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Learning from the behaviour of inmates and guards helps solving wicked challenges in the Danish Prison and Probation Service

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Once upon a time in the little Kingdom of Denmark the Prison and Probation Service experienced a set of really complicated and wicked problems. Many things indicated a tough and stressful environment — both for the inmates and the front line staff. Though most of the inmates and guards stuck to the common, daily routines, there were a few local, hidden heroes. A few inmates and guards managed to behave in distinct, different ways than the others, thereby succeeding in coping with and overcoming the challenges of the system environment. They led lives that were more meaningful than the others, thus being able to avoid stress, burn-out and alienation.

This is the story of the hidden local heroes, their successful behaviours and coping mechanisms, and how we all — finally — began to learn from them. This story evolves from a process that began in the Danish Prison and Probation Service two years ago. It was a process that started out with an ambition of finding new ways to solve wicked problems in the Danish Prison and Probation Service, to add new perspectives to the way we deal with problem solving initiatives, and to initiate social changes.

A large inspiration in the process has been the Positive Deviance Approach, as well as collaborate and user-driven methodologies. This means, among other things, that it has been a process characterized by practical field work with inmates and front-line staff. And a process that has taken place out in our facilities — out where the wicked problems are, and among the people who know the problems, work with the problems, experience the problems and are the true experts on the problems.

The description in this paper is not based on academic research, but on actual fieldwork. The paper entails the notes and reflections as a change practitioner working within our system.

In brief, Positive Deviance is a method used to solve wicked problems by discovering uncommon and

successful behavioral strategies of individuals. According to Sternin and others² Positive Deviance can be summed up as follows:

The basic premise is this: 1) Solutions to seemingly intractable problems already exist, 2) they have been discovered by members of the community itself, and 3) these innovators (individual positive deviants) have succeeded even though they share the same constraints and barriers as others³

The origin of the Positive Deviance approach is found in different theoretically approaches and methodologies. Firstly, there is inspiration from anthropology, which requires a new role from the facilitating team, for example mastering neutral observation, understanding behavioral patterns, asking good questions and active listening by the facilitators. Secondly some roots come from positive psychology, because focus is on assets rather than problems and behavior that already exists and works well. Then Positive Deviance is an evidence based approach, which implies being driven by facts, data and measurable behavior. Finally the approach is holistic, aiming at understanding the whole of the system, and focusing not just the usual suspects but the whole community in finding solutions to the wicked challenges.

According to this approach, positive deviation is:

... the uncommon behaviour that holds a key to success and the behavioural difference that helps a person or a group to overcome the same adversities that overwhelm most of the neighbours.

In other words the Positive Deviance approach tries to discover uncommon, successful coping strategies that individual use to survive under conditions that is often seen as impossible by traditional experts. The approach seeks out the latent behaviour and design

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1. Our facilitating team and the facilities have been really helpful. The team consists of Mads Fly-Hansen, Laura Schmidt-Hansen, Peter Dexters and Anne Bunimowicz.
 2. Pascal, Richard Tanner, Sternin, Monique and Sterning, Jerry. *The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems*, Harvard Business Press 2010.
 3. See the end of the paper for a more detailed description of the method Positive Deviance.

interventions that enable others to practice the behavioural strategies as well. It is different from traditional problem solving, where you move from problem analysis towards solutions. In positive deviance you flow from problem identification and analysis of successful solution to solving the problem. It is suitable for complex changes that can be seen as adaptive, which means it is not suitable for technical changes where best practices are useful and applicable. Also it is suitable, when problems are wicked and intractable and need new approaches. The problems and solutions share are rooted in the local community, which means that solutions are to be found among local community members.

Positive Deviance has been applied all over the world within various fields, for example Vietnamese child nutrition, HIV in Thailand, MRSA in the USA, and gang-related crime in the USA.

Thus this approach differentiates itself from traditional best-practice, expert-driven approaches, where externally imposed solutions often meet resistance and rejection. Traditionally it is argued that knowledge will change behaviour, but such an approach often produces poor results. In Positive Deviance the solution is born in the community and behavioural patterns are analysed and then trained and spread to others in the group. It is easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting. In other words there should be a change in behaviour then values, instead of trying to change values and attitudes first. It is practice oriented rather than knowledge oriented. Another important factor is that the deviant practice one identifies must be transferable to others or in other words a resource that is available to everyone⁴.

