

Singhal: [00:05](#) I believe I am wired, so this is just to check. Can people at the back hear me? All right, can you see me?

Singhal: [00:21](#) So let's begin by asking how many of us have heard what some people call this oxymoronic concept called positive deviance. Raise your hand if ... There are few hands up, which really means I can get away with anything.

Singhal: [00:43](#) Thank you, Jerry. Thank you, the organizers, for having me here on stage. I'd like you to pay a little attention to the visual on the screen, because in some ways it captures the essence of the positive deviance approach. So let's get started.

Singhal: [01:12](#) Anthony, I have a blank screen here.

Singhal: [01:17](#) Let's try it again.

Singhal: [01:24](#) All right, so begin with a blank canvas. The two reasons, one for you and one for me. For you, it is an invitation, if it's possible, it's going to be hard, to see if you can switch your mind to zero. Switch it off. Of course, switch it off meaning, erase what you have in your head right now, so that you can perhaps fill it up with something that we can have a dialogue about. So that's the invitation to you, the beginners mind. The zen philosophers say that beginner's mind, open mind, full of possibilities. Experts' mind, and there are lots of experts here, closed mind, very few possibilities. Usually there's one, and that's the only one. For me, it's an acknowledgment, the blank page is, that I know very little about what you know. So you work in the area of child welfare, you work with child abuse and neglect and it's prevention. I know nothing about that. So we'll tarry, we will go on this journey together. Anthony?

Singhal: [03:06](#) As you can see, the technology is ... Does anybody recognize somebody on the screen? We are in Washington, D.C., yes? Mr. Lincoln, and compliments to you because this was a picture that was taken 150 years ago. It's turned upside down. Its black and white pixels on a faraway screen, but yet some of us know it's Lincoln. That is something which we need to appreciate deeply because we as human beings are wonderful at recognizing patterns, even if they are pixels and dots on a screen. Hopefully, as we continue this journey, the next 25, 30 minutes, you will see some patterns and you can put them together in ways that make sense to you.

Singhal: [04:05](#) The reason why Mr. Lincoln is flipped is because there's a beautiful story that has relevance to the positive deviance

approach, which I'd like you to hear. Does anybody know how tall Abraham Lincoln was? Six? Seven? Six feet, four and a half inches tall, and of course, you put on his stovepipe hat, seven inches, he was a seven footer. There's a story of Lincoln being in a hospital, visiting some soldiers during the Civil War, and a soldier shook hands with the President, suddenly realized that his hand had to be like this. Mr. Lincoln's hand, you can imagine, was like that. So he clicked his heels, he saluted the Commander In Chief, extended his hand and said, "Oh, Mr. President, you're tall. How tall are you?"

- Singhal: [05:06](#) Without batting an eye, Lincoln's answer was, "Son, like you, tall enough that my feet reach the ground." Usually when people ask me, "Singhal, how tall are you?" I cheat a little. I say I'm five, nine and a quarter. I'm actually five, eight and seven eighths, and those of us who are experts really believe in precision and there's nothing wrong with it. It's one way of talking about height. Most of us, if asked the question, I can guarantee you all of us, when asked the question, how tall are you, will respond with a very precise answer and there's one answer and you know what the answer is. But we must pay attention to the mindset, the kind of mindset that Lincoln had, where his natural instinct is to say, "Son, like you, tall enough that my feet reach the ground."
- Singhal: [06:26](#) There's a backstory to why Lincoln talked that way, because he was not formally schooled. He didn't have the kind of degrees that we do. He only had about year and a half, two years, of formal schooling. He was self-schooled, and early in his childhood, he came across a book written by the Greek mathematician Euclid, a book on Euclidean geometry, where the first principle or the first axiom, the first common law, is that, "Things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other." Which means you've got to begin with where everybody is equal. So the invitation to you, if I were to extend it, in addition to having a blank mind, is to begin to think about the value of flipping our notions of expertise.
- Singhal: [07:25](#) Because if you flipped your notion of expertise and began to look at the common ground, you will be at a different place. Yeah, you're with me so far? Yes?
- Speaker 1: [07:36](#) Yeah.
- Singhal: [07:37](#) All right. Let's put Mr. Lincoln back in his place. He's six, four and a half. Uh-oh.

