




**EMPOWER**  
**TEACHERS**  
Who Break



It was time for Dr. Smith's daily walkthrough observations. As a principal, he enjoyed this task, especially when he entered Mrs. White's room. There, as always, something magical was occurring. The students were engaged, energized, and excited. The conversations were meaningful, the instruction was individualized, the climate was inviting, and every minute spent in this room was powerful. He only wished that every room looked and felt like this one.

The most effective teachers often are those who dare to deviate from conventional practices.

Frances A. Miller

As a teacher, Mrs. White is a positive deviant because she deviates from what is considered typical teaching, and does so in a positive manner. Positive deviants possess such character traits as innovation, charisma, and altruism. They also possess a natural, innate ability to meet the needs of all students in a spirit of caring, concern, and enthusiasm. Teachers who are positive deviants are our most effective teachers, able to produce results and solutions

# the Mold



**“Teachers who are positive deviants are our most effective teachers.”**

to problems that others in the learning community cannot. As a result, students in their classrooms usually produce assessment scores that are higher than those of students in their colleagues’ classrooms.

Teachers willing to learn from their positive-deviant colleagues receive the benefit of learning from an in-house expert—which is why principals who observe a positive deviant in action wish they could capture their essence to create a magic potion they could sprinkle on every other teacher in the building.

### **Building a Collaborative Culture**

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 presents a set of challenges for educating all children: using data-driven decisions within a standards-based system. These mandates have produced the realization that all teachers must work collaboratively to develop plans and adjust their practices to meet the academic needs of all students. When a school’s staff experiences cohesion, possesses a well-defined purpose, and develops a shared vision of what the school could be like, student achievement is affected in a positive manner.

In a collaborative culture, the leadership that really matters is not provided by the appointed leaders, but by the leadership exercised by individuals within the organization who ask questions, learn, and take risks.

### **Using Positive-Deviant Leadership**

Principals must be willing to share leadership and acknowledge that using

exemplary teachers within their schools offers three advantages over traditional approaches:

*Progress is made quickly without requiring excessive analysis or resources.* Using a source from within offers a homegrown approach that is authentic and cost-effective. The positive-deviant teacher is familiar with existing instructional practices, has already determined how best to challenge the system, and is aware of how to work with the personalities in the school community.

*Those within the community can sustain the resulting benefits.* The positive deviant assumes the role of internal consultant and is always available to answer questions, offer advice, and clarify misconceptions.

*The positive-deviance approach to school improvement can be applied in a broad manner.* Schools tend to rely on traditional approaches to solve problems. The positive-deviance approach involves focusing on the school’s needs and then trying to fulfill those needs by incorporating best practices suggested and demonstrated from successful sources within the school.

### **Leading the Leaders**

Principals realize that redefining the traditional links between their power and the power of teacher leaders means changing beliefs, attitudes, and ways of thinking about roles, accountability, and rewards. As principals develop new planning and assessment skills by empowering teacher leaders, they are aware that such changes can provide

fertile ground for conflict. For teacher empowerment to be effective, the principal needs to make sure the positive-deviant teacher is willing and prepared to accept an informal leadership role, and that he or she must not be resistant to changing the status quo.

In nurturing the relationship among themselves, the positive deviant, and the teaching staff, school administrators need to refine their own leadership qualities so that they foster positive interpersonal relations. Effective principals are willing to accept that leadership must be spread throughout the organization; one of the most powerful drivers of change involves learning from peers, especially those who are further along in implementing new ideas.

### **Avoiding Conflict**

Every principal has witnessed a situation in which an exemplary teacher has shared an instructional strategy, challenged the status quo, or offered an “out of the box” solution to a problem, only to be met with silence from his or her colleagues. Principals are often disappointed or even shocked when teachers treat one another in this manner. This is largely due to the fact that, until recently, teachers were isolated in their daily work. As a result, many teachers have difficulty with interpersonal and group skills essential for working together.

