

'Most Significant Change'

Most significant change (MSC) is a participatory, qualitative approach to evaluation, It is particularly useful for evaluating people-orientated projects and services where it is difficult to pre-determine outcomes or where complexity makes it hard to measure 'indicators of change'. MSC is a collaborative and non-hierarchical way of identifying what has the greatest significance for the people who are accessing and delivering services - what matters most to people involved and why. It can give real insight into what causes the impact of change.

Originally developed by Rick Davies in the 1990's, the MSC technique aimed to meet some of the challenges associated with monitoring and evaluating a complex participatory rural development programme in Bangladesh. Since then, it has predominantly been used by international development and aid agencies to evaluate their programmes around the world. However, MSC is now increasingly being recognised as a highly effective research, evaluation and change management tool by smaller scale, people-orientated projects and organisations in the UK. I am part of the Story-based Evaluation and Research Alliance, a group fo practitioners who have come together to promote more use of narrative within research and evaluation.

The technique uses 'stories of change' as data, collected from and analysed by project stakeholders through shared discussion. It can be used alongside other evaluation methods, to explore or triangulate quantitative data, for instance. It is easy to implement and scale to share findings and is adaptable to project needs and budgets.

There are three stages of the approach:

Story collection: in which stakeholders are asked what changes have come about as a result of their involvement in the project; and which of these matter most to them. They are asked what this aspect of their life or practice was like before their involvement; what it is like now; and what specifically has made the difference. This is written up as a short piece of prose, or can be recorded on video or audio.

Story reflection/ selection: in which a different group of stakeholders read and discuss a number of stories in order to identify what stands out most for them; and what the key learning for the project is.

Feedback and dissemination: the learning from the discussion session is shared.

Information noted from each story should include:

- Storyteller (plus demographic info if important)
- Who collected the story and when, and that consent to share was given
- Description of the story itself - beginning, middle, end
- Significance (to the storyteller) of events described in the story

Generally, I make notes and then write up into 3-4 paragraphs. You can record it, audio or video, if better for context. I have created two separate pages to help do your own version of a MSC process. This visual approach has the advantage that you could also use drawings or visuals if that suited you or the storyteller better. (You can download pdfs of these from the FAC/Thinking Practice websites.)

It can be helpful to think before collecting what kinds of change, impact or result you want to look for. These are sometimes called 'domains of change'.

Domains are broad and often fuzzy categories of possible SC stories. Eg funders of an arts programme for older people might look at

- Changes in the quality of people's lives
- Changes in the nature of people's participation in arts activities
- Changes in the sustainability of provider organisations and activities
- Changes in perception or habit
- Any other changes

Equally, this kind of analysis can be done after collecting stories.

The 'story reflection' is also a valuable part of this process, as it gives you the opportunity to bring together stakeholders you want to involve in your learning, or whose behaviour you want to influence. It is best to keep this to 4-6 people. For complex projects, where you might have lots of stories, you might have different 'layers' of reflection - eg front line staff choose stories which are then reflected on by senior management or board members. Although not part of the 'classical' MSC approach, I always include a question about what people think they might stop, start or carry on doing as a result of what they've heard or learnt from the discussion.

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TITLE:

What are the most significant changes, positive or negative, that you have seen or experienced?'

Which the most significant change - pick one?

What was it like before?

What is like now?

What made the difference?

Why does this matter to you?

MSC PANEL DISCUSSION *Who's in this discussion - stakeholders, influencers, participants?*

What strikes you about each story?

Story 1

Story 2

Story 3

Story 4

Story 5

Story 6

What themes are there that matter to you - and why do they matter?

Which story feels the most significant and why?

What is the relevance for your work? What might you start/stop/carry on doing as a result of this discussion?