

Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique

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Abstract

Often, evaluators encounter challenges in judiciously evaluating and monitoring large scale programs and MSC is one of those techniques that come to their rescue. The technique involves participatory collection of stories and systematic approach to selection of the most significant change stories. The technique cannot be used standalone but be used in conjunction with other techniques.

Introduction

The genesis of Most Significant Change technique dates back to 1990s when Rick Davies (the author of the technique) found it difficult to overcome the challenges associated with monitoring and evaluation of a participatory rural development program in Bangladesh. He developed MSC as a technique to suit the needs. Since then, the technique has been widely used by variety of organisations to capture and communicate the results of their efforts.

MSC is a qualitative technique which relies on participation from many project stakeholders and the technique can be used for both monitoring and evaluation. While used for monitoring, the technique can be used to inform program managers with insights from the field and enable them to course correct mid-way and when used for evaluation, the technique can be useful to assess the performance of program through insights on project outcomes and impact.

MSC is a way of constructing and communicating results through stories and the selection and verification of stories involve an established systematic transparent process. MSC cannot be used as a standalone technique and when used in complementary to other techniques such as quantitative data collection, MSC can provide additional valuable insights about the program performance.

MSC is a qualitative technique which can be used to both monitoring and evaluation traces which can be used as evidence.

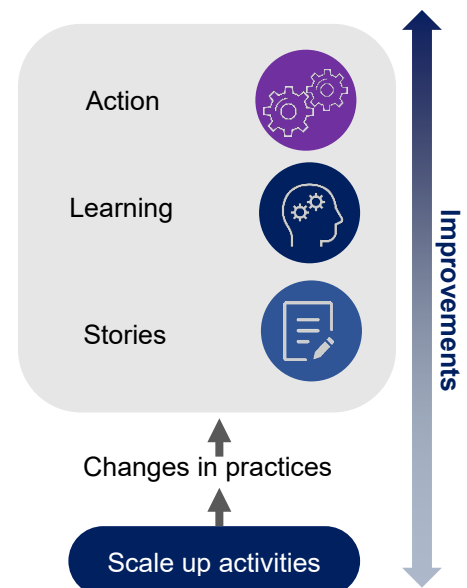


Figure 1: MSC cycle

Source: https://irh.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Evaluation_Tool_5.pdf

The core of the technique lies in asking the following question:

‘Looking back over the last month, what do you think was the most significant change in [particular domain of change]?’



Initiating MSC in an organization

According to the author, the MSC involves three core steps. The preparatory work to be followed before starting MSC in an organisation include

Start with small pilot

MSC is often seen as time consuming process and it is natural to doubt the credibility of the process according to the author of the technique. Hence, it is important to start MSC process in the form of a small pilot before one go and implement the technique across the organisation. Before rolling out the MSC technique across the organisation, the technique needs to be moulded specific to the organisation and it is always advisable to start the technique with people who are interested and enthusiastic about trying and valuing such qualitative techniques.

Select champions

Another key preparatory work involves identifying and selecting champions who could largely be involved in the design of MSC process. They will be positioned to catalyse the process by sensitizing the stakeholders on the process and earn their interest.

Define Domains of change

Once the process is started and the stories are captured, it is necessary to document the stories in an orderly fashion which will help to analyse these stories in a better fashion. To achieve this, it is advisable to define the domains of change to capture stories. The author of MSC suggests that having 3-5 domains of change is usually a good practice. The domains of change may be decided at an organisational level, will change with organisations and need to represent various stories that may be captured through the process. Besides, having 3-5 domain of changes, it is necessary to earmark a domain as “others” which can be used handy to fill the stories that may not fit in the 3-5 domain categories.