Singhal: [07:44](#) So I'm inviting you to look with a flipped mindset. My contention to you is that to solve complex problems, of the kind that you do so well and want to do better, we need flipped mindsets. Flipped mindsets. How many of us can do a cartwheel? Anybody wants to come on stage and try? Physically, it's very hard for us to flip our physical bodies. Although, mental somersaults? Possible. We do have this unique capability of making mental somersaults. So the task of flipping mindsets is possible.

Singhal: [08:46](#) So solving problems of the kind that you deal with, the kind that you address, and address so well, with a flipped mindset is the positive deviance way. Yeah, you with me so far? Okay. I have to apologize, as an academic, to not bring you 40 slides, with eight headings and several bullet points. I'm instead going to tell you three stories, and my deep apologies for not being very true to my profession, but stories hold patterns and patterns are what we can connect with. That's the intention, that perhaps through these three stories, you will understand the nuances, the subtleties of the positive deviance approach, an approach of flipped mindsets. Okay. You ready for the first story? Anthony, you ready?

Singhal: [09:52](#) He is.

Singhal: [09:55](#) The first story is a Sufi story. Any of us here have heard about Hodja Nasreddin or Mulla Nasreddin?

Singhal: [10:08](#) This one I can get away with really anything. So Hodja Nasreddin is a teacher who lived in what is now Turkey about 1300 years ago, and he's become a sort of a mythical figure. He was a wise man. Hodja means a learned man. Mulla as well, and I want to tell you a story about him because it's the quintessential positive deviant story. Yeah? Ready? So the story begins with Hodja Nasreddin going on top of Mount Everest, or whatever the highest mountain here is in this area, and with a megaphone, and saying, I am a smuggler. Catch me if you can. Of course, the challenge is issued to all ...

PART 1 OF 3 ENDS [00:11:04]

Singhal: [11:00](#) Of course, the challenge is issued to all customs agents. I am a smuggler. Catch me if you can. So the next morning, Nasreddin, riding a donkey, you can see him riding a donkey, with stuff loaded, with a few other donkeys behind with even more stuff loaded, comes to the border checkpoint, and there's a customs official, an expert, who says, "Nasreddin, what do you have?" Nasreddin says, "Look." So the customs official looks, and he

knows how to look. So, he looks here, and there, and over, and under, and he finds nothing of interest. So, what does he do? Well, what can he do? He's got to let Nasreddin go. Of course, Nasreddin, the next day he's back. He's riding a donkey, more stuff loaded with other donkeys behind, even more stuff loaded, and today the customs officials, "I'm going to nail you, Nasreddin. What do you have?"

- Singhal: [12:04](#) Nasreddin says, "Look." The customs official this time really looks. Looks here, and there, and over, and under, and looks behind the donkey's ears, and under the hooves, and finds nothing of interest. So, what does he do? Well, what can he do? He's got to let Nasreddin go. Of course, Nasreddin, the next day, he is back and you can imagine, he's riding a donkey with stuff loaded and more donkeys behind with even more stuff loaded, and the customs official, "Today I'm going to nail you, Nasreddin! What do you have?" Nasreddin says, "Look." This time the customs official really looks. He pulls out his manual from the Harvard School of Customs Checking, his expertise, and he looks here, and there, and over, and under, and behind the ears, and under the hooves, and puts on his x-ray glasses, and administers the sniffing test, and he finds nothing off interest. So, what does he do? What can he do? He's got to let Nasreddin go, and this happens day after day, week after ...
- Audience: [13:32](#) Week.
- Singhal: [13:32](#) Month after ...
- Audience: [13:33](#) Month.
- Singhal: [13:34](#) Year after ...
- Audience: [13:35](#) Year.
- Singhal: [13:38](#) Decade after ...
- Audience: [13:38](#) Decade.
- Singhal: [13:41](#) And the customs official is unable to find what Nasreddin was smuggling. So, the customs official one day, at age 65, retires from customs checking, and the day he announces his retirement, right behind him is Nasreddin with the megaphone. He says, "In that case, today I retire from smuggling." They happen to meet here in the Woodley Park area of Washington at Starbucks, and Nasreddin walks up to the customs agent, and the custom agent says, "Nasreddin, now that I'm an old man,

