

The most significant change approach for monitoring an Australian extension project

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Introduction

Between May 1998 and May 1999, I was involved in facilitating the implementation of a novel approach to project monitoring referred to as *The Most Significant Change* approach across an Australian extension project. As far as I am aware, this approach had never been attempted in Australia before. The purpose was two-fold: to collect data about the impact of the project as a whole; and to promote organisational learning within the project team. The Most Significant Change (MSC) approach is participatory, in that all the project stakeholders are involved in deciding the sorts of change to be recorded. Essentially the process involves the collection of stories of change, emanating from the field level and the systematic selection of the most significant of these stories by project steering committees.

This article describes the MSC approach and highlights some experiences gained during a 12-month trial with the Target 10 Dairy Extension Project. It is suggested that this approach constitutes an appropriate and credible process for monitoring change, helps to promote organisational learning, and can be inspiring for those involved.

Background to the project

The Target 10 Dairy Extension Project was initiated in 1992, with the aim of enhancing the viability of the dairy industry through programmes that profitably increase consumption of pasture by cows. It operates across four regions of the State of Victoria in Australia. In 1996, the project focus was broadened to include other areas that were of high priority to the industry. Information about these areas (grazing management, business, dairy cow nutrition, soils and fertilisers and natural resource management) is extended to farmers through courses, discussion groups, newsletters, comparative analysis, field days, focus farms and demonstrations and other media. The organisational structure under which the project operates is complex, having both public and private stakeholders and partnerships with the University of Melbourne and the dairy industry. The project also has a number of steering committees at the regional and state level. These committees are all chaired by farmers, and are comprised of farmer representatives, extension staff, university staff and representatives from the local dairy industry.

Taking this organisational complexity into account, it is vitally important that time is allocated for the various stakeholders to enter into a meaningful dialogue about what is happening in the field, and whether these experiences represent the sort of outcomes that are desirable. It is also important that projects under this organisational structure are able to demonstrate that they have the capacity for reflective practice, organisational learning and the ability to capture and interpret evidence of changes that they are trying to achieve.

Since 1992, the Target 10 dairy extension project has completed extensive benefit-cost analysis and individual programmes have been evaluated against their objectives. However, in 1998 there was still a feeling that some of the project impact and outcomes were not being captured. It was agreed to trial some unconventional forms of monitoring and evaluation and one of these 'experiments' was to implement a 'story-based' approach. After introducing the story concept to key project stakeholders, an agreement was made that the approach would be implemented across the whole project for a period of one year. While many sceptical voices were heard at the start of this 'experiment', there is now growing enthusiasm for the approach, which is still being practised well after the one-year trial period and now, several other extension projects across Australia are adopting modified versions of this approach.

The Most Significant Change (MSC) approach to monitoring and evaluation

The MSC approach was developed by Rick Davies through his work with a savings and credit project in Bangladesh in 1994 (Davies, 1996). It also goes under several other names such as 'the Evolutionary Approach to Organisational Learning', 'the Narrative Approach' and also the 'Story Approach'. Unlike conventional approaches to monitoring, the MSC approach does not employ quantitative indicators, and, because of this, is sometimes referred to as 'monitoring without indicators'. The main three steps as described by Davies (1996) are:

- establish 'domains of change';
- set in place a process to collect and review stories of change; and,
- hold an annual round table meeting with the project funders.

In the Target 10 case, three additional steps were added. Firstly, as staff were unsure of the sort of stories required, an additional process referred to as the *taste test* was developed prior to establishing the domains of change. Secondly, for the approach to evolve to meet the regional requirements, a reference group was established consisting of regional champions and myself. Target 10 management also requested a secondary analysis of the stories *en masse*; therefore a sixth step was added which involved a secondary analysis of the stories. The resulting steps were as follows.

- *Taste test* and become familiar with the approach
- Establish four 'domains of change'
- Establish a learning set, that includes *champions* from each region
- Set in place a process to collect and review stories of change
- Hold an annual round table meeting for the project funders to review the stories
- Conduct a secondary analysis of the stories *en masse*.

The following sections describe the above steps as they were implemented across the Target 10 project.

Step 1 – 'Taste testing' the process

During early attempts to initiate the process, it became apparent that staff and committee members were not sure what sort of stories were required and asked me for guidance on the length of the story, the subject matter and the form it should take. In line with the evolutionary ethos of the approach, I felt that the project stakeholders themselves should determine these things. Staff were understandably nervous about putting pen to paper with so little guidance, therefore I developed a 'proforma' (Box 1) to help collect the stories. Then I held a pre-trial workshop in which we *taste tested* the approach with the whole project team, which consists of over 43 extension staff and managers.