The wicked challenges in the Danish Prison and Probation Service

The Danish prison system is acknowledged worldwide for low rates of recidivism, high numbers of inmate re-socialisation, high security standards, and a healthy working environment. Nevertheless severe social challenges in fulfilling overall goals of reducing criminality by balancing between tough and soft approaches exist. The nature of the challenges is often systemic, complicated, and rife with dilemmas in the daily working routines. It is a system that, on one hand entails a lot of control and regulatory mechanisms and, on the other requires a lot of both system flexibility and individual judgement in order to function effectively (see Table 1).

Security	Re-socialisation
Strict	Soft
Punish	Support
Decide	Listen
Stick	Carrot
No	Yes
Distance	Closeness
Professional	Personal
Judicial principles	Pedagogical principles
Rules	Creativity
Brain	Heart

The dual purpose of the prison service mission makes it complicated to manoeuvre at the operational level. The Staff constantly needs to balance between strict and soft approaches in tackling their work with the inmates. Accordingly, the inmates need to adopt and accept a variety of behaviours from guards that might seem conflicting, though necessary to pursue the goals. Over the last decade there has been a 'tough on crime' policy due to government decisions. Combined with a clearly stated political goal of reducing recidivism, this is complicating mastering the balance between strict and soft approaches even more.

At the same time the nature of crime has changed dramatically, as has the profile of the inmate population. Previously the inmates could be characterised as relatively homogenous which is no longer the case, mainly due to globalisation of crime and rise in gang-related criminality. The fact that alternatives to sentencing have been introduced, further adds to the complexity of the clients.

Human resource issues are also complex and deeply connected to the system dynamics. Many front-line officers feel a lack of meaningful work, and they often fear and sometimes experience threats and violent incidents. Furthermore the tone among staff and in relation to inmates can be harsh, and one out of five employees has recently experienced some kind of harassment from either colleagues or immediate managers. The front-line staff also experience that management do not handle conflicts adequately. In short, the system lacks social capital, and the level of trust and confidence needs to be improved. The result is too often stress and burn-out among guards, an average rate of absenteeism of over one month per year in the maximum security sector, and an average retirement age of 48, which is alarming compared to working places in Denmark.

4. See Pascale, Richard Tanner and Sternin Jerry, Your Company's Secret Change Agents, Harvard Business Review, pp.1-11, May 2005 for a brief description of the approach and cases.

The process of social changes in the Danish Prison and Probation Service

As mentioned the social change process was initiated about two years ago, just after we met Jerry Sternin during management programme at Oxford University. During the course we worked together on the prison case as an example of how to apply the positive deviance methodology in a complex system facing wicked problems. Shortly after, we began to plan the processes in the Danish Prison Service. Unfortunately Jerry got seriously ill and died in December 2008. His friend and colleague Mark T. Munger was very generous and took over and has since then helped us understanding and applying the methodology in the Danish Prison Service. It has been a long journey, and senior management has been impatient and eager to see results. But exactly the slowness of the process is maybe one of the strengths. Or as Jerry puts it: 'You have to go slow to go fast'.

Only recently over the last six months we have seen distinct individual behaviours among, what we call our secret local heroes — that is the front-line staff working daily in several facilities with inmates and clients. It is an emerging journey and we do not claim to have solid hardcore results yet, though some interesting patterns

have been discovered among staff and inmates that others just like them can learn from.

Design of the Positive Deviance Initiative

It is crucial to design the positive deviance processes the right way. We did three things at a general level.

Firstly, we decided to train a team of internal positive deviance facilitators. The facilitators participated in a program that was a mixture of theory and practice. Their role is to facilitate rather than attempt to be experts — the real experts are the people in the facilities, and the people who own and feel the problems. This has been crucial in the progress of our initiative, because internally trained staff have much more street credibility than external consultants.