now that I am not part of the Feds, now that I'm in no official capacity to do anything to you, please, Nasreddin, please, can you tell me what is it that you were smuggling?"

Singhal: [14:32](#)

"Donkeys." says Nasreddin.

Singhal: [14:45](#)

So the question to ask of experts, or a general question to ask, is why was the customs official, or even many of you here, unable to see the donkeys? The answer to the problem that he was trying to solve was right there in front of his eyes, day after day. Not just one donkey, many donkeys, and I said donkey so many times. Customs official was unable, and this is a phenomenon that is rampant. Some people call it trained incapacity. You are incapacitated by your own training. Some people call it bounded rationality. Your rationality is bounded by what you know. Some people call it occupational psychosis. Too often, the answer that we are looking for to solve a problem is right there. That's the first principle of positive deviance. We just do not have the eyes to see it and what gets in the way is us. But if you flipped your mindset, there's a possibility for you to see the donkeys and how to see the donkey's story two and three will help you, but what lessons do we get from the Nasreddin story about the premise of the positive deviance approach?

Singhal: [16:20](#)

The premise is solutions to complex problems exist. Complex problems like child abuse, child neglect, child welfare. They stare us in the face. The solutions stare us in the face. We do not see them. We are actually incapable of seeing them. We don't even know where to look, and old problem-solving mindsets get in the way.

Singhal: [16:55](#)

Okay? Story number two. You're with me? You got the first story? Solutions are there, expertise gets in the way? All right? Okay. Anybody recognize anybody here? Yes? You recognize?

Audience: [17:12](#)

Jerry.

Singhal: [17:13](#)

Yes. Anybody in the picture you recognize?

Audience: [17:16](#)

Oh, Mother Teresa.

Singhal: [17:19](#)

Mother Teresa. Well, there are so many other people, let's see if you can see this person smoking some marijuana right there. What is it about us that we see Mother Teresa and we miss everything else? Of course, there is Mother Teresa so we should talk about Mother Teresa. Here is another Washington story

and this is a quest to see where the donkeys are. Right? So the question is how do you see the donkeys?

- Singhal: [17:54](#) So in 1974, Mother Teresa arrived in Washington, D. C., Dulles Airport arrivals hall, hoping to be greeted by two sisters from the Missionaries of Charity. When she arrived in the arrival hall, they were about 800 people with placards and images of her, swaying and like, Oh Mother, we are so happy you're here. Somehow, they found out. In Washington, information leaks, I believe. This was important information and people ... A representative walked up to Mother Theresa and says, "Mother, we are so happy you're here. Tomorrow we are having a march in Washington. We hope you will march with us." Mother says, "My child, what is the march about?" The representative says, "Tomorrow we are having a march in Washington against the Vietnam War and we'd like for you to march with us." And there's silence.
- Singhal: [18:49](#) So he says, "So you will march with us, right?" Mother says, "Oh, I'm so sorry, my child. If you're going to have a march on Washington against the Vietnam War, I'm so sorry." Somebody from behind, like, "Why won't she march with us? There are 800 of us here and it's going to be half a million people or whatever. We're going to be marching. We want her to march with us. So Mother, why wouldn't you march with us?" She says, "My child, if you are going to have a march in Washington against the Vietnam War, I am so sorry, but my child, if you were to choose to have a march in Washington for peace, I will be the first to lead."
- Singhal: [19:35](#) So being against the war and being for peace, one and the same thing in Mother Teresa's mindsets or a little different?
- Singhal: [19:44](#) Different.
- Singhal: [19:46](#) Too often as problem solvers, we are almost always against things. Why? Because you are trying to solve a problem, which means you are up against something. The very definition of a problem is I am against child neglect. I'm against child abuse, I'm against sexual discrimination. I am against racial discrimination. I am against teenage pregnancy. That's okay. There's nothing wrong with it. It's one mindset. What Mother Theresa is telling us is, because of being against, too often we begin to look at the deficits. What's not working, what are the gaps? Whereas she is also saying through this story that what if we defined our work with respect to what are we for? Strong and thriving families, child wellbeing.

