Quick-Start Guide

• A self-help guide for implementing the Most Significant Change technique (MSC) •

Jessica Dart & Rick Davies
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This aim of this guide is to help groups design an MSC system for their programme or project. The guide splits MSC design into 8 steps. Each step is described, then some questions are asked in relation to the step. Hopefully, answering these questions will help your group develop an appropriate MSC process. This document was designed to be used as part of a one-day training workshop in MSC – it was not intended to be a stand-alone document. But please feel free to copy this document, just acknowledge Dart and Davies as the authors and please let us know how it can be improved by contacting Jess Dart, jess@clearhorizon.com.au.

Overview of MSC

MSC involves the collection and systematic participatory interpretation of stories of significant change. Unlike conventional approaches to monitoring, MSC does not employ quantitative indicators, but is a qualitative approach.

The MSC approach was originally developed by Rick Davies through his work with a participatory rural development project in Bangladesh in 1994. It has since been adapted and widely promoted by Jessica Dart in Australia. Information about the MSC approach has also been made available globally through a MSC approach internet discussion group set up in 2000, which now has more than 120 members. Access to the mailing list and papers concerning the work of Rick, Jessica and others can be found at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mostsignificantchanges.

In 2000 the name Most Significant Change Approach was settled on as it embodies one of the most fundamental aspects of the approach: the collection and systematic selection of reported changes.

Overview of steps to design an MSC process

1. Starting
2. Establishing 'domains of change'
3. Collecting Significant Change (SC) stories & consider ethics
4. Determining who will review the SC stories
5. Determining a process for reviewing the SC stories
6. Feedback
7. Verification
8. Secondary analysis / meta monitoring
9. Revise the system!

1.   Starting

One of the most daunting steps is getting started. Often there is scepticism about the validity of the technique, and fears that it will take too much time. It often takes an enthusiastic individual or small group to raise interest in MSC by visiting key people/groups and presenting the methodology. It can help to present SC stories from other projects and to show example reports. These can be downloaded from the web site.

It is also worth presenting the technique simply - presenting all the theory at the start only confuses people. Many practitioners will not be interested in, nor need to understand, all the theory behind MSC. The message that needs to be conveyed at the start is that MSC is simple and straightforward to implement. In order to raise interest in MSC, it also helps if there is clarity about the purpose of MSC and the role it will play in an organisation. It cannot be stressed too often that MSC is not intended to be a stand-alone technique in monitoring and evaluation.

Another really important lesson we have learned from experience is to start small. It is a risky exercise to implement a huge and complicated MSC system without first piloting it on a smaller scale. Every organisational context is different, so MSC will have to be moulded somewhat to your particular context. Because of this, it pays to conduct a pilot and learn what works and what does not work.

When piloting MSC, look for people and sections of your organisation that are most interested and enthusiastic about the potential of MSC.

Questions

1. How will you get 'buy in' from the people who will be involved in creating/selecting SC stories?

2. Where can you begin – is there a small pilot that you can test first?

3. Who are the best people to capture the first SC stories from?

2.   Establishing Domains of Change

What are domains?

Domains are broad and often fuzzy categories of possible changes. For example, participants in the MSC could be asked to look for significant changes in four domains:

- Changes in the quality of people's lives
- Changes in the nature of people's participation in development activities
- Changes in the sustainability of people's organisations and activities
- Any other changes

A domain of change is not an indicator. Indicators are almost the opposite. Indicators are supposed to be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timebound changes). Indicators need to be defined in such a way that everyone has the same interpretation of what they mean. On the other hand, domains of change are deliberately 'fuzzy', enough to allow people to have different interpretations of what constitutes a change in that area.

Why use domains?

Dividing SC stories up into domains can make story selection process easier to manage. If you have domains, SC stories from each domain can considered separately, so that you are not comparing 'apples to pears'. This helps if you are going to collect and select among many SC stories.

There are two main ways of determining domains, the first distinguishes SC stories by their content the second by stakeholder groups:

1. If domains are to refer to the content of the SC stories, many organisations base the domains on their pre-existing high order objectives. This allows them to track whether they are achieving their objectives. Alternatively new categories can be developed.

2. Domains can be used to help describe SC stories from different stakeholders eg: significant changes from beneficiaries, from programme staff, from partners.

Tips

- *You can start without domains and allow them to emerge;*
- *We suggest you don't have more than 4-5;*
- *You can have a 'lessons learned domain' to pick up on the negatives.*

Questions

1.   Will you use domains?

2.   Who will select domains? Top down or bottom up?

3.   How will the domains be selected?

4.   How will 'lessons learned' domains be handled?

3.   Collect the Significant Change Stories

There are many ways to collect SC stories such as by interview or through group discussion. Ideally SC stories will be 1-2 pages long, and will be documented at some stage.

Questions

1.   Who will tell the SC stories?

2.   Who will collect the SC stories?

3.   How will they be collected?

4.   How and when will they be documented?

5.   How will you ensure that the collection process is ethical?

6.   How often will SC stories be collected?

4.   Determine a Structure to Select the Significant Change Stories

A central idea in MSC is the use of a 'hierarchy' of selection processes. This helps reduce a large volume of locally important SC stories down to a small number of widely valued SC stories. The use of multiple levels of selection enables this to happen without overburdening any individual or groups with too much work, despite the participatory nature of the selection process. Therefore, in designing an MSC process for your project/programme – you need to consider who should be involved in the selection process.

