TOOL: MONITORING AND EVALUATION THROUGH STORIES - MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE

Abstract

This tool describes how stories can be used for project monitoring and evaluation to a smart energy project by applying a technique mainly used in social programme called "Most Significant Change". This tool was written for project managers looking for novel and participatory methods for impact monitoring and evaluation.

What is it?

The "Most Significant Change" (MSC) technique is a participatory method for evaluation and monitoring through stories. Until now, this method has mainly been used as an evaluation and monitoring tool in the area of development cooperation. In the area of smart energy projects, it could prove an effective method to actively involve customers in a project. This short description is based on Davies & Dart's The Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique – A Guide to Its Use (2005).

The three indispensable actions in implementing MSC are:
- Collecting significant change stories
- Selection of most significant change stories by a chosen groups of stakeholders
- Feedback on the selection process to the related stakeholders.

All other activities depend on the specific circumstances in which MSC is applied.

When to use?

The MSC technique is an effective tool for detecting change that happens over time as well as evaluating the impact of e.g. a new project or product on the behaviour of consumers. When implementing MSC, it is valuable to start as early in a project as possible in order to track changes over time. The planning phase or early implementation phase would be a good time to start the implementation of MSC.

What do you need to do?

Figure 1: Selection of the Most significant Change story (based on: Davies & Dart 2014, p.11)

Collect stories of change

The first step to using MSC is to collect stories of change from project participants. The stories should focus on personal change and can be collected by asking loose questions, such as 'What is in your opinion the most significant change that took place because of action/intervention/the introduction of A?' The personal change stories should conclude with a statement on why certain events, etc. were chosen for the story, why this was particularly significant for the narrator. For further information on how to tell and collect stories, please have a look at the guideline Engaging people through telling stories. Examples for Templates to collect MSC stories are included in the guide by Davies & Dart (2005).

Choose selection committees

After collecting the stories, they go through several round of reviewing. For this review process so-called selection committees are chosen, e.g. from members of the project staff or other stakeholders, like managers or employees from a municipality, etc. These committees select in each review round the stories that contain the most significant change among all stories. As depicted in Figure 1, the collected stories go through several rounds of selection. The 1st Level Selection Committees discuss all of the submitted stories in their area and hand the most significant ones to the 2nd Level Selection Committee or committees who takes care of selecting the most significant of all the stories submitted from the lower level. The number of selection levels is variable and depends on the project's organisational structure. This way, the stories with most overall value are selected with putting too much work or pressure on just one person or group.

Optional: Determine "Domains of change"

The most significant change stories are selected in each round for each 'domain of change'. Domains are rather broad categories of change stories, e.g. changes in the

end users energy consumption. The stories of one predetermined domain of change are analysed together. A feasible number of domains are three to five. The frequency of collecting stories is variable, but should be determined in advance. A three month frequency is most common.

Select the stories with the most significant change and give feedback

To judge the significance of a change story, MSC doesn't usually work with fixed key performance indicators as such. Rather than that, the selection committee discusses and decides on a set of selection criteria. This can be done either before or during/after reading the stories. The selection committee documents the selection criteria and, for each story, the reasons why it was chosen to be among the most significant ones in this round and hands this information to the next level selection committee. Also, feedback on which selection criteria was chosen should be given to all people that submitted a story.

Although MSC provides mainly qualitative data, a quantification of the reported changes is still possible. Within each story e.g. the people involved, the number of activities and different effects is quantifiable. Also, once the most significant stories are selected, all participants can be asked about other instances of that same change. Furthermore, the frequency of a specific type of change in all collected stories can be counted.

Further reading

- Davies, R.J. & Dart, J. (2005). T*he 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique – A guide to Its Use.* http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf

SMART **CONSUMER**
SMART **CUSTOMER**
SMART **CITIZEN**