Step 2 – Establishing the domains of change

Domains of change are loose categories of change used to distinguish different types of stories. For example, one of the four domains used in Bangladesh was *Changes in People's Participation*. Davies (1996) suggests that unlike performance indicators, the domains of change are not precisely defined but are left deliberately fuzzy; and it was initially up to field staff to interpret what they felt was a change belonging to any one of these categories. In the case of the Target 10 project, the domains of change were established using the Delphi technique (Cary and Salmon, 1976) and involving over 150 stakeholders of the project. Delphi is a form of interactive (postal) surveying that utilises an iterative questionnaire and feedback provides participants with an opportunity to revise earlier views based on the response of other participants, until some desired level of consensus is reached. Part of my rationale for using the Delphi approach was concerned with balancing the need to have ownership of evaluation and in terms of addressing *felt needs*. During wide consultation

with the project staff, it was put to me that developing the domains of change in an analytical manner, without widespread consultation could have led to a lack of ownership and the feeling that the evaluation was being *done to them*, rather than *being done by them*.

The domains of change chosen for monitoring the Target 10 Dairy Extension Project were: changes in on-farm practice, changes in profitability or productivity, changes in farmer decision-making skills and any other significant types of change.

Step 3 – Establishing a reference group

A reference group was established to capture learning, to encourage the adaptation of the process to local conditions and to co-ordinate the process. The reference group comprised four extension staff, representing each of the four project regions, and myself. These extension staff volunteered for the role of co-ordinating the story collection and selection in their regions and were referred to as the 'monitoring champions'. This group of people formed the main *learning cell*. Modifications to the process were discussed and decided upon during communication with these individuals. In some cases, we decided to test an idea in one region, before recommending the practice to the other regions.

Step 4 – Collecting and reviewing the stories of change

Collection of stories

In June 1997, all staff and committees (comprising of farmers, extension staff and representatives from the university and local industries) were supplied with blank proformas and encouraged to generate stories concerning what they considered to be significant changes (see Box 1). However, as very few stories were generated using this method, I encouraged staff to share the stories verbally during the meetings. These impromptu stories were later recorded and transcribed. For some people, this was their preferred form of storytelling; thus each region decided to purchase a tape recorder and to record stories at staff meetings and regional committee meetings. However, others continued to write the stories onto the blank proformas; and so the mode of initial recording was left to personal choice.

Structure of the review process

It was decided at an early stage of the implementation that the MSC approach should 'ride on the back' of the pre-existing project structure. This was considered to be an important point, as stakeholders did not want to schedule any additional meetings. My initial proposal for the story selection design was a copy of the Bangladesh structure, within the limitations posed by the pre-existing Target 10 hierarchy. The idea was for the stories to be collected primarily by staff, based on their own experience, or second hand from farmers and other stakeholders. The storytellers were to nominate the appropriate domain for their story. At

Box 1 Items contained in the proforma for collection of stories

Story title: '.....'

Domain:

- changes in decision-making skills
- changes in on-farm practice
- changes in profitability/ productivity
- other significant changes

Name of person recording story:

Region:

Date of narration: ... / ... /

Where did this happen?

When did it happen?

What happened?

Why do you think this is a significant change?

What difference did it make already/ will it make in the future?

NB: Normally more space is allocated for responses

staff meetings, participants were to review all the stories collected over the month and to select four, one for each domain, that represented the most significant change from their perspective. The four selected stories were then to be sent to the corresponding regional committee meeting. As these committee meetings were held every three months, the idea was that 12 stories (four from each of the monthly meetings) would be sent to the respective regional

committee meeting. Each of the four project regional committees was then to select four stories (one from each domain) to send to the statewide committee. They in turn would select a further four stories at each state-wide meeting, that would be sent to an annual round table meeting with the funders of the project. This proposal is illustrated in Figure 1 and the flow of stories is graphically presented in Figure 2.

