EUROPEAN UNION

Guide to the
**Most Significant
Change Method**

anpcdefp

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Guide to the Most Significant Change(MSC) Method

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Guide to the
Most Significant Change (MSC) Method

Imagine a method of evaluation that not only captures the complexities and nuances of change but also involves the very people who experience these changes firsthand.

This is the essence of the Most Significant Change (MSC) method, a participatory approach used to monitor and evaluate complex projects and programs. Rather than relying solely on numbers and metrics, MSC focuses on the power of storytelling, collecting and systematically selecting stories of significant change from various stakeholders.

the 9th edition
of Connector

Connector aims to create a space and context where people involved in learning become familiar with and practice different non-formal learning methods, having in mind the 2024 Erasmus+/ESC priorities - *inclusion& diversity; digital transformation; environment and fight against climate change;participation in democratic life.*

A special focus will be placed on how these learning methods : create a framework for telling stories around project results. a chance to become familiar with non-formal learning methods that you can afterward use in your projects or your daily learning context.

Because you can experience learning in an international and multicultural context. Because learning by doing and focusing on participants' hands-on experience are the key elements of this event. We welcome youth workers, adult education practitioners, trainers, learning facilitators, teachers, educators, and support staff, representatives coming from youth sector, schools, higher education, adult education, and vocational training institutions.

Connector is about learning, networking, sharing and practice, but it's mostly about PEOPLE getting connected!
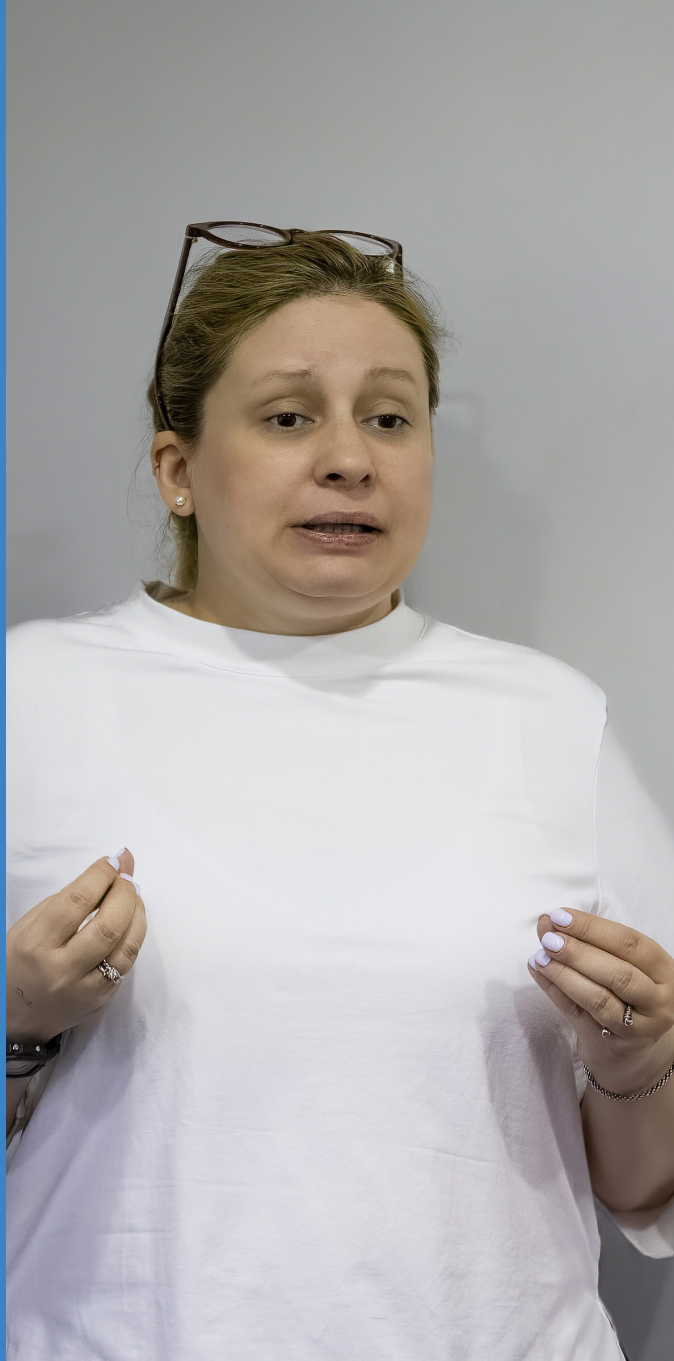
Andreea Rabota-Buzec

