies through the official organizational change. In essence they had permission to stop efforts to increase collaboration and go back to their normal ways of interacting. Matt was "off the hook" to make the mandate work with these teams.

In that moment they realized that their motivation had been less about the official re-structure, and more about how they could collaborate. Rather than react by halting their efforts, they decided to continue their efforts without any permission from higher levels in the organization. They would no longer invoke the official mandate as the reason for their efforts, they would develop

their own reasons to continue, and they would use portions of their own project budgets to do so. Through their joint experience of creating more collaboration, they had developed unique relationships, formed an informal coalition based on trust, and glimpsed how they and others could work together differently.

> *The managers' purpose was to increase collaboration through individual and interpersonal development. This was a clear other-focus as described by Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003), since their motivations were to help people grow as individuals. They each had a sense of deep personal meaning for this effort that created intrinsic rewards and motivation. In addition, the group created a sense of self-determination as they chose to pursue an effort that was no longer being asked by their managers. This was an instance of positive deviance by the coalition of managers and strengthened their identity as a coalition.*

> *Working together on feedback and tough interpersonal issues had changed the landscape of possible good reactions for this set of managers. Complexity theory can inform this situation in two ways. First, we see that the landscape changed or "danced" (Page, 2009). Second, complexity theory helps us come to grips with the notion that some situations are fundamentally unpredictable. We could not have known that working together in the way they did would have caused this set of managers to react differently to a top manager stopping an initiative (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). An individual leader did not cause the reaction but rather it was made possible by the network of relationships that had emerged.*

At this point Matt stepped back as the lead and Sally, a member of the pilot group, stepped forward to coordinate the continuing efforts with the coalition. Matt did not disappear but his role subtlety shifted from an official goal champion to a peer in the informal coalition. Someone else stepping forward on their own volition was also a deviation from past reactions to canceled initiatives. This piqued our interest as researchers and we asked Sally if we could remain engaged with the process. She agreed and our role now

became thinking partners with Sally and researchers to understand if and how the feedback and seminar process was influencing collaboration back in the workplace.

> *This is an instance where the power of the coalition led to sustainment different from the past. Sally did not wait for someone to appoint her. Her identity of someone passionate about collaboration was solidified by her actions from this point forward. Power shifts external and internal to the group emerged naturally and could not have been predicted at the beginning of the effort. The fluidity of power relations is a hallmark of informal coalitions and is essential, we believe, to creating conditions for positive deviance of such a group.*

4. Learning the Way Forward

We met with Sally to discuss how to continue the conversation regarding why collaboration was important, what actions to take next, and who could or should be included. Instead of designing a highly structured strategic planning process, we suggested that people attending the session share their own stories of why they were interested in the effort, what they had gained so far, and ideas they had regarding how to continue. We imagined a conversation where next steps naturally emerged from dialogue rather than an unnatural process of brainstorming, then driving to closure or consensus.

> *These next steps were not big and costly but rather small and if they did not begin to create something better they were halted or altered with only minor negative effects. If they did create positive effects, then we encouraged, enabled, and amplified them.*

> *We speculate that by creating change through small next steps, learning how people react, and then deciding on the next small steps was also a factor in facilitating positive deviance. Social changes such as increasing collaboration are complex and it is impossible to predict what will emerge. Therefore, if the coalition had developed a large complicated plan for implementation they*

might have intuitively felt that the plan would be unsuccessful. By deviating from the norm of planned top-down change, and instead using a small steps and learn-as-you-go approach, they were able to initiate many small deviations and alleviate some feeling of risk. Risk was reduced in this case because if a small action did not produce the desired reaction, there was little lost effort or loss of face.

Many people attended the session that Sally coordinated and subsequently several people in the coalition took action. If no one had appeared or the result was not action, we would have tried a different experiment. Because of the good outcome, Sally continued this approach and coordinated a quarterly strategy session where those interested discussed what actions had occurred since they had last met and what actions to take next.