Figure 1 Proposed steps and feedback loops of the MSC approach as implemented across Target 10 Project

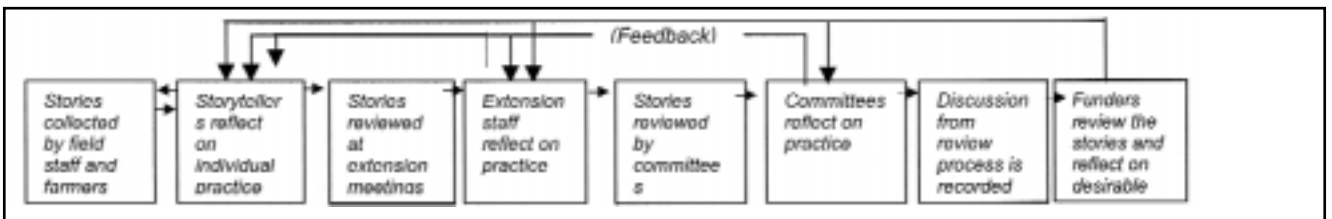
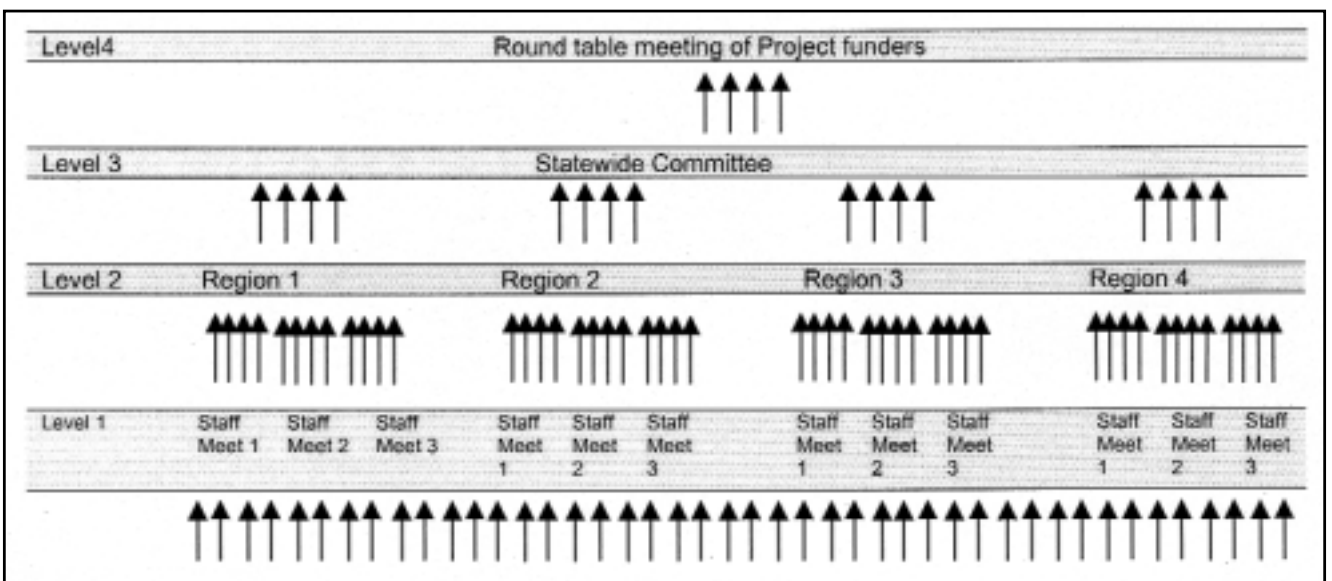


Figure 2 Diagram to represent an idealised flow of stories for a 3-month period across the Target 10 project



In practice it was found that the first level of selection, planned to be at monthly staff meetings, was problematic in that:

- not all regions had monthly staff meetings, and the committee structure varied considerably;
- project staff were keen to include stories directly from the committee members;
- collecting stories at every monthly staff meeting was too frequent; and,
- some felt that the stories should be selected by the regional committee members, rather than at staff only meetings.

As a result, in most cases the selection process began at the regional committee (Level 2, see Figure 2), and thus occurred at three, rather than four hierarchical levels. Each region developed its own system of selecting and collecting stories, depending on the existing committee structure. The only condition was that all regional committees should submit four stories to each state-executive meeting (Level 3, held every two/three months) and that they should document how they had selected these stories (see Figure 2).