Questions

1.   Who would benefit from reading and selecting SC stories?

2.   How could the selection process work?

3.   Map out a possible structure.

5.   Selection Process

Often story selection begins with a group of people sitting together, with a pile of documented SC stories which may or may not be assigned to domains. The task of selecting SC stories is to reduce the pile of stories down to one story per domain. So if there are four domains, in each domain the participants will select a story that they believe represent the most significant change of all. If the SC stories have not yet been designated against domains, this is the one of the first jobs to be done.

The selection process invariably begins with reading some or all of the SC stories out loud or individually. We tend to prefer reading the SC stories aloud, as it brings them to life. But the effectiveness and practicality of this of this may vary with context.

If the SC stories have already been allocated domains, then stories from each domain are considered as separate groups. From here various facilitated and unfacilitated processes can be used to help participants decide which are the most significant stories. Whatever process you use to select the stories, it is most important to remember to document the reasons why certain stories were selected over the others.

We encourage you to experiment with different selection processes to find one that best suits your cultural context. While various processes can be used, the key ingredients to story selection are:

- Everybody reads the SC stories;
- Hold an in-depth conversation about which ones should be chosen;
- Come to a decision with regard to which stories everyone feels to be most significant - try to reflect all views (*e.g.* Choose 2 if necessary or add caveat if you cannot reach agreement in the time available);
- Document the reasons for the choice.

We think it is quite important to do this in an inductive way – that is, to choose the story first then discuss the criteria afterwards. The process tends to be more productive than if you set the criteria in advance.

Questions

1.   How will you select the SC stories?

2.   How will you make sure that everyone in the group is happy with the choice?
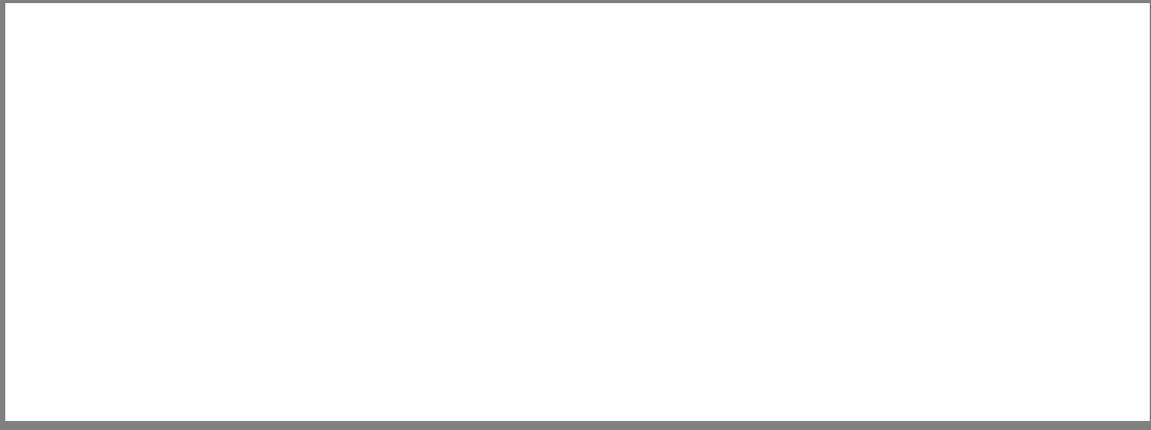
3.   Who will record the reasons for choosing the story and how will it be recorded?

6. Feedback

It is really important to feed back your selected SC stories and the reasons for the choice to the relevant people. Then the next round of SC stories can benefit from the feedback.

Different ways to provide feedback include:

- via representatives;
- email feedback;
- verbal feedback;
- newsletters;
- formal report.

Questions

1. Who needs to get feedback on selected SC stories and reasons for selection?

2. How will feedback be communicated?

3. What will the feedback cover? Comments on all SC stories or just those selected?

7.   Verification

There are two ways in which reported changes can be selected for verification:

1. Making random checks of reported changes. This method is not advocated and we don't know of any organisation that has made use of random checks.

2. Making checks on those changes that have been selected as most significant of all, *i.e.* those that are selected as most significant at all levels, from the field level, though middle management, up to senior management. Given the weight of meaning attached to these reported changes it makes sense to make sure that the foundations are secure, in the sense that the basic facts of what happened are basically correct.

Questions

1.   Will you verify any of the SC stories?

2.   If yes, which SC stories will you verify?

3.   If yes, what aspects will you verify?

4.   If yes, who will verify them, how will they be verified and when will they be verified?

8.   Monitoring MSC and Secondary Analysis

Often a spreadsheet is used to help record where the SC stories come from. Things that might be included are:

- gender or region of storytellers;
- outcome of the selection process;
- frequency of SC stories.

Questions

1.   How will you monitor and store the SC stories?

2.   If you use a spreadsheet, what information will you record?

3.   Who will do this?

Secondary Analysis

Some organisations choose to analyse the SC stories en masse – both those selected and those not selected. This can be done in a variety of ways such as thematic analysis.