Proposition 8
The Most Significant Change Technique

In a Word The Most Significant Change technique helps monitor and evaluate the performance of projects and programs. It involves the collection and systematic participatory interpretation of stories of significant change emanating from the field level—stories about who did what, when, and why, and the reasons why the event was important. It does not employ quantitative indicators.

Rationale

Development (as so much of knowledge and learning) is about change—change that takes place in a variety of domains.[1] To move toward what is desirable and away from what is not, stakeholders must clarify what they are really trying to achieve, develop a better understanding of what is (and what is not) being achieved, and explore and share their various values and preferences about what they hold to be significant change. Evaluation has a role to play. However, in the alleged words of Albert Einstein, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

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[1]For instance, the domains might relate to changes in the quality of people's lives, the nature of their participation in development activities, or the sustainability of organizations.

Definition

The Most Significant Change technique is a qualitative and participatory form of monitoring and evaluation[2] based on the collection and systematic selection of stories[3] of reported changes from development activities. The technique was developed by Rick Davies in the mid-1990s to meet the challenges associated with monitoring and evaluating a complex participatory rural development program in Bangladesh, which had diversity in both implementation and outcomes. The technique is becoming popular, and adaptations have already been made.

Benefits

The Most Significant Change technique facilitates project and program improvement by focusing the direction of work away from less-valued directions toward more fully shared visions and explicitly valued directions, e.g., what do we really want to achieve and how will we produce more of it?[4] It can also help uncover important, valued outcomes not initially specified. It delivers these benefits by creating space for stakeholders to reflect, and by facilitating dynamic dialogue. As a corollary, project and program committees often become better at conceptualizing impact (and hence become better at planning). The unusual methodology of the Most Significant Change technique and its outcomes are a foil for other monitoring and evaluation techniques, such as logic models (results frameworks), appreciative inquiry, and outcome mapping—especially where projects and programs have diverse, complex outcomes with multiple stakeholders groups and financing

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[2]Qualitative monitoring and evaluation is about learning: it is dynamic and inductive and therefore focuses on questioning. The data is hard to aggregate. Goal displacement is not an issue. Quantitative monitoring and evaluation is about proving (accountability): it is static and deductive and therefore focuses on measurement. The data is easy to aggregate. Goal displacement can be a problem. The Most Significant Change technique is a form of monitoring because it occurs throughout the project cycle and provides information to help people manage that. Michael Quinn Patton has argued that evaluation findings serve three primary purposes: (i) to render judgments, (ii) to facilitate improvements, and/or (iii) to generate knowledge—the Most Significant Change technique contributes to evaluation because it provides data on outcomes that can be used to help assess the performance of a project or program as a whole.

[3]Ideally, the stories will be 1–2 pages long in proforma.

[4]The Most Significant Change technique differs from common monitoring and evaluation techniques in at least four respects: (i) the focus is on the unexpected (rather than predetermined quantitative indicators that do not tell stakeholders what they do not know they need to know), (ii) information about change is documented in text, not numbers, (iii) major attention is given to explicit value judgments, and (iv) information is analyzed through a structured social process.

agencies—to enrich summative evaluation with unexpected outcomes and very best success stories. What is more, the technique's reliance on participatory monitoring and evaluation can only enhance the chances that lessons will be learned and that recommendations will be acted upon.[5]

Process

The central process of the Most Significant Change technique is the collection and systematic selection of reported changes by means of purposive sampling with a bias in favor of success. This involves asking field staff to elicit anecdotes from stakeholders, focusing on what most significant change has occurred as the result of an initiative, and why they think that change occurred. These dozens, if not hundreds, of stories are passed up the chain and winnowed down to the most significant as determined by each management layer until only one story is selected—a story that describes a real experience, reviewed, defended, and selected by the people charged with the success of the project or program. Participants enjoy the process and usually bring to it a high level of enthusiasm—this owes mainly to the use of storytelling.[6]

Enablers

Four broad enabling contextual factors drive successful implementation of the Most Significant Change technique. They are

- Support from senior management.
- The commitment to the process of a leader.
- The development of trust between field staff and villagers.
- An organizational culture that prioritizes reflection and learning.
- Infrastructure that enables regular feedback of the results to stakeholders.
- Time to run several cycles of the technique.

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[5]Some have suggested that the technique could be improved by adding a process to formally incorporate the lessons learned from the stories into short-term and long-term project or program planning. This might be accomplished by requesting those who report stories to make recommendations for action drawing from the stories they selected.

[6]The advantage of stories is that people tell them naturally (indigenously). Stories can also deal with complexity and context and can carry hard messages (undiscussables) that people remember. However, they are not known for accuracy (truth).

Caution

The Most Significant Change technique is still evolving. Suggestions for improvements have been made,[7] while others look to adapt it to different contexts or to combine it creatively with other approaches. Further, although it can address what follows, the Most Significant Change technique should not be used to

- Capture expected change.
- Prepare stories for public relations.
- Understand the average experience of stakeholders.
- Generate an evaluation report for accountability purposes.
- Conduct a quick evaluation.
- Conduct retrospective evaluation of a completed project or program.

Further Reading

Davies R, Dart J (2005) The "Most Significant Change" (MSC) technique: a guide to its use

[7]Some have suggested that the technique could be revised to (i) elicit and include the voices of critics and nonparticipants, (ii) conduct en masse participatory analysis of stories, (iii) improve the feedback process, and (iv) establish a formal process for incorporating the insights gained into both short- and long-term project and program planning.