Selection and feedback process

The stories were selected at meetings using a facilitated process. The titles of the stories were written on a white board under the respective domains. When all the stories had been read out, all the stories within one domain would be considered together. The facilitator would then ask a series of questions to prompt discussion before moving on to a vote by a show of hands. Each committee member was given one vote for each domain. When the vote was done, if there was no consensus, then further discussion was facilitated until an agreement had been reached as to which story should be selected. Occasionally no agreement could be reached, therefore either two stories were selected, or no story was found to be suitable. The idea was to come to an agreement as a group. As well as selecting a story, the committee members were also asked to state why the story had been selected over the others. Much of the discussion revolved around explanations of why they thought one story was particularly valuable or particularly misleading. This discussion was recorded on tape, or by a note taker.

The various committees were required to document which stories they selected and what criteria were used. The idea was that this information would be fed back to the project stakeholders on a regular basis so that they could learn from the previous round of stories and interpretations.

Step 5 – Annual round table meeting

At the end of the 12-month trial period a round-table meeting was held with eight participants who were considered to be funders or 'key influencers' of the Target 10 project. The round-table meeting took the form of a facilitated group discussion in which all participants were asked to give their reaction, in general, to the stories. They

were then asked to nominate certain stories as being the most representative of the sort of outcomes that they felt were valuable. Box 2 gives an example of one of the stories that were selected with the feedback comments attached to the bottom of the document. The comments were taken from the transcript of the discussion at the statewide committee meeting and round table meeting respectively.

In addition, a booklet was produced containing all the stories that had been selected by the statewide committee meeting over the period of the year. Each story was accompanied by the interpretation of the storyteller, comments from the statewide committee meeting, and comments from the funders (see Box 2). Thus the reader of the document can make a judgement on the story, and also have access to information about how the story was valued by the project committees and funders of the project. The booklet also detailed an outline of the MSC approach, and the findings of the secondary analysis of the stories. Approximately 350 copies of the booklet were distributed to project stakeholders.

Step 6 – Secondary analysis of the stories

In total, 134 stories were collected, transcribed and entered onto a database. Of these stories 77% were generated by project extension staff, 13% directly by farmers and 10% by other collaborators (industry and university representatives). At the request of the project, I conducted an additional step of analysing the stories en masse, the findings of which were included in the booklet *Target 10 Evaluation Stories* and circulated to all stakeholders. This analysis was done by examining the origin of the stories, the main themes, and differences between the stories that were selected and those that were not.

Fine tuning the process

It would be misleading to suggest that the MSC approach was implemented smoothly and easily across the project. At various stages in the 12-month trial, problems arose and where possible these were addressed. As the process was an iterative one, it was possible to modify each 'round' on the basis of feedback provided from the previous 'round' of stories. The main problems that arose were associated with the time needed to run the process and the confidentiality of informants. Some people also disliked the competitive aspect of the process, feeling disillusioned when their stories didn't get selected. It was also noticeable that the response to the MSC approach differed between the four regions of the project. Further research is currently being conducted into the organisational conditions that are likely to impede or enhance the success of this approach.

About 10% of all stories collected concerned some element of 'bad news'. Feedback from the statewide committee suggested it was extremely beneficial to read and discuss stories that were associated with negative outcomes. Because of this, eight months into the process, a fifth domain of change was added named 'lessons learned'.

Box 2 Example of a story

Title:	"I'll Not Be Milking Cows When I'm 55"
Name of person recording story:	Mark Saddington, dairy farmer
Region:	Gippsland
Date of narration:	Round 2 – 21 August 1998
Who was involved:	Farmer and family
When did it happen:	1998

What happened? We did the pilot Dairy Business Focus Program in March; and for the first time, my wife came along to something. We were able to look at our farm as a business, not just as a farm. As a consequence of doing the program, we did a few sums and made a few decisions. We worked out that we can afford to have her on the farm, and she has left her job at the bank. We will generate enough income on the farm to make it more profitable for her to be here. The kids will benefit from seeing her a lot more, and they won't be in day care. So far this year, this has made the calving so much easier, we have a joint input, and it has been such a turn around in my lifestyle. It has been so good.

We actually went to the accountant yesterday to get some financial advice on how we should be investing off-farm. He was amazed that what we are doing is treating the farm as a business. I said: 'Now everything that we earn on this farm is going to be put away so that I am not milking cows when I am 55 years old!'

We have got a debt-reduction program running for the next 12 months, but after that the money will be channelled to off-farm investment. I want to retire young enough to enjoy what we have been working towards for the last 20 or 30 years. My boss is 77 and is still working on the farm. If I am that fit when I am his age, I want to be touring around the world.