Secondly, we designed and initiated Living Universities, where facilitators and practitioners could meet and share experience of all kind. We have had five half-day sessions during the process, where reflections, knowledge sharing and burning questions were on the agenda. External practitioners and other interested partners have been invited to participate throughout the process. We named these sessions 'kitchen table' discussions, because you usually have good and useful discussion, while you eat together. Often we asked

**Table 2:
Approaches to Change**

TRADITIONAL APPROACH	POSITIVE DEVIANCE APPROACH
<i>Leadership as a Path Breaker</i> Top Down approach	<i>Leadership as Inquiry</i> Community takes ownership of the quest for change — bottom up
<i>Outside in</i> Expert and best practise driven	<i>Inside out</i> Community identifies pre-existing solutions
<i>Deficit Based</i> Deconstruction of problems and design of best practice solutions. Implication: 'Why aren't you as good as your peers?'	<i>Asset based</i> Community leverage pre-existing solutions practised by those who succeed against odds.
<i>Logic driven</i> Think, then act	<i>Learning driven</i> Act into new thinking
<i>Vulnerable to Transplant Rejection</i> Resistance to imported ideas	<i>Open to Self-replication</i> Latent wisdom is tapped
<i>Flows from Problem Solving to Solution Identification</i> Best practice applied to problems within the context of existing parameters	<i>Flows from Solution Identification to Problem Solving</i> Solution space is expanded through the discovery of new parameters
<i>Focused on Protagonists</i> Engages stakeholders who would be conventionally associated with the problem	<i>Focused on Enlarging the Network</i> Identifies stakeholders beyond those directly involved with the problem

ourselves 'who else should be at the kitchen table' with the result of enlarging the group and enriching the knowledge sharing.

Thirdly, we decided not to manage the initiative in a traditional top-down manner from the central office. It was decided to develop a framework and a set of processes that could facilitate local initiatives instead of coming up with solutions to their problems. This change in mental model has proven very effective, and was a bit frightening, because there was an expectation of the usual management style where the central level finds solutions finds solutions to problems (not that they always work in practice). On the other hands the central level had to give up control, which has been a challenge, especially, when things and processes get tough.

The secret behaviour of the local heroes — three stories

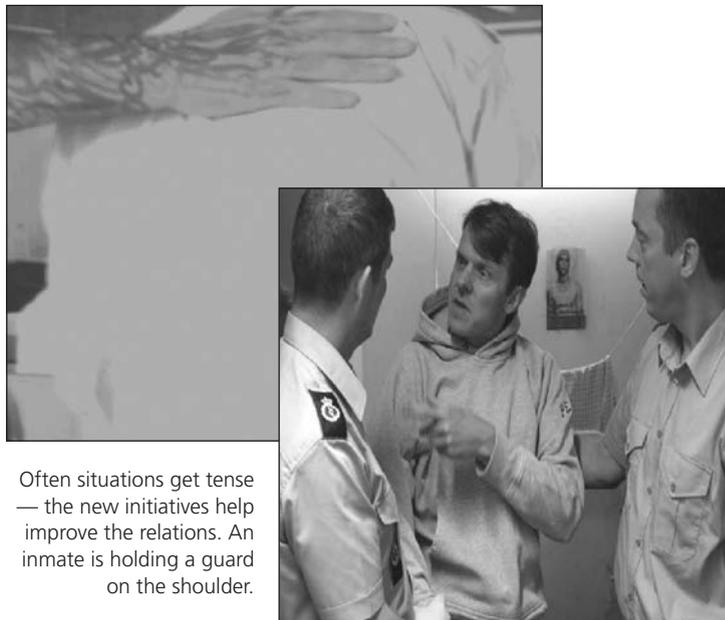
At one maximum security prison facing exactly the wicked challenges mentioned above, we starting a user-driven process where inmates together with guards began discovering the secrets of a meaningful daily routines. Both inmates and staff were bored, but a few inmates and guards were more active during the day than the others. These individuals managed to cope and get by despite the inherent systemic barriers. Together with a group of both other inmates and guards they began applying and developing new behavioural routines and activities during the day that created more energy and life in the prison, for example a 12 week health and nutrition programme including physical training — together. Though this might seem banal and almost simplistic, it was not done before in a wider scale for larger groups of inmates and staff. It has created new energy and meaningfulness for both



The left picture illustrates the life of a prisoner before the initiative, where an ashtray, an empty coffee cup and a play station were a major part of life. The right picture illustrate the life after the initiative was launched, where inmates and staff — together — engage in physical training, health and nutrition counselling, and various sport activities.

inmates and staff. People within our system from other facilities are now beginning to question their practices and want to learn from the initiative.

