

The Positive Deviance Phenomenon of Leading Successful Strategic Change

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Abstract

The focus of this phenomenological study was to explore how the positive deviance phenomenon and strategies manifest through the lived experience of successful Canadian financial services strategic change leaders. The 4 leadership dimensions culminate in the *Leading Successful Strategic Change: The 4 Factor Formula*.

Problem

The **general business problem** was that strategic change program failure undermines the sustainability of competitive organizations. Leading strategic change effectively is a fundamental leadership skill (Drenkard, 2012; Krummaker & Vogel, 2013). The positive deviance approach to change can result in exceptionally successful results (Allio, 2011; Cameron & Plews, 2012).

The **specific business problem** is how the phenomenon and strategies of positive deviance manifest while leading successful strategic change in Canadian financial services organizations.

Purpose

The purpose was to explore how the positive deviance phenomenon and strategies manifest through the lived experience of successful Canadian financial services strategic change leaders.

Business Impact

- **Practical suggestions** for leading successful strategic change support competitive & resilient organizations
- Considering successful change agents as positive deviance models provided **fresh insights** for leading strategic change

Social Impact

- Demonstrated that **community members have the necessary resources to solve serious issues**
- Gave successful strategic change leaders a voice & **opened positive deviance to mainstream organizational research**
- Positive deviance is collaborative & reinforces **benefits of stakeholder engagement**

Relevant Literature

Conceptual Frameworks

- **Positive deviance** refers to behavior and results that are extreme positives on a standard deviation curve (Seidman & McCauley, 2008), and was applied for understanding the atypical results of successful strategic change leaders.
- Leading successful **strategic change** and Lewin's (1945) foundational **change management** concepts were used.

Supporting Information

- Global competition, rising customer expectations, and obsolete legacy systems have increased the **requirement for leaders to implement strategic change** (Guimaraes, 2011).
- Despite focused change-oriented research, strategic and reengineering **change failure occurred in 70% to 90%** of reported cases (Nasim & Sushil, 2011).
- Change programs failures have caused dynamic organizations to lag competitively or falter (Jacobs, van Witteloostuijn, & Christe-Zeyse, 2013).

Research Questions

Central RQ: What strategies do successful Canadian financial services strategic change leaders use for positive deviance?

Support RQ1: To determine patterns in what is currently working well, how might successful strategic change leaders perceive organizational strengths and potential?

Support RQ2: How would successful strategic change leaders describe their unique lived experiences of positive deviance strategies and processes?

Procedures

Design

- Phenomenological inquiry

Purposive Sample

- 22 successful Canadian financial services strategic change leaders, averaged 19 years leading change

Data Collection

- Semistructured telephone interviews of 10 questions

Procedure

- Member-checked transcriptions were loaded to NVivo and tagged with pre-set or emergent codes

Data Analysis

Using **systematic inductive analysis process** (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), the coded data were first organized by concepts, then synthesized into emergent themes, and further distilled into 4 aggregate leadership dimensions.

Findings

Influence Factor

- 1 Organizational Context

Direct Control Factors

- 2 Leaderful Identity
- 3 Deep Skill Set
- 4 Strategic Behaviors

Outcome

- *Leading Successful Strategic Change: The 4 Factor Formula*

Limitations

Potential **researcher bias** was addressed through integrated bracketing, peer review, inclusion of rich data descriptions, and triangulation of several data sources (Finlay, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Conclusions

The *4 Factor Formula* captures the positive deviance patterns, strategies, and processes of strategic change leaders. The findings highlight **how leaders manifest strategic change in complex, polarized environments**.

Positive deviance is a viable construct. Researchers and leaders are encouraged to **seek out the positive deviance change leaders** who have figured out how to solve complex issues.

Social Change Implications

Successful strategic change leaders serve as a **positive deviance role model** for achieving extraordinary results.

Improving the results of strategic change has **broad application for assuring resilient organizations**, industries, communities, and countries. Incorporating the positive deviance approach into University, College, and corporate development course materials could improve the understanding of both **how to lead strategic change successfully** and **how to identify exemplary change leaders**.

Giving strategic change leaders a voice, a means to advocate and an opportunity to articulate how they engineer results have built the **roadmap for others who also aspire to lead positive social change**.

Committee

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Leading Successful Strategic Change: The 4 Factor Formula