Andreea has been working in community development for more than 13 years, managing a foundation, developing and implementing projects, designing and implementing training modules, facilitating participatory processes for various communities' stakeholders, both at local, as well as at international level.

As a freelance consultant and trainer, she designs and delivers training modules for private companies, public authorities, non-governmental organizations and community members on various topics such as leadership, organizational development, strategic planning, diversity management, conflict management, community development, community organizing, etc. combining technical input with graphic facilitation.
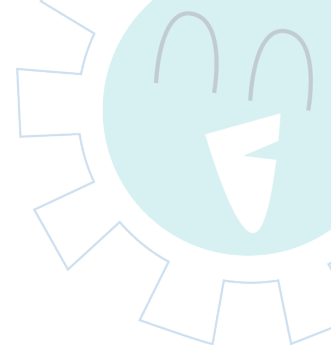
Content

What is the Most Significant Change method?

The most significant change (MSC) method is a way to evaluate projects by collecting personal stories of change directly from participants. These stories provide insights into how a project has impacted individuals and communities, with a focus on unexpected or qualitative changes rather than predefined metrics.

For instance, in a program designed to empower youth through leadership training, one participant might share how their newfound confidence led them to start a local environmental campaign. While the program's goal may have been leadership development, this story highlights broader outcomes like community engagement.

Facilitator tip: Start by framing MSC with a relatable example. For instance: *"Imagine someone shares how learning to manage stress through our program helped them better organize themselves. This is the kind of significant change we aim to uncover through MSC."*

Why is MSC unique? MSC focuses on:
- Real stories: Hearing directly from those impacted.
- Unexpected outcomes: Discovering results that may not align with predefined objectives.
- Depth of impact: Understanding emotional and personal growth.

Example: In a literacy program for adults, MSC uncovered a story of a participant teaching their child to read at home, showcasing the ripple effect of the program beyond the primary participants.
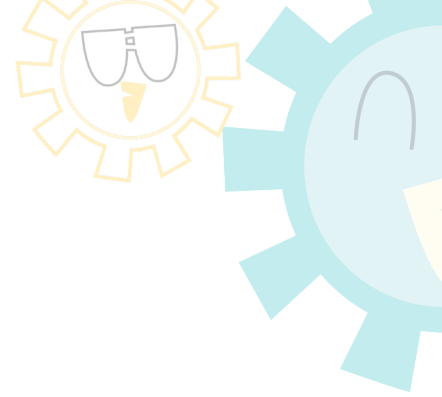
Objectives

The objectives of the Most Significant Change (MSC) method encompass a range of goals that focus on capturing, analyzing, and utilizing qualitative data to understand the impact of programs. These objectives are aimed at providing a comprehensive evaluation framework that highlights the nuanced and diverse effects of interventions.

Here are the primary objectives of the MSC method:
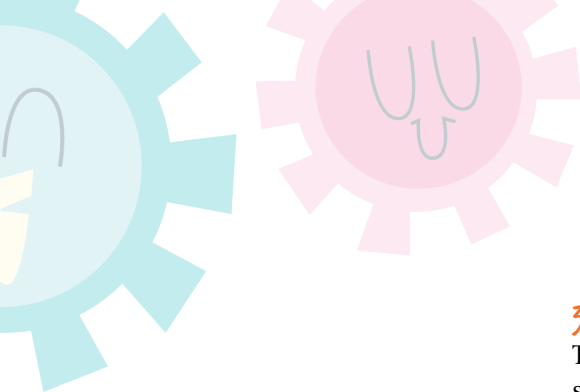
1.Capture qualitative impacts

To gather detailed, personal stories from participants that describe significant changes they have experienced due to the program in order to provide a deeper understanding of the program's effects that may not be captured through quantitative measures alone.