It has opened up our lives. We are now looking at off-farm investment, as capital investment on-farm is not that great. We are not going to invest in new machinery but are going to invest in contractors to do any work we can't do. There is no point buying new machinery, as it depreciates. Instead, we will buy shares and invest off the farm. This proves that you can farm on 120 cows, you don't have to get big, and you don't have to milk a lot of cows. It just depends what you do with your money. If only we could educate the younger farmers to think ahead instead buying the largest SS Commodore or the latest dual cab. I followed the same track for a few years until we sat down and worked out where we were going and where we could be. We made a few mistakes in the past, but the past is the past.

Feedback from the state-wide committee

- This story generated lots of discussion. But is it really about profitability or quality of life or changes in farm practice?
- The general consensus was that there needed to be more detail in the story for it to be clearly about profitability.
- It is a really powerful story that shows considerable change.

Feedback from the Round-table Meeting

- The story showed strong evidence of attitudinal change, leading to self-improvement and goal setting. These people will be high achievers and reap the rewards. They will be good role models for others who desire similar rewards.
- This approach is okay, but it isn't necessarily a prescription for others.
- It has some good messages, but it hasn't got all the answers.
- This is a very good example of achieving the goal of the DBF Program: i.e., getting strategic thinking/planning followed by farmer action.
- I liked this story as it highlights the diversity in personal goals and ways to get there.

Including this as a domain implied that each region was obliged to submit one story about lessons learned for every statewide review.

Findings

Describing the 'results' of this process is a difficult task. The first problem is that there is never a 'final' outcome, as the aims of the process are to:

- move *towards* a better understanding between all the various project stakeholders as to what is occurring for the individual farmer clients;
- to explore and share the various values and preferences of the project stakeholders; and,
- to gain a clearer understanding (as a group) of what *is* and *is not* being achieved by the project and to clarify what they are *really* trying to achieve, so that the project

can move *towards* what is desirable and move *away* from what is undesirable.

Secondly, unlike conventional evaluation approaches that tend to reduce the complexity of the client experience into numbers and averages, the MSC approach attempts to keep an element of the 'rich picture'. Therefore, it would go against the ethos of the approach to dissect the stories and summarise them in the name of the 'final results'. The 'final results' of this process are really the feelings and the judgements that are made when reading the stories and deciding whether they represent the sorts of outcomes that the reader finds merit-worthy for a project such as this.

Impact of the MSC approach on the project

After the 12-month trial of the process, I conducted a meta-evaluation (evaluation of an evaluation) into the impact of the MSC approach on the project (as part of my PhD research). The data consisted of a facilitated discussion with the project funders, 10 semi-structured interviews with committee members and staff and an internet survey sent to all project staff (Dart, 1999). The findings of this meta-evaluation revealed that those who participated in the process viewed the 'experiment' as a positive learning experience. Staff who participated in the process felt that they gained a better understanding of impact and a more fully shared vision between all the project collaborators. There is also evidence that the stories were used to improve extension practice, either to improve planning of extension activities or actually using stories to help explain a point to a farmer or to another member of staff. An unexpected outcome of the process was that for some, the process boosted their morale, especially through hearing how their work had contributed to positive outcomes in farmers' lives. One respondent commented that the stories "motivated, encouraged and invigorated us. Negative feedback was also very useful. It was really good to get positive feedback directly from farmers. Really great and rewarding to have 'my name' mentioned in a story".

The process of collecting and analysing stories saw farmers, collaborators and extension staff sitting together at committee meetings discussing and interpreting qualitative data, making evaluative judgements and negotiating about what constitutes a significant change. Feedback from the project committees suggested that learning also occurred in terms of increased skill in conceptualising and capturing impact; over the year the storytellers became better at capturing impact and responding to the suggestions that were provided in the feedback from the story review process.

Conclusion

The MSC approach appeared to provide useful, engaging accounts of how farmers had been affected by the project interventions. But without underrating the power of the MSC approach to produce data that contributed to describing the impact of Target 10 project, it is suggested that the most significant impact lies in the intangible area of organisational learning. There have been noticeable improvements in terms of gaining a richer and more shared understanding of what has been achieved as a project and what is valued as a positive outcome by the project stakeholders. The fact that practitioners are actually using the findings of an evaluation to improve their extension practice is also encouraging. The project has elected to continue using the MSC approach since the 12-month 'experiment' ended, and the project funders unanimously voted to continue to be involved in the annual story review process. Currently, other extension projects in Australia are now adopting modified versions of this approach.

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