“Ask questions that help the community identify and solve their own challenges”: Lars Thuesen of the Welfare Improvement Network on Positive Deviance and co-creating solutions with those most impacted.

Lissa Harris
September 18, 2024

Lissa Harris: Can you introduce yourself, your organization, and discuss the problem you're addressing?

Lars Thuesen: My name is Lars Thuesen, and I'm the founder of the Welfare Improvement Network (WIN). I’ve been a civil servant for many years, working in both the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Justice in Denmark. Currently, I hold a role in local government as the head of several departments, while also managing my own company, working on various projects. These projects mostly involve NGOs [non governmental organizations], United Nations [UN] organizations, and bilateral government development donors, depending on the specific project.

I’ve been working on complex social issues, often called 'wicked problems,' and facilitating solutions by bringing together people in communities. I collaborate with different people from my network depending on the project. Sometimes we might have 12 people working on one

project, while other times it could just be two—it all depends on the scope. One of the main methods we use is the positive deviance approach, an anthropological and ethnographic approach where you work closely with communities that face the problems. Instead of coming in as an expert, you act as a facilitator. Ask questions that help the community identify and solve their own challenges. It's an asset-based approach, meaning that solutions already exist within the community—someone is already practicing something that works.

This methodology has been applied in many different contexts and was first used to address child malnutrition and later expanded to healthcare, including MRSA and hospital-acquired infections in the U.S. It has been widely applied in the NGO sector and the public sector, including work with UN organizations around the world. In recent years, I've worked in places like Eastern Europe—North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Moldova—and also Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Palestine, Morocco, and Fiji.

Another methodology we use is the Adaptive Leadership model, developed at Harvard Kennedy School by Ron Heifetz. This approach focuses on leaders learning to let go of control and allow things to happen naturally, which can be challenging for some, including myself. The third methodology is design thinking and service design, where prototyping helps make ideas visible and concrete, making implementation much easier. We've been combining these three approaches in our work.

We've been very engaged in gender equality issues, including violence against women and girls in many countries, particularly with UN Women, UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund], and UNDP [United Nations Development Programme]. In Palestine, we worked with different UN organizations and NGOs that help implement some of the work that the UN is facilitating, addressing issues relating to violence and gender equality. One of our key focuses is reducing and eliminating child and teenage marriages, which are often related to various forms of violence, including sexual violence, social control, and economic violence.

The Positive Deviance methodology helps communities define problems, look for solutions already practiced by some members, and design what we call a dissemination and learning process. For example, we knew that the numbers of teenage and child marriages were quite high, especially in Gaza's village areas. So, the NGO, supported by us, went out to understand the local norms—what most people do and how they act. Many girls and boys get married, and some girls marry men who are much older. There are also cousin marriages, which can carry health risks. We aimed to use early marriage as a proxy to see if we could eliminate or reduce different forms of violence. We discovered that some mukhtars—clan leaders—have a tradition

of stamping marriage certificates. We asked, "Are there any mukhtars who do not stamp for teenage marriages?" The answer was yes. We then explored who these mukhtars are and what they do differently, asking questions to understand their specific behaviors.

Another example involves imams, religious Muslim leaders, who discussed during Friday prayers the reasons for not marrying early. They also communicated with other mukhtars and imams, advising against early marriage due to its negative impacts on teenagers' health and the associated risk of violence. This work ties into the mission statement of UN Women and UNICEF, which is to eliminate violence against women and girls. We used the issue of child and teenage marriage as an entry point to engage with community members.

Lissa Harris: It really shows the method of looking for where the solutions already exist in the community and trying to bring them forward and make them more widespread.

Lars Thuesen: Yes. What differs from traditional methodologies in implementation is identifying what we call positive deviance. It's a somewhat contradictory concept because, especially in Arab Muslim communities, positive deviance can be associated with being sexually deviant. We prefer to use the term champions instead, which works well. Finding these champions is one step, but we also need to agree with the community. It's not us as facilitators or consultants who decide who the champions are; they nominate themselves.

The next question is how we can get other imams and mukhtars to learn from their behavior. Instead of presenting a training or implementation plan, we provide tools. For instance, there's a tool called a community scorecard, which offers a structure for community members—like the mukhtars and imams—to design different metrics. This enables them to track how things evolve. They also decided to meet regularly to communicate and engage with people in various ways.

Lissa Harris: Could you discuss your main audience. Who are you primarily communicating with, and how do you establish connections with them?

Lars Thuesen: Our primary audience is the UN country offices. While there are various regional hubs around the world, my experience has mostly been with country offices, as they implement projects directly in the communities. Our collaboration began in 2016 when I was invited to a conference in Istanbul attended by many UNDP and UN Women representatives. Shortly after, I was involved in our first project with the UN in Moldova. We also work with bilateral donors, serving as financial sponsors. These donors could include Sida in Sweden, USAID [United States

Agency for International Development], the Italian Cooperation Office, or the Japanese government, among others. They typically provide funding for projects implemented by the UN.