2.Highlight diversity of experiences

To include a wide range of voices and perspectives, especially those from marginalized or less-heard groups in order to ensure that the evaluation captures the full spectrum of participant experiences and the program's impact on different categories of participants.

3.Facilitate reflective learning

To encourage participants and stakeholders to reflect on the changes experienced and the factors contributing to these changes.

4.Promote stakeholder engagement

To involve diverse stakeholders, including program staff, participants, and community members, in the evaluation process in order to enhance the relevance and validity of the evaluation findings by incorporating multiple perspectives and expertise.

5.Identify and document significant changes

To systematically select and document the most significant change stories that illustrate the program's impact so as to create a rich, qualitative dataset that highlights key outcomes and can be used for program reporting and advocacy.

6.Support project's improvement and adaptation

To use the insights gained from MSC stories to identify strengths and areas for improvement in the project.

7.Enhance communication and advocacy

To communicate the program's impact effectively to stakeholders, funders, and the broader public; to use powerful personal narratives to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of the program, thereby supporting advocacy and fundraising efforts.

8.Encourage a culture of learning and accountability

To establish a culture within the organization that values continuous learning and accountability through regular reflection on MSC findings.

Preparation
of the Method

a. PLANNING

Steps to prepare for MSC:

1.Define purpose: Clarify what you hope to learn. *For example, a youth mentoring program may want to understand its impact on self-confidence and career choices.*

2.Scope and focus: Decide the areas of interest and the timeframe for changes. For instance, focus on changes within the first six months of participation.

3.Resource allocation: Prepare necessary tools, such as recording devices for interviews or a platform for collecting stories.

4.Stakeholder involvement: Identify stakeholders to include—*e.g., program staff, participants, and funders.*

Facilitator tip: Tailor the MSC approach based on the group's context. *For example, when working with young people, use creative tools like storytelling games to make the process engaging.*

b. TRAINING

•**Training collectors**: Provide training for those collecting stories, covering ethical considerations, interview techniques, and cultural sensitivity. Role-playing exercisescan help prepare collectors for real interviews. *Example: In a training session, simulate an interview where participants share a significant change, followed by group feedback*

•**Training participants**: Conduct orientation sessions for participants to explain the MSC process, its purpose, and how their stories will be used. This ensures transparency and encourages honest sharing.

Training collectors:

•Teach ethical considerations, such as obtaining informed consent.

•Role-play interviews to practice asking open-ended questions and active listening.

Example: In a training session, simulate an interview where participants share a significant change, followed by group feedback.

Training participants:

•Explain the MSC process in simple terms.

•Use visual aids to show how their stories contribute to understanding the program's impact.

Facilitator tip: Make the training interactive. *For example, ask participants to share mini-stories to practice identifying significant changes.*

ETHICS

Informed consent
- Ensure that all participants fully understand the purpose of the research, how their data will be used, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time.
- Provide clear, written information about the study and obtain written consent.

Confidentiality and anonymity
- Protect the identity of participants by anonymizing personal data and using pseudonyms where necessary.
- Store data securely and limit access to authorized personnel only.

Non-maleficence and beneficence
- Avoid causing harm or discomfort to participants. Ensure that the process is not distressing or intrusive.
- Aim to provide benefits, such as empowering participants by valuing their stories and insights.

Respect for persons
- Treat all participants with respect and dignity, valuing their input and experiences.
- Be mindful of power dynamics, ensuring that all voices are heard and considered.

Facilitator insight: Always prioritize the comfort of participants. For instance, let them choose whether they want their stories to be recorded or written down.

INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

Open-ended questions
- Use open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses and provide participants the freedom to express their thoughts fully.
  For example, ask, "Can you describe a significant change you've experienced due to the program?"

Active listening
- Practice active listening by giving full attention to the participant, showing interest, and not interrupting. Use non-verbal cues, such as nodding, to show engagement.

Probing for depth
- Ask follow-up questions to delve deeper into specific points. *For example, "Can you elaborate on how that change affected your daily life?"*

Neutral and non-leading
- Maintain a neutral stance, avoiding leading questions that could bias the participant's responses.
  For example, instead of asking, "Did the program improve your skills?" ask, "How has the program impacted your skills?"

Building rapport
- Establish a comfortable and trusting environment by being friendly and approachable. This helps participants feel more at ease sharing personal stories.

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Cultural awareness
Be aware of and sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of participants. Understand that cultural norms and values can influence how people perceive and express their experiences.

Language and communication
Use language that is appropriate and accessible to the participant's cultural context. Avoid jargon or colloquial expressions that may not be understood.

Respect for cultural practices
Show respect for cultural practices and beliefs. For example, consider the appropriateness of the interview setting and the way questions are posed.

Avoiding stereotypes
Do not make assumptions based on cultural stereotypes. Treat each participant as an individual with a unique perspective.

Inclusivity and representation
Ensure that the research design and implementation include diverse cultural perspectives, especially those from underrepresented groups.

c. STORY COLLECTION

Selecting participants

Ensure a representative sample by selecting participants from different demographic groups and regions. In a project aimed at improving rural healthcare, this might include patients, healthcare providers, and community leaders.

Collection methods

Choose appropriate methods based on the context and participants. Options include:

- Individual interviews: For in-depth personal stories.
- Focus groups: To capture a range of perspectives and encourage discussion.
- Written submissions: For those uncomfortable with verbal sharing.

Questioning techniques

Use open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses, such as *"Can you describe a significant change you've experienced since joining the project?"*

d. CRITERIA FOR SELECTION

Defining 'Significant'

Collaborate with stakeholders to define what constitutes a significant change. This might include:

- Depth of change: The extent to which the change has affected the participant.
- Breadth of impact: How many people are affected by the change.
- Relevance: The change's alignment with the program's objectives.

Delivering the Method

a. STORY COLLECTION

Interview process: Conduct interviews in a comfortable setting, ensuring privacy and confidentiality. For instance, in a program targeting youth at risk, choose neutral locations where participants feel safe.

Recording and documentation: Record interviews (with consent) and take detailed notes. Transcribe the recordings to ensure accurate representation of the stories.

Ensuring ethical standards: Obtain informed consent from participants, explaining how their stories will be used and ensuring their anonymity if desired.

Select participants: Ensure diversity by including individuals from different demographics.
For example, in a program targeting urban and rural youth, include participants from both areas.

Use open-ended questions: Encourage participants to share freely. For instance: "*Can you describe a moment when you felt most impacted by this program?*"

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Facilitator tip:
Build rapport before diving into questions. Start with casual conversation to make participants feel at ease.

14

b. STORY SELECTION

Forming the review panel: Create a panel comprising diverse stakeholders. *For example, in an educational project, include teachers, students, parents, and project managers.*

Panel preparation: Prepare the panel on the selection criteria and the process for discussing and evaluating stories. Emphasize the importance of respecting differing opinions.

Panel discussions: Facilitate structured discussions where panel members present stories they consider significant. Encourage debate and consider multiple perspectives. *For example, a story about a student overcoming language barriers might be weighed against a story about improved teaching practices.*

Consensus building: Use consensus or voting methods to select the most significant stories. Document the discussions and reasons behind the selection to provide transparency and accountability.