Positive deviants need a good bit of protection to avoid being ostracized by others in the organization. Also, those teachers who produce exem-



plary results are often reluctant to share their knowledge, aware that they might perturb others in the system by presenting different perspectives. Yet, if the differing perspectives are handled properly, and a climate of risk-taking is both nurtured and encouraged, teachers can work together to redesign and innovate.

Principals should realize that positive deviants do not create most conflicts, even though there is an inclination for other teachers and school communities to see them as a threat to the normal way of doing business. As a result, those who are progressive are often pressured to conform and suppress their beliefs due to fear of ostracism by the group. This peer pressure can drive them to act in a manner opposite of what they believe in their hearts.

In order to manage conflict surrounding the use of teacher leaders, the principal should lead the staff in a discussion to create and define a group norm regarding collegiality. Embedded in this norm should be a process that addresses how conflict will be handled when it occurs. This topic is often difficult since each staff member will need to acknowledge his or her personal style in managing conflict. In order for teacher leaders to thrive, a culture where differing opinions are accepted and viewed as opportunities to learn must be viewed and upheld as the norm.

### Principals and the Positive Deviant

So how does a principal capitalize on the talents offered by a positive deviant to lead others toward effectiveness?

*A principal first needs to create, encourage, and model a culture that promotes collegiality.* Schools that have a collegial culture guide students to reach their maximum potential by using a team-based approach. Parameters for how differing opinions are expressed, received, and challenged need to be defined. Principals must support this culture by providing time for such discussions to occur. If the norm of collegiality is established, then all teachers are accustomed to communicating instructional strategies that are useful and effective in raising student

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achievement. The positive deviant then feels comfortable to share without feeling singled out.

**The positive deviant needs to be empowered to serve the school as an informal leader:** The principal accomplishes this by encouraging the positive deviant to take risks instructionally, professionally, and personally. Supporting the positive deviant through professional discourse will give principals insights regarding the craft of teaching, as well as the struggles and successes that are experienced as the positive deviant strives to increase the level of student achievement. Positive deviants should be encouraged to enhance their leadership skills while exploring their options to further use their talents and careers. By offering meaningful leadership opportunities to their best teachers, principals not only send a message to them that their expertise is valued, but the rest of the learning community benefits as well.

**Positive deviants need to be used as job-embedded staff developers.** What would our schools look like if all teachers learned something new about teaching and learning every day? When teacher leaders are encouraged to share instructional strategies, materials, and discourse with others, they are amplifying positive deviance from within the organization. Monthly faculty and data meetings can prove to be fertile ground in which principals can capitalize on the talents of effective teachers. These meetings are where staff can find solutions to the instructional difficulties they face every day. In addition to sharing at staff meetings, most positive deviants will continue discussions while conversing in the hallways, eating in the faculty cafeteria, copying papers at the copy machine, walking through the parking lot, and visiting each others' classrooms. This is where the *real* professional development occurs!

## Creating a Promising Future

When principals decide to use the positive-deviance approach to improve schools, they must focus on defining the school's needs and then try to fulfill those needs by incorporating best practices as suggested from sources inside the school. As this process unfolds, those within the school community often accept the internal solutions provided by the positive deviants' uncommon, yet successful strategies.

As principals invite, encourage, and empower positive deviants to share their strategies, others within the school community are inspired and a culture of learning is established and strengthened. 

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### WEB RESOURCES

This Web site provides descriptions, research, and information related to various current initiatives in which the positive-deviance philosophy is being used to effect change.

[www.positivedeviance.org](http://www.positivedeviance.org)

In this Q&A, Robert Edward Quinn, professor of organizational behavior and human resource management at the University of Michigan, discusses the concept of positive deviants.

[www.nsd.org/news/jsd/quinn224.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/news/jsd/quinn224.cfm)

The California Teachers Association Institute for Teaching highlights initiatives that capitalize on the talents and knowledge of teachers as schools focus on changing and improving while promoting a culture of success.

[www.teacherdrivenchange.org](http://www.teacherdrivenchange.org)





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