Additionally, I occasionally work with local governments. Next week, I'll be in the UK collaborating with community leaders in Yorkshire, funded by the local government. It's essential to engage with those who own the problems directly. It's not sufficient to converse solely with a UN organization or local NGO; we must meet the individuals experiencing violence or addressing other issues.

Lissa Harris: I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what makes your approach distinct from others working in a similar sphere?

Lars Thuesen: I think the combination of looking for things that already work well, where there's already somebody doing it, and a very strong community-oriented way of working is what makes us distinct. I know other approaches say that too—that it's "nothing about me without me"—but we mean that from the beginning of the process. Once we start working, we go directly to the communities and start there. So, this combination of looking for solutions that are already being practiced and a strong community-oriented approach.

Lissa Harris: I wanted to ask about an example that really shows the impact of your work. Could you talk specifically about what led to that success?

Lars Thuesen: At the time in Denmark, we were facing high levels of staff absenteeism among guards, along with many incidents of violence and threats—both towards staff and among inmates. We had been trying to solve these issues for years without success. While pursuing a master's degree at Oxford University in the UK, I became familiar with Positive Deviance. When I returned, I thought, "This might be something we should try. We don't know if it will work, but let's give it a shot." We reached out to seven maximum-security prisons and began working with five, looking for solutions that were already working well. The methodology was consistent: we involved the guards, social workers, middle managers, and, importantly, the inmates and former inmates in the dialogue to define the problems and identify existing solutions. We also included them in designing the implementation process, which we call learning and dissemination.

One example we call "the key." When an inmate wants to leave his cell, he has to press a button that rings a bell in the guard's room. The guard then needs to come and open the door with a key, which can take time and disrupt their work. This often leads to potential conflicts between the inmate and the guard once the door opens. However, we found some female guards who

approached this differently. They thought, “The bell is ringing; he cannot get out. It might be something important, so I better get up.” They would go to the door and might even make a small sound with the key so the inmate could hear they were on their way. Once they stood in front of the door, they would take a deep breath, preparing themselves because they never knew what was on the other side. Then, they would knock and say, “Okay, what is it about? What would you like to talk about?”

When we talked to the inmates about this behavior, they noted that it felt humane and that the guards respected their privacy since it was their living space. They felt comfortable discussing difficult topics, including being denied leave due to a positive drug test. This created a relationship of trust, which we refer to as “professional nearness” rather than distance. Looking at the numbers, which you can find in the case study on the website, we saw a reduction in staff absenteeism and incidents of violence—both against guards and between inmates. Stress and burnout among staff decreased, and the conditions for rehabilitation improved.

Lissa Harris: On the other side, sometimes you learn as much from things that don't work as from things that do. Is there an example of something you tried that really didn't work out but that you learned something important from?

Lars Thuesen: I'm using the prison example again. In one of the departments, we found that there were behaviors that were not appropriate. We discovered differences in how the guards treated the inmates. Some inmates could get a cigarette, while others could not. This raised a question of equality, which we found unacceptable, so we did not follow that behavior.

In one of the departments, we found a very nice tradition—though you might not imagine this in the U.S.—of inviting relatives to eat together with the inmates around Christmas, Easter, and other occasions, including Eid, the Muslim feast. This worked really well, as girlfriends and wives would bring their kids, and they had a good time together, even sitting down with the guards. They prepared food together and drew things, among other activities. We thought, “Oh, that’s excellent! Can others learn from that?” Then, a month or two later, we discovered a wife came in wearing a hijab, and then she exchanged something with her husband. He then walked out the door and left the prison. We had to stop that practice and not spread it to other places.

Lissa Harris: It's not that you have one problem; it's more like you have one method, right? And you apply it in different circumstances.

Lars Thuesen: Recently, we have worked on youth inclusion. In many Western countries, there are a lot of young people diagnosed with some kind of mental illness. Many young people drop out of what we call "youth education," which is basically high school or something similar. If they don't complete that, the likelihood or risk of not getting a job and being able to generate their own income is very high. We have had a few projects primarily in Norway, but also a little bit in Denmark, with different local governments where we focused on identifying the right issues because terms like "school dropout" or "not getting a job" can be very abstract for adolescents or young adults.

We worked on problem definition, which is about picking the right problem that is appealing to the community. Then, again, we flipped it. These are usually very tough problems that good people have tried to solve, but without much success. If you know how to do things and have a solution, then don't use positive deviance because it requires time and can be messy. This approach can be used in many different problem areas as long as they are behavioral issues.

Lissa Harris: With that in mind, what are the big barriers to your work? What are the main challenges you face in rolling out this approach, setting aside funding since that's just the common denominator for everyone?

Lars Thuesen: Related to funding, many UN projects and projects initiated with bilateral donors are limited in duration; they have a beginning and an end. If a project is too short— for example, a six-month project— it is unlikely to be successful. It takes time to identify the problems, look for effective solutions, and disseminate and scale them. I've had projects that were very short, as well as projects that lasted for three years.

