

Introduction to Most Significant Change

Background material for Exchange lunchtime discussion, 3 February 2005

<http://www.healthcomms.org/>

The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. MSC has been used by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governments in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and Australasia. A guide to using MSC by Rick Davies and Jess Dart is out now.

MSC is based on telling stories about events people think were important – there is no need to explain what an indicator is or learn special professional skills. So everyone can **participate** and the technique can be used in different cultural contexts. Project stakeholders are involved both in deciding the sorts of change to be recorded and in analysing the data.

MSC occurs throughout the programme cycle and provides information to help **monitor** and manage a programme. MSC is particularly suited to monitoring a programme where the focus is on learning rather than just accountability.

MSC provides data on impact and outcomes that can be used to **evaluate** the performance of the programme as a whole. MSC can identify unexpected changes to deliver a rich picture of what is happening even when there are complex and diverse outcomes.

The Most Significant Change process

The MSC process involves the collection of stories from field staff and beneficiaries who are directly involved in a development programme. The stories are then analysed, discussed and verified.

Before the stories are collected, a group of stakeholders decides what will be monitored – the ‘domains’ – such as ‘changes in people’s lives’. The domains are deliberately left loose so the actual users can define what they mean to them.

Simple questions help participants decide what to write about. For example: ‘During the last month, in your opinion, what was the most significant change for participants in the programme.’ Participants are encouraged to say why they consider a particular change to be the most significant one and to say which domain it belongs in.

A panel of stakeholders or/and staff select the most significant stories – they systematically look for project impact. Various people sit down together and read the selected stories aloud and discuss the value of the reported changes. When the technique is implemented successfully, whole teams of people begin to focus their attention on programme impact.

The stories are filtered up through the levels of authority in a programme or organisation, from project managers to funders. At each level the most significant story for each of the domains is selected. The criteria used to select the stories are recorded and fed back to all interested stakeholders so it becomes obvious how people at different levels decide which events and changes are valuable.

The stories can be verified by visiting the sites of the events they describe. Visits also offer a chance to see what has happened since the event was first documented.

The guide to MSC covers nine stages of implementation:

1. Start and raise interest
2. Define the domains of change
3. Collect the stories
4. Select the most significant of the stories
5. Feedback results of the selection process
6. Verification
7. Quantification
8. Secondary analysis and meta-monitoring
9. Revising the system.

When to use Most Significant Change

MSC takes time to implement but it enables the collection of data that can make sense of impact and foster learning. MSC is more suited to complex situations such as large projects with many layers, or programmes that offer highly customised services. It can also be used to evaluate bottom-up programmes that do not have predefined outcomes.

Because MSC is time consuming, it is less appropriate if the aims are solely to capture expected change, develop good news stories for public relations or conduct an end of programme evaluation report for accountability purposes.

The technique is more likely to be implemented successfully if enabling conditions are already in place:

- an organisational culture where it is acceptable to discuss things that go wrong as well as success
- champions with good facilitation skills
- a willingness to have a go at something new
- time to run several cycles of the approach
- the infrastructure to enable regular feedback to stakeholders
- commitment by senior managers.

More information

Most significant change email list set up by Rick Davies
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MostSignificantChanges/>

Source Quick list: [Impact assessment in complex development situations](#)