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Facilitator tip:
Create a structured discussion process. Use ranking methods or voting to select the most impactful stories.

c. FEEDBACK AND DISSEMINATION

Sharing findings: Share the selected stories with all stakeholders through various channels, such as newsletters, websites, or community meetings. *For example, in a public health initiative, share stories in local clinics and community centers.*

Feedback to contributors: Provide feedback to participants who shared stories, highlighting how their contributions have helped shape the understanding of the program's impact.

Using stories for learning: Use the stories in training sessions, policy discussions, and program planning to illustrate the program's impact and areas for improvement.
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Facilitator tip:
Use storytelling events or showcases where participants can hear the stories chosen as most significant. This fosters a sense of community and recognition.

Evaluation

Thematic analysis: Analyze the stories to identify recurring themes and patterns. *For example, in an anti-bullying campaign, themes might include increased self-confidence and reduced incidents of bullying.*

Impact assessment: Compare the qualitative findings with quantitative data, if available. For instance, cross-reference stories of improved health outcomes with statistical data on disease prevalence.

Actionable insights: Develop actionable recommendations based on the analysis. *For example, if stories indicate a lack of access to resources, consider expanding resource distribution efforts.*

Documentation and reporting: Compile a comprehensive report detailing the MSC process, selected stories, and findings. Include reflections from the panel and recommendations for program improvement.

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Facilitator tip:
Use visuals like word clouds to present recurring themes to stakeholders. Develop recommendations based on the findings. For instance, if stories highlight logistical challenges, suggest improving access to resources.

Why we use this method?
Inclusion & diversity context

The MSC method is invaluable for capturing diverse and nuanced impacts, especially in complex and diverse settings. It:

Captures diverse voices: Ensures that the experiences of marginalized and less-visible groups are represented, providing a fuller picture of the program's impact.

Encourages reflection and empowerment: Empowers participants by valuing their stories and encouraging them to reflect on their experiences and growth.

Reveals unexpected outcomes: Highlights unexpected changes and outcomes that may not be captured through traditional quantitative methods.

Enhances project adaptability: Provides rich qualitative data that can inform project adaptations and improvements, ensuring relevance and responsiveness to participant needs.

In the context of Erasmus+ and ESC, MSC can reveal the personal and intercultural growth of participants.

How it can be used
in Erasmus+/ESC context?

Monitoring & evaluation
Use MSC to track the personal development, intercultural experiences, and social impact of participants in mobility and volunteering projects.

Training & development
Incorporate MSC stories into training materials to prepare new participants, helping them understand potential challenges and benefits.

Advocacy & communication
Share MSC stories with stakeholders to advocate for the project, demonstrating its impact on personal growth, cultural understanding, and community development.

Policy development
Use the insights from MSC to inform policy discussions and development, ensuring that the needs and experiences of participants are considered.
Example: An ESC project might use MSC to showcase how a volunteer's experience led to their increased civic engagement back home.
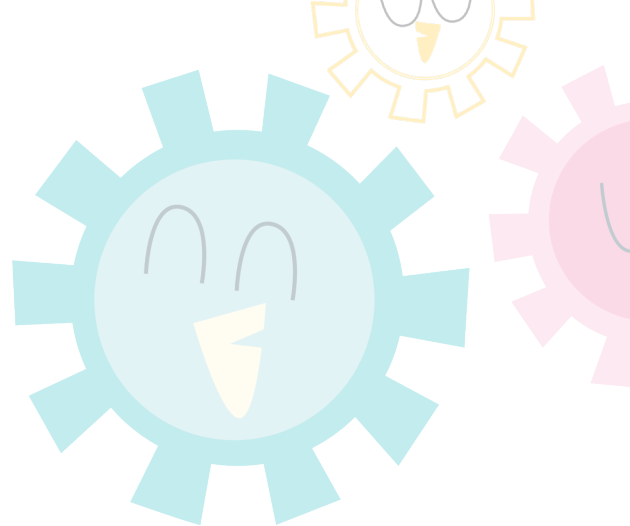
Applying MSC to Evaluate a Volunteering Project on Sustainability

A volunteering project financed by the European Solidarity Corps aims to organize a local community festival promoting sustainability. Volunteers engage in various activities, such as creating eco-friendly workshops, partnering with local businesses, and raising community awareness about sustainable practices.
How MSC could be applied:

18

1. Define the scope of MSC

The focus could be on capturing personal changes among volunteers, such as increased environmental awareness, leadership development, or community engagement, as well as broader community impacts, like shifts in sustainable habits or strengthened local partnerships.

