Most Significant Change

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Overview of the Most Significant Change (MSC)

What is Most Significant Change?

Story-based approach to get information on change in participants' voice

What is it: a method for ongoing collecting and analyzing personal accounts/stories of change and what led to this change

Purpose:
To clarify values held by different stakeholders
To help explain how change comes about
To capture unintended consequences

Why Most Significant Change?

- A participatory approach that allows participants to define success

- Captures less predictable outcomes

- Funders' preference to focus on outcome level change

- Focused on learning rather than just accountability

- Not a stand-alone approach to MEL

Why Stories?

- People tell stories naturally
- Stories can deal with context and complexity
- People remember stories (our brains are wired to understand information in form of stories)

Exercise:

Think through a current program or a program you have implemented in the past.

Have you had an instance where indicators you reported on did not capture all the important outcomes from this program?

Step by Step MSC Process

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1. Raising interest

2. Establishing 'domains of change'

3. Defining the reporting period

4. Collecting stories of change

5. Selecting the most significant stories

6. Providing stakeholders with regular feedback about the review process

7. Setting in place a process to verify the stories if necessary

8. Quantification

9. Conducting secondary analysis of the stories

10. Revising the MSC process

Ten steps to implementing MSC

Step 1: Raising interest:

- Need to be very clear about the purpose of MSC

- Meet with participants to explain the technique

Techniques:

- Excite and motivate people

- Answer questions about technique

Ten steps to implementing MSC

Step 2: Deciding on domains of change

- Define the areas of change that are important to program stakeholders.

- Track whether progress is being made

- Provide some guidance to those collecting stories about what kind of change they are searching for

- Group a large number of stories into more manageable lots that can then be analyzed

- Some organizations include a domain for **negative stories**

Techniques:

- Domains of change are often very broad buckets of change

- 3-5 domains of change are usually a manageable number

- Include an open-ended category

- Need to decide on the unit of analysis – individual, organization, etc.

Step 3: Deciding on the reporting period

- This step involves deciding how often the process of monitoring the changes that are taking place should happen

Tips:

- A balance between allowing enough time for outcome level change to take place and monitoring results frequently enough to learn and adapt projects

- Every 3-6 months is best practice

Step 4: Collecting stories

They are collected using an open-ended question, such as: *'During the past 4 months, what do you think was the most significant change in your party as a result of taking part in this project? Why is this change significant?'*

Can be collected in a group discussion (best case), individual interviews, written submission

Step 4: Collecting stories

Techniques:

Ask an open-ended question: 'Looking back over the last month, what do you think was the most significant change in the quality of people's lives in this community?'

This example is taken from CCDB, which was the first organization to use MSC monitoring, in Rajshahi, Bangladesh, in 1994. The question has five parts:

1. 'Looking back over the last month…' – It refers to a specific time period

2. '…what do you think was…' – It asks respondents to exercise their own judgment

3. '…the most significant…' – It asks respondents to be selective, not to try to comment on everything, but to focus on one thing

Step 4: Collecting stories

Techniques:

4. '…change…' – It asks respondents to be more selective, to report a change rather than static aspects of the situation or something that was present in the previous reporting period

5. '…in the quality of people's lives…' – It asks respondents to be even more selective, not to report just any change but a change in the quality of people's lives. This tag describes a domain of change and can be modified to fit other domains of change. For example, another one of CCDB's MSC questions referred to a change 'in people's participation'

Ten steps to implementing MSC

Step 5: Selecting the most significant stories

- Once the stories are collected, they are then analyzed.

- The criteria used to select the stories are also written down and sent to all relevant stakeholders

- Provide some guidance to those collecting stories about what kind of change they are searching for

- This process helps to reduce the large number of locally important stories down to a small number of more widely valued stories

Tips:

- Discussion is the most important element of MSC – to discuss values and definition of success

- Select one most significant story in each domain of change

- Criteria for selection should be discussed, and the group can vote again

Step 6: Informing key stakeholders of results

- A document is produced that includes all the stories selected at the highest level in each domain of change.

- The reasons for selecting the stories are attached to each story

Everything is going smoothly and will submit on time.

Step 7: Verification of stories

Knowing that there are procedures for verifying stories can help to improve the quality of the stories

Step 8: Quantification of stories

- Various methods can be used to collect and analyze quantitative (numerical) information about MSC stories, such as the number of people involved, how many activities took place, and the number of times a particular change is recorded.

Ten steps to implementing MSC

Step 9: Secondary analysis and meta-monitoring

- Secondary analysis involves analyzing the themes across a complete set of MSC stories,

- Meta-monitoring focuses more on the attributes of the stories themselves (such as who participated, who selected the stories, what happened to the stories, and how the different changes were reported).

- This is not a critical step but can strengthen the MSC process.

- This step is usually done by members of an M&E team.