Sample domain categories

Here is an example of domain names for a project that used MSC for monitoring

1. Changes in the quality of people's lives.
2. Changes in the nature of people's participation in development activities
3. Changes in the sustainability of people's organisations and activities
4. Any other changes

Source: The “Most Significant Change” (MSC) Technique, A guide to its use by Rick Davies and Jess Dart

On capturing negative side stories

The process generally tends to capture only the positive side of the stories as the program implementers are the one leading the capturing process and tend to not capture the negative side of the stories. Organisation can take efforts to capture the negative side of the stories in a way that does not bring down the morale of the organisation. This could be done by actively encouraging the stakeholders in the organisation to share stories that could provide learning from the failures.



The Laos ADRI project made special efforts to capture the negative stories and learn from those stories. In order to capture negative stories, the field staff were encouraged to capture such stories. In addition, the evaluators included a separate domain so that the field staff consciously capture the negative stories. This resulted in capturing negative stories as a part of MSC technique administration.

Source: 'Most Significant Change' Pilot project, Evaluation Report, Institute of Sustainable Futures for ADRA Laos

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Core steps in administering MSC technique:

The three core steps recommended by the authors are as follows:

- Collection of SC stories
- Selection of the most significant change stories by group of stakeholders
- Feedback to relevant stakeholders concerning which SC stories were selected and why they were selected

Collection of SC stories

One of the major steps involved in the MSC technique is collecting the significant change stories. The author of the technique suggests that using an open ended question: "Looking back over the last month, what do you think was the most significant change?" is very useful in eliciting the significant change stories. The content of the question is powerful enough to capture the respondent's judgement to select a change story referring to a specific timeline.

Table 1: Interview questions to capture changes

Example - Sample interview questions to capture changes		
Question for village midwife and kader	Question for pregnant women	Purpose of the question
1a. What positive or negative changes have you experienced after participation in our health promotion training?	1b. You have attended Posyandu for antenatal services before we trained the kader and village midwives. Have you noticed any change in the Posyandu after the kader and the midwife attended the training? If yes, what positive or negative changes have you experienced?	This introductory question aimed to capture a range of changes experienced by the beneficiaries.
2. Could you describe the most significant changes you found?		This question focused on the beneficiaries' personal judgment on what was the most significant change of all stated changes. This question reflects the participatory approach that empowered the beneficiaries to have a voice on what they thought was the most important change

Source: Limato. R., et al., Use of most significant change (MSC) technique to evaluate health promotion training of maternal community health workers in Cianjur district, Indonesia



Organisations that implement MSC technique can utilize different approaches to capture stories. They can either employ an active searching technique to identify and elicit stories or they can utilize the existing knowledge of field workers and apply retrospective enquiry to identify stories. The author suggests that utilising field workers knowledge to identify stories is a better approach as the respondents tend to provide “expected” accounts of change during active searching.

After identification, the field workers can use multiple techniques such as focus group discussions or in depth interviews with selected number of beneficiaries to solicit the stories. In cases where possible, the beneficiaries themselves can be requested to write their own stories. It is also usual practice for the field workers to write the significant change stories on their own based on their field experience.

The collection of stories shall involve collecting the story itself of what has actually happened in addition to gathering data on the details of events, its significance and the one who collects the story.

Selecting the most significant of the stories

Only a great story can communicate the project implementation results better and it is only possible when the best (most significant) of all stories collected are selected. Hence, selecting the most significant of the stories is a critical step in the MSC technique. The author of the technique suggests the use of a systematic process to select the most significant of the stories because selection of the best necessitates involvement of most important stakeholders and need them to contribute with an open mind.

The organisation implementing MSC can either set up a separate team or utilise the existing implementation team to select the most significant of the stories. The process of selection can follow a hierarchy – such as the middle management shortlist the stories collected at the field worker level and then passed on to senior management for further shortlisting. The executive heading the department or institution can have a final say based on the recommendations. At some places, the field worker level can also be involved to shortlist stories at their end.