Singhal: [20:54](#) Because if you focus on what you are for, you will be at a different place, and by corollary, if you are again something, you're looking at the gaps and the deficits. If you are for something, you begin to look at what are the assets? What are the strengths? What's working? You with me? So one way of trying to solve a complex problem with a flipped mindset is to ask what's working? What are you for?

Singhal: [21:28](#) You ready for story number three? Anybody you recognize? Yes. Mahatma Gandhi. We know that Mahatma means "great soul," it wasn't his first name. I don't know if you can see, but he's traveling a certain class of service, and what class of service that? Is he traveling first class? Not even second class. He's traveling third class. So, here's the father of the Indian nation. They called him [inaudible 00:22:04]

PART 2 OF 3 ENDS [00:22:04]

Singhal: [22:00](#)third Class. So, here's the father of the Indian nation. He called him Rush Jupiter who traveled third class. And you can imagine people of my parents and my grandparents generation. I'm the first generation of Indians to have been born in a free in there. Parents and grandparents would say, "Bapu father, why do you travel third class? You know, we as a country can do better." We know when the president takes his plane, it's Air Force One. When the chopper rises it's Marine One. Yeah, first lady, one one one first. Here's the father of the Indian nation traveling third class. So, people have said Bapu father, "why do you travel third class?" And his response always was the same. "I traveled third class because as you know, there is no fourth class." Now when I was flying from El Paso to Washington DC, I must confess, you know when you go through the line and you have electronic boarding pass and sometimes you got to, you know, put it under one of those shining lights and hope that everything would work okay. And it beeps and it's like, okay, I'm sorry what happened? And she said, "Oh sir, nothing to be sorry about. You've been upgraded."

Audience: [23:30](#) That's perfect.

Singhal: [23:30](#) And you know how it feels, especially if you're traveling with colleagues.

Audience: [23:38](#) [inaudible]

Singhal: [23:39](#) your whole demeanor changes.

Audience: [23:41](#) Yeah,

Singhal: [23:42](#) there's like, "Me? Moi?"

Audience: [23:47](#) [inaudible]

Singhal: [23:47](#) and you know, if you go from seat 33F to 1A.

Audience: [23:48](#) okay.

Singhal: [23:51](#) And even before you sit down, you're asked, "what is it that you'd like to drink, sir?" And you throw in a vodka martini, shaken, not stirred. And of course, you got to Instagram at right?

Singhal: [24:09](#) Because have you really traveled first class, if there's nobody who knows you've traveled first class. That's the way we work. That is our mindset. Nothing wrong with it. There's nothing wrong in saying you are five-nine, there's nothing wrong in saying I'm against this. What we are saying is if you look at the common ground, if you look at what you are for and if instead of our natural instincts of upward mobility or best practices, we are so obsessed with [inaudible 00:24:46] best practices. What Babu, what Gandhi is saying is if you can look at what's working, so you're combining Mother Teresa and Gandhi. If you can look for what's working for the fourth class, the one who face the highest odds, you will know where to look for donkeys. Okay?

Singhal: [25:07](#) So keep these three stories in mind. I'm going to give you an example very quickly, in 1990 Vietnam 65% of the kids were severely malnourished and for the first time they asked a question to apply the positive deviance approach and you will see Mother Teresa in this question and you'll see Gandhi in this question and you will see Lincoln in this question.

