



The Most Significant Change (MSC) approach to program monitoring and evaluation involves a process where stories from our program participants are collected and analyzed in a particular way. By its nature, it's a collective and inclusive approach as stakeholders are involved in every part of the process. Following the steps of MSC can help to generate broader ownership of the research and evaluation process across the organization and its stakeholders. This method is best suited for organizations that have a genuine interest in learning from their evaluation in a way that goes beyond demonstrating accountability to donors and funders. Below are some aspects of MSC to consider before deciding to use this approach to gathering stories during an evaluation.

Advice for CHOOSING this approach (tips and traps)

- MSC is particularly useful in helping different stakeholders understand the diverse values that other stakeholders have in terms of "what success looks like".
- MSC works best in combination with other options for gathering, analyzing and reporting data. It doesn't provide comprehensive information about the impacts produced by an intervention.
- MSC does not use pre-defined indicators – it leaves it up to stakeholders to determine the best indicators of success.

Advice for USING this approach (tips and traps)

- Ensure the stories are not hijacked for other purposes such as for promotional material. Data can only be used for the original stated purpose, which in this case is evaluation unless other uses have been negotiated and agreed to at the time.
- MSC isn't a quick option. It takes time and an appropriate project infrastructure to generate understanding and value clarification (identifying what people think is important). The full MSC process involves programs with several structures in it (local and regional, for example), and repeated cycles of analysis with participation of contributors and stakeholders.
- There is scope to be innovative in this option. A project that doesn't have a hierarchical structure can look at other ways of forming groups around which the stories can be discussed and the values identified.
- It can be challenging to get engagement of the different groups involved in the process and to maintain their interest. Don't have too many cycles of review.
- Other skills necessary: Good facilitation skills are important along with the ability/processes to identify priorities.

Source: http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/most_significant_change





Ten Steps in MSC

1. Start and raise interest
2. Defining the domains of change
3. Defining the reporting period
4. Collecting stories
5. Selecting the most significant of the stories
6. Feeding back the results of the selection process
7. Verification of stories
8. Quantification
9. Secondary analysis and meta-monitoring
10. Revising the system

From: Davies and Dart (2005)

Step 1: Start and Raise Interest

- The first step involves introducing a range of stakeholders to MSC and fostering interest in and commitment to participating. When selecting stakeholders for this process, it's important that they represent a diverse range of backgrounds and values. Holding a meeting to explain the technique and show some MSC reports and stories gathered would be a good place to start. From this initial meeting, identify those who are most enthusiastic and willing to help. Gathering champions early is important, as MSC involves the participation of many different people over an extended period of time.

Step 2: Defining Domains of Change

- One of the first tasks of an MSC team is to help identify the domains of change to be monitored. Possible domains include: 'changes in people's lives' 'changes in knowledge or awareness', 'changes in attitude or behaviour'. Some organizations also include a domain for negative stories to help generate suggestions for improvement. The domains are deliberately broad so that participants can have different interpretations about what changes they think are important within a given domain.

Step 3: Defining the Reporting Period

- This step involves determining how frequently to monitor changes taking place in these domains. MSC can be used to monitor changes on a monthly or a yearly basis. If using MSC for a time-limited evaluation process, establish a workplan that allows sufficient time for all MSC steps.



Step 4: Collecting Stories

- Stories of significant change are collected from those most directly involved, such as participants and field staff. The stories are gathered by asking an open-ended question such as: 'during the last month, in your opinion, what was the most significant change that took place for participants in the program?' It's initially up to respondents to allocate a domain category to their stories. In addition to this, respondents are encouraged to report why they consider a particular change to be the most significant. Stories can be captured in direct interviews or during group discussions. Evaluators can write down stories they've heard, or participants can write their own stories. Whenever possible, stories should be written in the first person.

Step 5: Selecting the most significant stories

- Stories are then analyzed and filtered through the levels of authority in an organisation or program. Each group reviews a series of stories sent to them by the level below and selects the single most significant account of change within each of the domains. Each group then sends the selected stories up to the next level of the programme hierarchy, and the number of stories is whittled down through a systematic and transparent process. Every time stories are selected, the criteria used to select them are recorded and fed back to all interested stakeholders, so that each subsequent round of story collection and selection is informed by feedback from previous rounds. The process of discussing stories can help uncover the values of an organization and open them up for discussion and change.

Step 6: Feeding Back the Results of the Selection Process

- After this process has been used for some time, (perhaps a year) a document is produced that includes all stories selected at the highest organizational level in each domain of change over that period of time. The stories are accompanied by the reasons for selection. Donors and funders can be asked to assess the stories and select those which best represent the sort of outcomes they wish to fund. They are also asked to document the reasons for their choice. This information is fed back to project managers and back to those who provided the stories. Knowing that a particular change is valued can lead to further searches for similar changes in that domain.

Step 7: Verification of Stories

- The selected stories can then be verified by visiting the sites where the described events took place. The purpose of this is twofold: to check that stories have been reported accurately and honestly, and to provide an opportunity to gather more detailed information about events seen as especially significant. If conducted sometime after the event, a visit also offers a chance to see what has happened since the event was first documented.



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Step 8: Quantification

- Numerical or quantifiable information can be collected from the MSC stories such as the number of people involved, how many activities took place or the number of times a particular change is recorded.

Step 9: Secondary Analysis and Meta-Monitoring

- Secondary analysis involves analyzing the themes of a complete set of MSC stories. Meta-monitoring examines the attributes of the stories themselves, such as who participated, who selected the stories and how the different changes were reported.
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Step 10: Revising the System

- The final step is to revise the design of the MSC process to take into account what has been learned as a direct result of its use. Changing some aspect of MSC implementation for the next round is a good sign, as it indicates that learning is taking place.

In sum, the kernel of the MSC process is a question like: 'Looking back over the last month, what do you think was the most significant change in [particular domain of change]?' A similar question is posed when the answers to the first question are examined by another group of participants: 'From among all these significant changes, what do you think was the most significant change of all?'

Adapted from:

<https://www.odi.org/publications/5211-msc-most-significant-change-monitoring-evaluation>

https://www.betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/EA_PM%26E_toolkit_MSC_manual_for_publication.pdf