It is important to note that the informal coalition was not clearly constituted. There were only vague 'in' and 'out' groups. This informal coalition continued to grow while at the same time some people reduced their engagement. We noted that this was another deviation from the past where the vagueness might have raised concern and the reaction would be to establish a formal group and charter. Instead because of the resulting action and momentum there was at the moment an effortless feeling to the progress, in contrast to a "resistance to change" which came next.

5. Deviating from Patterns of Resistance

About six years into the journey, the participation in the feedback process and leadership development seminars had spread through a network of influence to about 200 people. As part of our research, we tracked who influenced whom to attend and developed a network diagram showing the spread of the idea through the informal coalition connections. We also captured stories of people's experience with the feedback and seminars and the relevance of it back in the workplace. The reactions to the non-traditional methods used in the feedback process and seminars were now mixed. Some, as with the pilot group, gained transformational insight. Others were pleased with the

experience but didn't view it as transformational. And others were reacting more negatively, wondering why they were asked to attend and questioning the legitimacy of it all. The negative feedback gave rise to questions about the process, including who was attending, if the vendor was legitimate, and concerns about employee confidentiality regarding feedback. Some managers, who had been aware of the efforts but not openly supportive and not active participants, now began to raise questions.

Sally's supervisor asked Sally to step back from being so visible in the sponsorship. We saw this as another significant event and wondered what would happen next. Sally's department managers assumed it was primarily Sally sponsoring the effort since they had little experience with a network of sponsorship. Their experience was that a single goal champion spearheaded change. The fear for these managers was that Sally's visibility would create a poor image of the department if more people began to think negatively about the leadership development seminars. The request to step back was devastating to Sally, who was very passionate about the progress being made. Sally was also aware of the mixed reactions now emerging from various parts of the organization and wanted to ensure all of the issues raised were openly addressed and no reaction silenced. Sally was able to share her disappointment with us and we encouraged her to do the same with the coalition.

Sally agreed and quickly gathered the coalition of peers that had now grown into many different departments and expanded to about 15 peer mid-level managers. Sally shared that she needed to become less visible while also needing to learn from each issue that was being raised. As each issue was discussed, a different manager chose to take on the issue. The group discussed where the issue was coming from and who had the most useful relationship with the person or part of the organization. Each manager was willing to take on personal risk to ensure they collectively could adapt and continue their efforts. It was another example of how much collaboration had increased over the past 6 years.

The power of the coalition was clear in this instance and arose not from adding up their individual power in the organization, but from their identity as a coalition plus their relationships outside the coalition. Because they were a diverse group, coming from many parts of the organization, their combined relationships had influence over a large part of the entire organization network. In other words, their combined multiple identities and relationships effectively amplified the power of their identity as a coalition creating positive change. Their sense of self-efficacy was combined to create a larger sense of group-efficacy.

The people in the coalition were able to deviate positively from accepted organization norms and discourse collectively by each taking a piece of the personal risk that can occur by being deviant. Their individual risk was lower based on existing trusting relationships and the collective risk was hedged by sharing across multiple relationships. Individually there was less need for courage while collectively there was more courage. Additionally, as people in the coalition used close relationships with others outside the coalition to manage the issues, they expanded the coalition.

Someone in the coalition addressed each issue by directly engaging whoever raised the issue. After 3 months, changes were made in the process of selection, invitation, and preparation for the leadership development seminar. Another swell of participation occurred as the negative gossip subsided. The collective credibility and openness of the managers involved became difficult to refute. All those involved, including us, noted that this was a new experience for them. They were collaborating across their boundaries, shifting their identities from their individual parts of the organization to a collective of change makers.