Ten steps to implementing MSC

Step 10: Evaluating and revising the process

- Reflect on the initial planned steps and adapt next steps, as necessary. Do not force the pre-determined process for the remainder of the project if the initial plan shifted. (Don't panic, reach out to MEL staff/ELP!)
- Make sure to debrief about the process, especially if it was the first time utilizing MSC for the program team and/or partners who are collecting the stories
- Allocate sufficient time to adapt and anticipate any changes.
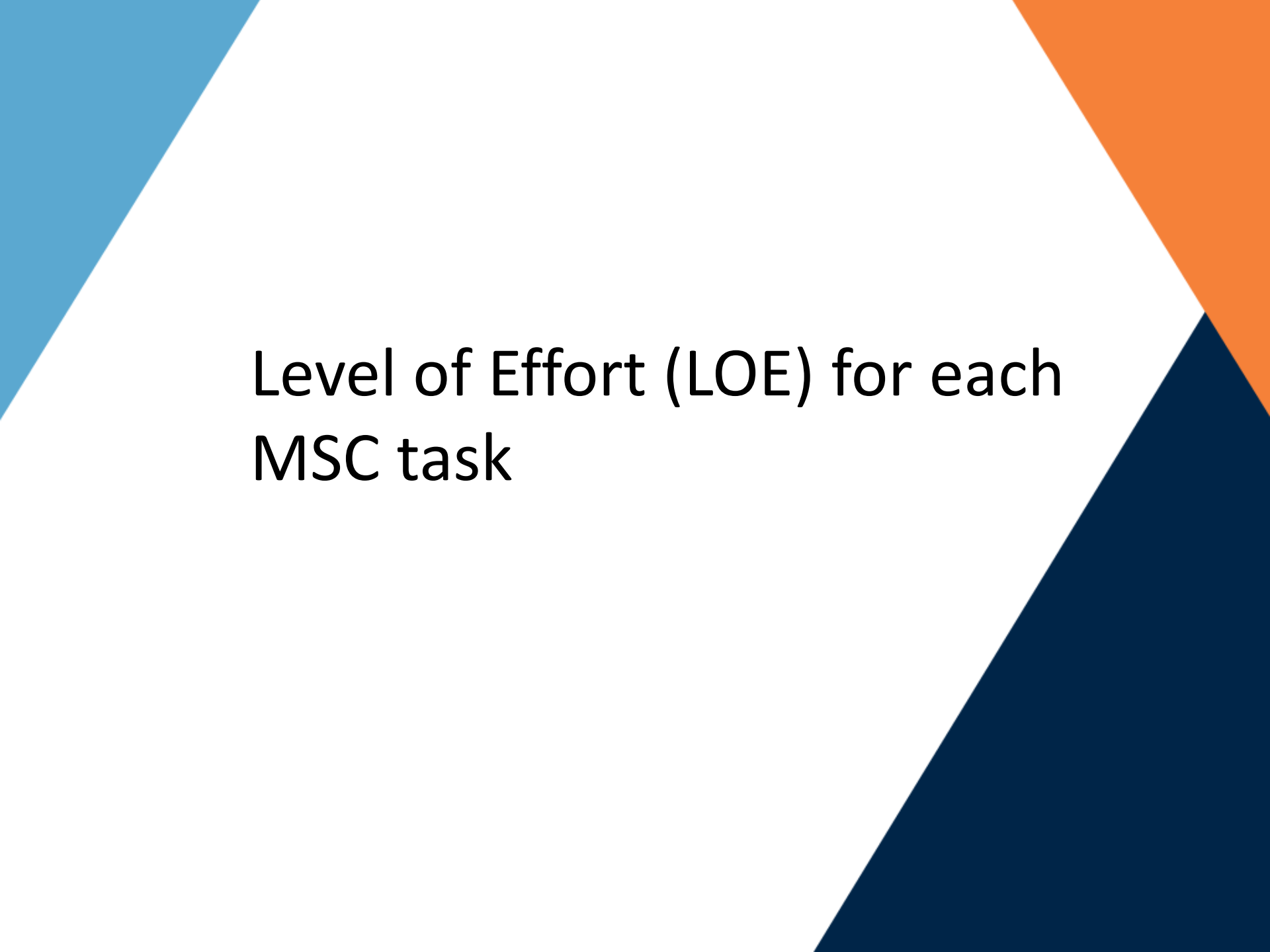
When VS. **When not** to use MSC

Use MSC

1. In complex programs with diverse and emergent (evolving) outcomes.
2. When participants/partners have the buy-in and willingness to devote time to sharing and discussing stories of change throughout project implementation (meeting in a group or submitting written/in-person stories of change typically every quarter or 6 months.)
3. In programs where we have repeated contact with the same participants over time.
4. There is trust established between participants/ partners.
5. There is no agreement between stakeholders on which outcomes are the most important.
6. In programs that focuses on social and/or behavior change.

Don't use MSC

1. As a standalone MEL tool.
2. As a communications strategy for developing success stories
3. To solely verify expected outcomes.
4. There is a lack of trust between direct participants/partners.
5. Lack of opportunities for consistent follow up or willingness of participants/partners to devote time to participatory discussions throughout project implementation
6. Minimal bandwidth from program staff or local implementing partners

Most Significant Change (MSC)

1. In complex programs with diverse and emergent (evolving) outcomes.
2. In participatory initiatives/programs.
3. When participants/partners have the buy-in and willingness to devote time to sharing and discussing stories of change throughout project implementation (meeting in a group or submitting written/in-person stories of change typically every quarter or 6 months.)
4. In programs where we have repeated contact with the same participants over time.
5. There is trust established between participants/ partners.
6. There is no agreement between stakeholders on which outcomes are the most important.
7. Best used at baseline and throughout a project rather than as a one-off exercise.
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Level of Effort (LOE) for each MSC task

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	Program staff	Partner	MEL staff	Total LOE
Preparation & Design	X	X	X	5 – 10 hours
Training partners and/or participants on MSC	X	X	X	2 – 3 hours
Ongoing data collection	X	X		5 – 10 hours
Analysis & selection	X	X	X	10 hours
Reporting	X		X	3 hours

Level of Effort (LOE) for each MSC task

ELP-specific tasks (illustrative)	Time estimate
Initial training and MSC Kick-off within IRI	1.5 hours
Kick-off & Training with partner organization (if applicable)	1.5 hours
Ongoing guidance and consultations	2 – 3 hours
Additional support for verification, selection of stories, secondary analysis, touch base with partner, follow up, debrief on process	10 hours
	3 hours

Challenges and Opportunity in Virtual Settings

MSC in Practice

Thank you for joining us today!

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