

Most Significant Change Stories (December 2012)

The Most Significant Change (MSC) method was pioneered by Drs Rick Davies and Jess Dart and profiled in their 2005 guide to using the method. It's been described as a powerful, participatory, 'dialogical story-based technique' for monitoring and evaluation.

MSC involves a collection of stories about what people consider to be success stories in a program they are involved with.

MSC is a method where key informants are asked to describe their stories, and are encouraged to talk about the highs and lows of their journeys. The selection of a most significant story or stories speaks to what people or organisations value in terms of change and also informs them about the pace of change and people's journeys.

Fiona Cram and Sara Bennett offer comments about their experience of MSC.

According to Sara Bennett

I've recently been using the MSC method with youth health and development providers funded by the ASB Community Trust (the Trust). MSC stories are a powerful way of identifying unexpected changes and impacts, as well as programme values, and enables the development of a rich picture of change and impact. This approach is also useful to identify change over a wide variety of youth programmes developed and delivered by the Trust's funded providers, as it would otherwise be challenging to develop meaningful common indicators over such diverse programmes.

The values framework that supported this work acknowledged the MSC stories as gifts, and as such, careful consideration was given to the values framework and intentional process around the selection of pinnacle examples of 'most significant' change. Feedback from participants in the evaluation summit indicated that while all the stories were powerful gifts – and resulted in laughter, tears, and reflective silence as they were read aloud - a discussion based consensus process worked well to support a high trust and transparent selection process to identify the most significant examples of change. Selection of a range of stories, reflecting diverse outcomes and domains of change, was seen as the most appropriate approach, rather than reducing the selection process to identifying a single story.

Positive feedback was received about the process, including the value of being able to intentionally reflect and tell a story, active listening, and the connections to ongoing assessments of programme outcomes.

According to Fiona Cram

In training Māori in this method there's interest in storytelling and how it can inform practice models, as well as evaluations. There is, however, much hesitation and resistance to deciding which of a range of significant change stories is most significant as all change stories speak to people in different ways. On more than one occasion two or three 'most significant' stories have been selected, each for different and perfectly good reasons.

The stories hold possibilities for monitoring throughout a program cycle as well as contributing

to evaluation data on outcomes (and the inductive development of a theory of change). The stories of change can also be analysed for common themes, pathways and timelines and this information used to help others understand the future journeys that might be open to them. MSC holds particular promise for the current Whānau Ora initiative and its focus on stories of whānau change. A discussion of a package of whānau change stories, using an MSC process, would facilitate shared understandings of how change happens, what facilitates change, as well as the expectations and aspirations whānau have for themselves.

One NGO providing services for young people was keen to share their stories of significant change with the young people so that they could also share and reflect on where they had come from during their time with the program.

Significant change stories from others can also provide input into planning future service directions.