

Bright spots

“You are simply asking yourself. What’s working and how can we do more of it? That’s the bright spot philosophy in a single question.” (Heath & Heath, 2010: 41)

The big idea

The concept behind bright spots is that often big problems are most easily solved by a series of small solutions; there is seldom one big solution. The approach is based on the work that Jerry Sternin, of Save the Children, did in Vietnam to improve infant nutrition. He found that there were a number of mothers who, within very constrained resources, were bringing up well-nourished children. He was able to help these mothers, these ‘bright spots’, to share their successes with others, and in doing so reduced malnutrition by 85% in the area. This bright spots approach was introduced to organisational practices in the form of ‘positive deviance’ in *Surfing the Edge of Chaos* (Pascale, Milleman, & Gioja, 2000).

Purpose

The purpose of identifying bright spots is to find what has been going right and amplify those successful practices. All too often we focus on the things that have gone wrong rather than learning from what has worked well.

The tool

Take the following steps to work with your bright spots:

1. Find the right people to work on the problem. This can be a cross-section of your team and stakeholders or a willing group of peers if you are a sole trader or small organisation. There is no typical team for a bright spots inquiry but it should include the people who want the change as well as those who can help make it happen
2. Define the problem and your desired outcomes
3. Find out if there are any bright spots. Determine the measures you will use as a group and collect the data. Ideally the data you use will show positive results across a number of areas – processes, people etc

4. Find out what the bright spots do that actually makes a difference. This doesn't have to be about individuals, it is about what they do. This is effectively the discovery phase and is the opportunity to develop new ideas
5. Design ways to share the bright spot practices. This needs to be a very practical method of copying them. Try and make sure you also build in an approach to feedback that allows you to get instant feedback
6. Monitor the results

Take the next step

Think about something you have done recently that got really good results. Think of another time when something did not go so well. What was the difference between the two? What is it like to remember the time that went well? Which one did you focus on more after it had happened?

Top tips

- Address the 'what's-in-it-for-me' question with those whose behaviour needs to change
- Make the problem as concrete as possible
- Let the team create the solution themselves, they are more likely to implement it on that basis
- Make use of the data and feedback mechanisms. There are examples of bright spot projects where people did not believe the data initially; it was only when further measurement was done that they accepted the results

References

- Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2010). *How to Change Things When Change is Hard*. London: Random House Business Books.
- Pascale, R., T, Milleman, M., & Gioja, L. (2000). *Surfing the Edge of Chaos: The Laws of Nature and the New Laws of Business* London: Texere Publishing.