Then I would say that standard operating procedures can also be a barrier. Some institutions, like the UN, have very rigid procedures for how to operate. They have theories of change that do not correspond well with this way of working, which is driven by different ways of thinking. Getting a UN program officer out in the field to work with us and the NGOs in the communities can sometimes be difficult. Usually, their role is to initiate a project, then hire an implementer (an NGO), and subsequently receive reports about how it's being done. I think we've succeeded in this regard, and it was a lot of fun for them as well to engage more directly with what they call the beneficiaries. Sometimes there's too much administrative work and reporting that is just boring and unnecessary.

Lissa Harris: Do you see shifting cultural norms as part of the work that you do? If so, can you talk about a specific example or strategy that has been effective in shifting cultural norms related to a particular problem?

Lars Thuesen: In one of the projects, we trained and provided tools for 30 faith leaders—Christian church leaders in Fiji, where there is a significant amount of violence against women and sexual abuse. We started our work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, we could only conduct training online. However, we eventually had the opportunity to work with them for about seven days, gathering 30 to 35 people in a room. During this time, we trained them in the positive deviance methodology, sharing many examples of positive deviance behavior and problem definitions. We also focused on their roles as change agents. This is where the cultural aspect you mentioned comes into play. Many of them expressed feeling better equipped by the end of the training to engage with their communities as facilitators. The role of facilitation shifted from our team of four to them, and we continued to coach them online afterward. Helping people become change agents or change leaders is a way to facilitate cultural change.

Lissa Harris: Do people adopt different behaviors and then it changes their mindset about things?

Lars Thuesen: Back to Gaza—one project involved engaging men and boys in gender equality. We later visited a family where the husband shared household chores—uncommon in Gaza. He realized how much work it takes and started helping his wife. He expressed that he now respects his wife much more than before. This shows how changing behaviors can shift cultural norms.

Lissa Harris: You mentioned your main entry point is the UN regional offices, but you also collaborate with local groups. Can you discuss your strategies for cultivating and maintaining these partnerships?

Lars Thuesen: About once a year, we have a module on positive deviance. I incorporate case studies from my work into this executive master's program, which I attended years ago, and invite partners to join. We've featured cases from Palestine, prisons, and Roma kids in Romania, where girls marry at just 12 or 13—it's shocking. I've co-trained with UN and Red Cross personnel to honor their fantastic work, making it less about me and more about highlighting their contributions. We typically create narratives about situations, like in Gaza, discussing norms such as early marriage, then roleplay with personas like a mukhtar or an imam. This helps

participants define problems and explore solutions. Even without ongoing projects, I stay connected with people. For instance, a colleague from Fiji recently moved to Istanbul. We had a call and have become friends. We're planning a webinar this winter with 18 countries in Eurasia on positive deviance.

We've also held several conferences over the years. In 2016, we hosted 120 people from 20 countries in Copenhagen, bringing together PD enthusiasts and champions to share and celebrate. During COVID, we marked our 13th anniversary online since we couldn't meet in person. It's about keeping this movement alive.

Lissa Harris: What are the main lessons from your work that others can learn? What advice would you give to someone looking to apply the positive deviance approach?

Lars Thuesen: There's something about leadership because leaders can spoil everything, but they can also support the process. Many leaders have an appetite for control and micromanagement, which doesn't work here. It's essential to be curious and open and to give things time to work because it doesn't come easily. I noted a few points of advice in one of the case studies. Communities are often good at identifying positive deviance, without creating a comprehensive plan for training, dissemination, and scaling. Trusting the process is crucial, as traditional organizations tend to have a lot of hierarchy and demand immediate results. Patience is often difficult, especially when sponsors want to see results right away. If these problems were easy, they would have been solved already.

Lissa Harris: Lissa Harris: What does it take for communities and individuals to care about and own the problems you're addressing? And on a more macro level, what influences UN offices or NGOs to adopt this strategy?

Lars Thuesen: When addressing communities and the behavioral changes we want to see, it's crucial to approach them with an open mind rather than a pre-defined problem. For example, when we worked with girls and boys in the Roma communities in Romania, we discussed the 60% school dropout rate—a very abstract problem defined from the top. Instead, we focused on specific issues like regular school attendance and completing homework, which resonated more with them. They noticed many classmates weren't attending school or doing their homework, and most kids actually enjoy coming to school. By shifting the problem definition from a top-down perspective to one that was relevant to them, we engaged them in a way that mattered. Interestingly, if we address daily attendance and homework, we'll likely see a reduction in dropouts over time.

I've been fortunate to work with leaders and program managers in the UN and bilateral government donor organizations who have encountered many ineffective approaches but haven't lost hope. They've shown the curiosity and courage to try something new. In our work in Moldova, we were supported by the Japanese government and Sida, the Swedish government, both of which have been innovative in their approach. They didn't adhere strictly to the typical project cycle of six months or one year with immediate progress demands. This openness to new ways of working is essential for making real progress.

Lissa Harris: That is wonderful. Thank you for talking with me today.

Lissa Harris is a freelance reporter, science writer (MIT '08), and former local news entrepreneur based in upstate New York. She is currently working as a consultant on capacity-building and local solutions-oriented community projects in the rural Catskills.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*