6. Reflection and Suggestions

Many of the conditions to facilitate positive deviance described by Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) were present for the informal coalition in this case. First, the coalition maintained a clear other-focused goal of personal

development and organizational collaboration. Second, this goal had deep meaning from personal experiences and their desire to help people grow. Third, the group decided together to focus on this goal and as such created a sense of self-determination. Fourth, their individual self-efficacy was amplified as they developed an identity and supported each other through difficulties. And fifth, by working together, they were able to develop courage to confront risk to themselves and their efforts. We argue that these conditions were enhanced because of their identity as a coalition, which led to an increased ability to exhibit positive deviance.

Having made the case that conditions such as Spreitzer and Sonenshein describe are necessary, we wish to pull back from that position by suggesting that we are making retrospective coherence of events. It is not clear that the conditions *caused* the positive deviance to occur as much as positive deviant behavior may have *allowed* the conditions to exist. Our view of organizations as complex and fundamentally unpredictable leads us to be cautious about linear cause and effect claims in social systems. Our experience is that rarely, if ever, can a sequence of conditions and events that occur in one group of people at one given time be predictably repeated in another group of people at another time. Instead, we can briefly mention some of the interactions we focused on in this case that seemed to influence positive deviance.

Rather than prescribing guidelines, steps, or conditions for success in facilitating positive deviance in a group, we suggest that there are some micro-practices that we and others in this case performed that helped influence the outcomes. Micro-practices, (Goppelt et al., in press) are not reified processes but instead are a kind of heuristic that are called forth in the moment through reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) in an attempt to pragmatically move forward toward desired goals. We describe three micro-practices that seemed to be useful.

> *Question the legitimate*: By becoming mindful of management discourses people could openly critique their own entrained habits and take different

(and deviant) actions. One example from this case is deciding to continue without top management approval.

Mindful of stories and conversation: By focusing on actual experience and stories, next steps were allowed to emerge more naturally than if a detailed plan had been developed. One example is how Sally was able to create many small changes and learn forward rather than needing to understand the entire change before starting.

Focus on coalition rather than structure: By using their own informal coalition rather than falling back on the hierarchy, people were able to challenge power structures and create new power relationships. One example is how people in the coalition each took part of the risk as they engaged others in the negative gossip.

By setting aside management discourse of planned and controlled change, we are able to focus on the network of conversations and meaning making that occurs naturally in organizations. In this case, the emerging coalition was able to use their collective power to challenge and deviate from accepted norms in their organization in order to pursue an honorable goal of increased individual development and intra-organizational collaboration.

In our role as OD consultants and researchers, we gently nudged them toward some of their initial deviations, for example suggesting that they gather those interested rather than creating a formal strategy group. We continually helped them reflect on what the experience was creating in the moment, for example helping Sally share her emotion at being asked to step back. We also captured and relayed stories from the organization so that the coalition was not isolated from people's experiences and reactions.

We propose that in this case positive deviance led to more positive deviance as those involved became experienced in confronting accepted norms and discourse. It is also possible that eventually their mode of operating will become the accepted norm and yet others may need to form informal coalitions to challenge a new way of interacting.

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About the Authors

Ganesh ANANTHARAMAN works with the Bangalore based Global IT firm Wipro Technologies Limited as General Manager in the Leadership & People Sciences function. He is also currently the elected President of the Indian Society for Applied Behavioural Science (ISABS). Besides being a T Group practitioner since 1998, Ganesh has also been on the staff of many Group Relations Conferences in India.

Joan GOPPELT, Ph.D. is Director of Practice at Act Too Consulting, which provides organization consulting and research. Joan has degrees in mathematics, computer science, and most recently a doctor of philosophy in Human and Organizational Systems from Fielding Graduate University. Joan's interests include collaboration, re-conceptualizing leadership, and challenging management discourse.

Doug KIRKPATRICK is the author of Beyond Empowerment: The Age of the Self-Managed Organization. He is a former financial controller for The Morning Star Company and a participant in the adoption of its unique self-management philosophy. He is an organizational change consultant, TEDx and keynote speaker, executive coach, writer, educator and SPHR.