Singhal: [25:32](#) The question was simply, are there children under the age of five from the poorest of the poor households, the fourth class who were well nourished?

Audience: [25:43](#) Okay,

Singhal: [25:46](#) The data driven exercise, they started working for communities. They found a handful of kids, 24 kids out of 3000 in these four communities, that's less than 1% and for those of us who do quantitative work, we know about p less than equal to point or one being the happiest state. You're looking at positive outliers. Those who have solved the problem against all odds. And if

they've solved the problem against all odds, you know the answer to solve the problem are there in the community.

Singhal: [26:21](#)

They are there.

Singhal: [26:23](#)

And those answers have been there for a long time. So, what did we find? These were the questions are there well-nourished children among the poorest of the poor? And if so, what uncommon practices were there? And the answer of the uncommon practices was there were some mothers who are adding the shoots, the greens of sweet potato plants. What do we do with the greens? How many of us have even seen greens of sweet potato plants? We throw them or use them as fodder or as animal. No. And this or compost. Some mothers were taking the greens and adding them to the fold. Some mothers were bending down in their rice fields and picking up these tiny, teeny tiny shrimps and crabs and shellfish, which was considered duck food and chicken food would come back home, peel and add that. So, the answer to solve the problem was right there.

Singhal: [27:25](#)

And a few other things. And then all this was you can say amplified in Vietnam over a period of eight years, and this program then spread to over 20 countries. In Vietnam, 2.2 million people, including half a million children, improve their nutritional standards. That's the positive deviance approach. Ask what's working for those for whom it shouldn't be working.

Singhal: [27:54](#)

Want to give you another quick example. You know this. Ah, okay. This is important. I just keep this slide for 10 seconds from the Vietnam case. You can look at, you know, what implications it may have for the kind of questions you can ask. Are the case workers who reunify families despite heavy odds, what enables them? Are there families that are least likely to get their children back? But they do. What enables them?

Singhal: [28:28](#)

And I'll end with this. There was a piece of work that we did in Danish prisons, me and several colleagues from Denmark, and we looked at prison guards who were absent a lot, who had very high turnover, who retired early, had a lot of violent acts committed against them. So, the question that was asked was, are there guards in maximum security prisons, those who face the highest odds, who were psychologically resilient? Who were rarely absent and who had very few violent acts committed against them? And again, there were a handful, eight out of 400 guards in a maximum security prison. And then you asked the question, what enabled them? What were the uncommon things that they did? And you figure out that, well, one of the

guards had made a pact with himself. One of the guards said made a pact with himself that he would not read the dossier of those who came in. And you can imagine what that did. No, if you don't know who's here then, well maybe you don't judge. And if you don't judge, then perhaps how they respond to you is different. One of the guards had the habit of giving the prisoners a tour as opposed to taking them and locking them in their cell. You would say, well, you know, here's your gymnasium. You like to play soccer. You know, I was a goalie. You can, you know, hit some shots and I'll try to, um-hm.

Singhal:

[30:07](#)

One of the guards jingle their keys as they walked up to the prisoners bar. If the prisoner had asked to go to the restroom, knowing that, you know, I'm coming for you right away as opposed to waiting for a long time, which was normative practice and the, you know, these ideas were observed and then they were amplified and within six months violent acts were down by 40%. A lots of implications for child welfare case workers.

Singhal:

[30:45](#)

You may also, and I leave the slide presentation here, you may ask, where are the other donkeys? Are there parents who struggle with substance abuse? Are there parents who have a diagnosis of a mental illness? Are there communities that against heavy odds are able to keep their kids safe? So, my assertion is that there are hundreds of positive deviance, parents, families, child protection specialists, social workers, law enforcement. And many of you here in this room hidden from plain view. The answers are here. Steven Spielberg once said that the camera denies the existence of what it does not see, which also means that the camera accentuates and animates what it chooses to see, which means our mindsets, the lenses we use are absolutely critical in terms of how we view the world. Thank you very much.

PART 3 OF 3 ENDS [00:31:49]