2. Story collection

Volunteers, community members, and local partners would be invited to share their experiences.
Example questions:
"Can you describe a moment during the festival preparation that felt significant to you?"
"How has participating in this project changed the way you think about sustainability?"
"What was the most impactful part of the festival for the community?"

3. Potential MSC stories

- A volunteer shares how organizing the festival inspired them to start a zero-waste club at their school.
- A local business describes how the festival encouraged them to adopt eco-friendly practices like reducing single-use plastics.
- A community member recounts how attending the festival's workshops motivated them to create a compost system for their neighborhood.

4. Story selection process

A review panel composed of volunteers, local stakeholders, and project coordinators would assess the stories based on agreed criteria, such as:

- Depth of personal change (*e.g., new sustainable practices adopted by individuals*).
- Breadth of community impact (*e.g., multiple local businesses implementing eco-friendly practices*).
- Alignment with the project's goals of promoting sustainability.

5. Using the stories

- **Evaluation**: Identify themes, such as volunteers' leadership growth or increased community participation in sustainability efforts.
- **Advocacy and reporting**: Share selected stories with the European Solidarity Corps to demonstrate the project's success and justify future funding.
- **Learning and improvement**: Use insights to refine future projects, like incorporating more hands-on workshops or expanding outreach to specific community groups.
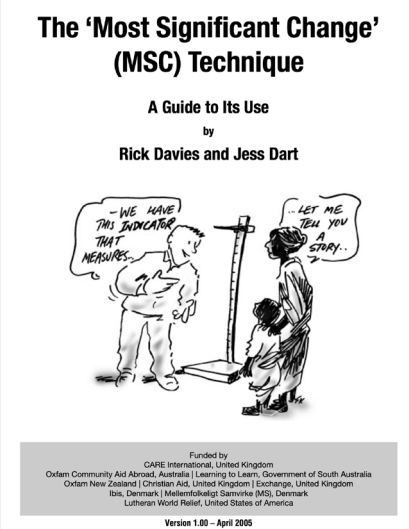

Facilitator tip:
Encourage participants to focus on specific moments of change rather than general observations, as these make the stories more vivid and impactful.
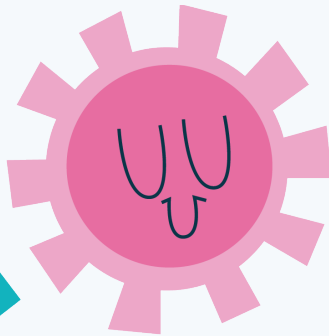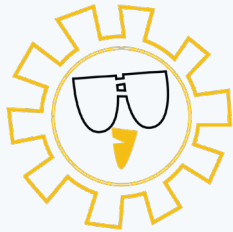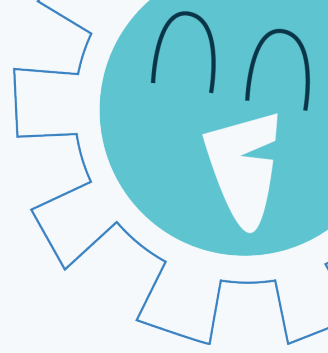
Resources

1

Davis, R. & Dart, J. (2005). The "Most Significant Change" (MSC) technique: A guide to its use.

2

Intrac for civil society (2017): Most significant change

CONNECTOR
is an international event focused on non-formal learning and organised every year by
ANPCDEFP
National Agency for the Community Programmes in the Field of Education and Vocational Training
(Romanian NA for European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+)
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