Contact: doug@redshift3.org

Anne LITWIN, PhD, is an organization development consultant, educator, researcher and coach. Anne has been the C.E.O. of her family retail business and is past-Chair of the Board of Directors of NTL Institute. She is co-editor of the book, Managing in the Age of Change and author of the recent book, New rules for Women: Revolutionizing the Way Women Work Together (2014), along with numerous journal articles. Anne received her PhD from Fielding Graduate University in Human and Organizational Systems in 2008. She lives in Boston.

For further information and contact: www.annelitwin.com or info@annelitwin.com.

Alice MACGILLIVRAY works as an organisational consultant from her straw-bale home on Gabriola Island in British Columbia Canada. Her PhD is in Human and Organisational Systems from Fielding Graduate University; her MA degrees are in Human Development (Fielding) and Leadership (Royal Roads University). Alice is an Associate Faculty member with Royal Roads, a Visiting Scholar at Capella, and a Fellow with the Institute for Social Innovation at Fielding. She sits on the Editorial Board of the International Journal of Complexity in Leadership and Management. Alice works in the areas of leadership development and knowledge-related challenges in complex environments.

For further information and contact: www.4KM.net.

Keith W. RAY, Ph.D. is Director of Research at Act Too Consulting. Keith has a degree in physics from University of Nebraska and a doctorate in Human and Organizational Systems from Fielding Graduate University. Keith began his career as scientist and project manager and then became an internal OD consultant. Keith now evolves his external practice using principles of social construction and complexity.

Franz RÖÖSLI is a professor at the University of Applied Sciences Zurich (ZHAW), management trainer and Director of the Beyond Budgeting Round Table (BBRT), an international, membership-based practitioner and research community. He had worked in different companies in leadership positions including member of the executive team before he started an academic career. His research and consulting interests are organizational behavior, leadership and management innovation. He co-authored the book The Leader´s Dilemma. He holds an MBA of the University of St. Gallen.

Contact: franz.roeoesli@zhaw.ch

Andrea SCHUELLER, PhD, is an international consultant and executive coach specializing in organizational change, core transformation, systemic identity, innovation and creative emergence, and conscious(ness) evolution in focus. Andrea works with business firms, NGOs, GOs and trans-organizational

networks, bridging individual and collective development through innovative methods and learning designs. She teaches at various universities and is a teaching trainer for Group Dynamics for the Austrian Association of Group Dynamics & Organization Consulting, where she currently serves as a Board Member. She is a member of Hernstein International Institute and Infosyon. She researches and publishes articles on social innovation and organizational design.

For further information and contact: www.andrea-schueller.com.

Michael SONNTAG is a medical doctor, Bioenergetic Analyst (trained by Alexander Lowen) and management consultant. He is specialized in teaching and creating the conditions needed to enable, enhance and govern deep transformational and self-healing processes, both on an individual and an organizational level.

Contact: m.sonntag@sonntag-consulting.ch

Maria SPINDLER, PhD has been an international organizational consultant in economics (banking and production) and at NGOs (universities and foundations) and lectures at universities in Europe and the US. Her topics are creating future, inventing and transforming organizations, structures and leadership cultures. Maria is qualified to train the trainer for the Austrian Association for Group Dynamics & Organization Consulting and serves on their education board. Her books deal with transformation, creating future for leadership and organizations, group dynamics, organizational consulting and research. Maria founded COS . reflective hybrids® in 2011 and is its chief editor.

For further information and contact: www.maria-spindler.at.

Gary WAGENHEIM is adjunct management professor at the Beedie School of Business at Simon Fraser University and Aalto University – Executive Education and former professor of organizational leadership at the School of Technology at Purdue University. His research and teaching interests are reflective practice, individual and organizational change, and organizational

behavior. He owns and operates Wagenheim Advisory Group that provides corporate training, coaching and organizational development programs. Dr. Wagenheim received a Ph.D. and a M.A. in Human and Organizational Systems from Fielding Graduate University, a M.B.A. in Organizational Behavior/Organizational Change and Development from Syracuse University.

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