Suaahara's MSC stories selection steps

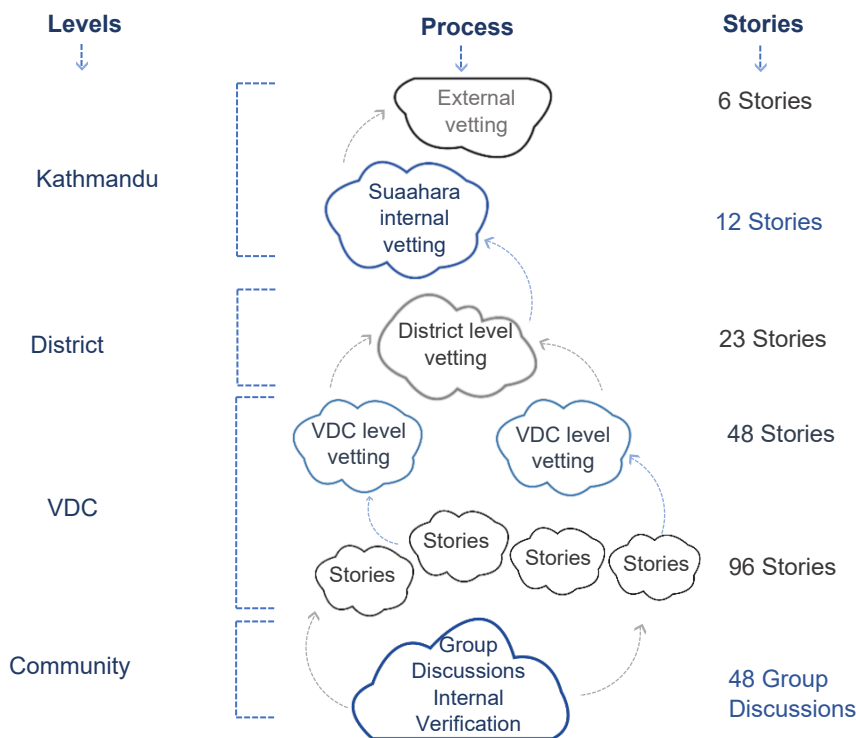


Figure 2: Sample MSC stories selection steps

Source: Suaahara Most Significant Change (MSC) Stories, USAID



As a practice, it is important to maintain the trail of selection and the selection of stories shall start with reading the stories individually/in group. The stories can be sent to the team set up for the purpose or read out aloud when all of them assemble together. Selection criteria need to be spelt out clearly as a guideline for the team to select the most significant of the stories. There are many ways in reaching the final decision such as

- a. Majority rules: Vote by show of hands in a group setting
- b. Iterative voting: Iterative voting with an aim to arrive at consensus
- c. Scoring: Each story rated, aggregated and the highest rated selected
- d. Pre-scoring then a group vote: Prior scoring results summarized in a table and presented to the participants for group vote
- e. Secret ballot: Voting done anonymously

It is also recommended to document the reasons for the selection and the explanation could be just more than a few words.

Sample write up on “Why was this story most significant?”

Why was this story most significant?

Majority of the vetting panel members liked the story of Maya because she was an exceptional beneficiary who went beyond the scope of the program. Maya was trained by the Suaahara program on homestead food production but she went beyond just producing the food for consumption and used the agricultural skills for income generation as well. Despite having discouraging in-laws she was determined to bring a positive and significant change in her life. The vetting panel also liked how Maya actively participated in her group meetings, promoted golden 1000-day period and enrolled new mothers in the group. They also liked how the entire community paid strict attention in maintaining cleanliness and good hygiene in her VDC. Minority members did not think Maya's story to be significant because while the story focuses on her personal development being a Village Model Farmer, as her role demanded, Maya could not substantially contribute to other 1000-day mothers.