Another maximum security facility facing high rates of harassment and a harsh tone among staff and in relation to inmates discussed the behaviours of 'softeners' and tighteners' among the guards. They found out that the 'softeners' had distinct



Often situations get tense — the new initiatives help improve the relations. An inmate is holding a guard on the shoulder.

communicative behaviours that were very different from the others. Interestingly enough there is a tendency that the 'softeners' experience fewer incidents with threats and violence. This is social proof that their behaviour is successful in coping with the difficulties of the system logic. Together the staff found out that the 'softeners' are using distinct communication and feedback techniques that help improve the psycho-social environment of the prison. Now the others are learning how to apply the techniques.

A third maximum security prison with the same challenges as mentioned above and additionally a high turnover rate of inmates and a lot of first timers has been working on lowering stress, burn-out and the rate



of absenteeism among guards. They began a process of identifying staff with less than five days of absenteeism over the last two years. The behaviour of these guards turned out to be very interesting. Three distinct behavioural patterns emerged. Firstly the deviants all have some kind of a helper gene. They are warm-hearted people, who want to help others in getting a better life and getting out of criminality. While being at work, though, they are able to manage and control their desire to help in order to keep the right professional distance. In their spare time though, they are very active in the social sphere, involving themselves in sport club, NGO's etc. This helps them survive the system dynamics that might result in stress, burn-out and higher absenteeism. Secondly, another deviant behaviour is that some guards throughout the process admitted that they stopped reading the dossiers of the inmates in order to meet the inmate as an equal human being and without prejudice. This behaviour is closely related to human respect and is named 'kill your curiosity'. Thirdly, the deviants are able to ask for help in stress-full and painful situations, so the problem becomes a working place and common problem instead of only an individual one. This pattern is called 'swallow your pride'.

Reflections and recent learning points

Finally, it is worth reflecting on our observations about the process as a change management and diagnostic tool in the prison environment. These observations are summarised below:

- ❑ It is an emerging process and the Prison Service still has a long way to go, though some interesting evidence is being found. The deviant behavioural patterns are now being analysed and the process of teaching other how to act differently has been started up.
- ❑ Framing and defining the right problem is an art and very difficult. It requires a lot of facilitation skills, active listening, being quiet and asking qualified questions.
- ❑ The process of identifying individuals with distinct positive behavioural patterns that others can learn from is an emerging process that takes a lot of effort and time. The approach should be taken into account, unless other approaches are not applicable.
- ❑ The process creates a lot of energy and frustration among the inmates and staff. It is about acting your way into a new way of thinking, which is new, uncommon and often human beings want to jump to conclusions quickly.
- ❑ Leaders and middle managers need to change their mental models by loosening control and living with the fact that traditional hierarchies are turned upside down. When things get tough they have a tendency to try to roll back in the expert trap and 'fix' instead of letting the change process emerge. The real experts are the local problem owners.
- ❑ Finding the right evidence is a hard nut to crack too. Social proof: 'somebody just like me is doing it, so can I' is hard to identify.
- ❑ How to get people involved and motivated constitute a challenge. Formulating an inspiring invitation that makes people join the process is crucial. It is crucial that the processes are engaging and demand-driven. It should not be driven, only facilitated from the central office.
- ❑ Finding the right data is difficult, though crucial. Skilled facilitation helps, but does not entirely do it. The community needs to demand for data, facilitators can help to organise and structure them, so social proof can be presented and discussed.
- ❑ Managers responsible of other wicked areas are becoming aware of the positive deviance approach. For example it is now being considered using it in one maximum security prison in relation to gang-related crime challenges.
- ❑ A lot of wicked social challenges move across 'silos', both within the prison system and across boundaries to other institutions, private companies and NGO's. It is challenging to engage people outside the smaller community, because for example financial, cultural, managerial inducements are not present and levers change.
- ❑ The process has given us some seeds than are slowly developing and spreading in a sustainable way.