Source: Suaahara Most Significant Change (MSC) Stories, USAID

Feeding back the results of the selection process

According to the author, providing feedback is useful in many ways and particularly useful in providing information about the selection of stories so to drive focus on the participant's searches for significant stories. This is especially important when MSC technique is used for monitoring purposes and the feedback provides opportunities for the participants to search similar significant stories. The feedback helps the participants to assess the quality of the collective judgements made and help them align themselves accordingly.

According to the author, the feedback about the selection processes and the reasons for selection will be helpful to communicate to those shared the stories and acknowledge their efforts. This step completes the core steps in administering MSC technique.

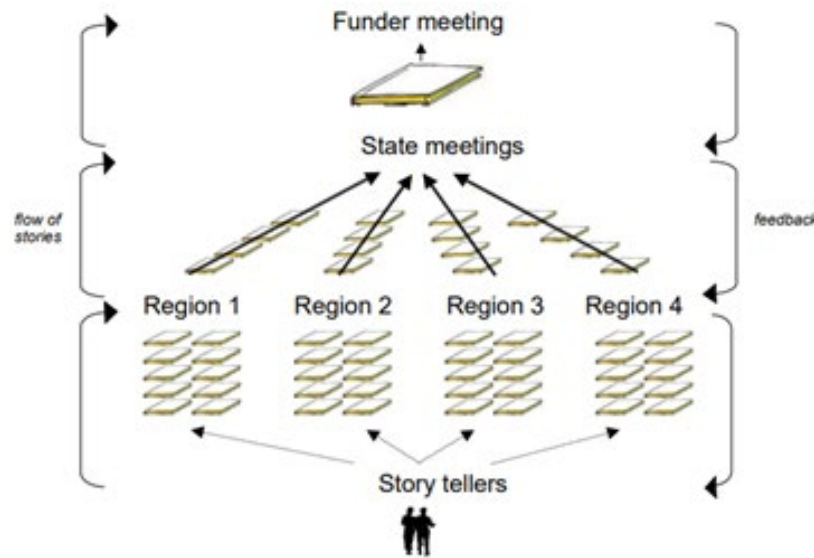


Figure 3: Flow of stories and feedback in MSC

Source: Dart. J., and Davies. R., A Dialogical, Story-Based Evaluation Tool: The Most Significant Change Technique

Verification of the stories:

In addition to capturing the most significant stories, verification is an additional and optional step that organisations may administer based on the needs and availability of resources.

Verification play an important role when the stories are shared to external audience and the organisation feels the need to ensure the description and interpretation aspects of MSC stories are captured well. The verification process can be administered by the organisation staff and this step also provides an opportunity to capture further finer details of the stories. It is recommended to perform verification on the most significant selected story only, if at all needed to be done.

Advantages of using MSC:

1. MSC technique involves identifying and selecting the most significant stories among the collected stories. This results in the selection of exceptional changes possible through a particular intervention.
2. Given the necessary focus, the technique helps in identifying useful lessons by capturing stories that are deviant from program theory. These stories are better positioned to provide important insights and helpful to update the program theory going forward.
3. The technique involves participation of stakeholders from all hierarchical levels and their active participation is significant in arriving at the most significant story. Hence, the process has the potential to bind stakeholders across the hierarchy.
4. The technique helps in identifying the most significant story, which in true sense will communicate the program results in the best possible manner. In addition to capturing the results through MSC, the stories can also help in promoting the underlying project work in a much better manner.



Limitations of MSC

1. MSC is a time consuming process and need organisation staff to invest significant time and resources in administering the process.
2. The technique cannot be used standalone and can only be used to support other techniques.
3. Since the technique captures only the most significant stories, it will not do justice to reporting the project impact across different geographies for summative evaluation.

Conclusion

Since its development, the technique has been used by number of organisations to communicate the program results better through stories. The technique has the potential to bind the members across the organisation hierarchy in collection and selection of most significant stories when its core principles of participatory collection and systematic approach to selection of stories are followed. Recent development such as communicating the results through most significant change stories videos is a testimony to the usefulness and effectiveness of the MSC technique.



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