Most Significant Change (MSC) stories – some basic information

Asking people about *change*

The name - 'Most Significant Change' - really does tell you what this is all about: it's about asking people to share what has changed for them. If there's more than one change, you're asking which 'change' stands out the most *for them*.

Who are you asking?

You might be asking the people taking part in an event or classes or who are part of a group. They might have been audience members at a show or visited an exhibition. Or they might receive a service or live in a place for which you have responsibilities.

But they may not be those people at all.

This is because you can use MSC with *anyone* who is involved:
- from your Board or steering/advisory group
- from stakeholder organisations – or other interested parties
- people who are volunteers
- people who are paid to work on your project/ activities/ strand of work.

The people who answer the questions are the **storytellers**. The people who ask are the **story collectors**. Later, the people who discuss the stories are the **panel**. These three should always be different people.

You need the **storytellers' consent**. This is because their stories are shared with a panel, for discussion – sharing their stories is an essential part of the whole MSC process. But the stories should be anonymous.

What's the question?

At the heart of these conversations about activities, or project, or strand of work, or place, is a request:

"Tell us about a change that you've noticed"

There are other ways you could ask the same question:
- *What's surprised you?*
- *Describe what stands out most for you (at this stage)*
- *What have you noticed?*
- *Is anything different because of your being involved/ taking part?*
- *What's struck you the most about this activity/ project? Is that different from what you thought before?*
- *Describe any changes you've noticed since you first got involved.*
- *Can you tell us about anything that has changed for you because of coming here?*

Or you might ask something like:
"Has it made a difference to your day/ your journey/ your visit, seeing this exhibition/ hearing musicians/ trying the new service? Can you tell me why/ how?"

Change – since when?
MSC has a bit of a 'before' and 'after' flavour to it – a bit like the photos of people before and after they've had their beard shaved off, or lost weight.

As a story collector, you're asking – how was your life before? What changed? What was it like after that?

You might be asking about a particular part of someone's life – their working life. Or their understanding of what it is to be in later life. Or how they spend their time during the week. The way you ask the question needs to make sense to you and to the people you're asking!

Sometimes it helps to approach this more as a chat over a cup of tea. But you need still to have a bit of structure in your chat.

It's generally better to talk one to one, rather than have this kind of conversation in a group. If you do ask a group of people, you might find it helpful if you start as a group and then ask people to write down (or record in other ways) their own answers and just share these individually with you. This is because this part is about people's individual stories – not a group story.

Collecting stories
You can collect stories in lots of different ways – written text, artform media, audio, visual. Feel free to be creative, adapting to your project and the strengths and preferences of your storytellers and panel. Whatever you decide to do, don't lose sight of the fact that the stories need to be discussed by a panel who won't have been involved with these stories before.

It's a good idea to limit the number of stories you collect at any one time. Mostly people collect around 8-15 stories. This is because of what happens next – the panel discussion. Fewer than 8 stories might not create a good discussion; more than 15 is unwieldy!

Panels
Panels get together after the stories have been collected and recorded, to discuss the stories. They shouldn't know whose stories these are because stories should be anonymous. Sometimes the detail of the story might mean it's fairly obvious where/who it's come from - but that fact may only distract from the purpose of the panel's discussion so you might want to discourage the panel from commenting on it.

The panel isn't meeting to pick a 'winning' story. They're not there to decide which story best illustrates the point *they've already decided they want to make*. (We all know that can sometimes happen!)

They meet to discuss which story stands out most for them – *and why*.

The '**why**' is as important as the '**which**'. Whoever facilitates the panel's discussion needs to record both.

You might think of the panel as a bit like a book club. The panel meets to talk about how the stories have affected them. On the panel, everyone's thoughts and voices about the stories are as important as everyone else's.

Ideally, you'll have 5-8 people in your panel. The panel should be people who:
- Haven't told stories (or, at least, haven't told a story that's being discussed)
- Haven't collected the stories. (You might, as facilitator, have collected the stories: if this is the only practical way you can do this, just be aware of your own views of the stories when you are facilitating).

The panel might also be people you want to influence, eg:
- Funders and other stakeholders; local or national politicians; housing or health professionals; artists; other older people.

Make sure everyone has copies of the stories in good time, before they meet.

Just as you might collect stories from anyone who is involved, your panel can be made up from anyone involved. So, you might have:
- Stories from your Board members discussed by a panel of your tenants, or
- Stories from staff members discussed by a panel of potential funders, or
- Stories from older participants discussed by a panel of volunteers.

This is part of why MSC is such a different approach from more 'traditional' ways of evaluation. It can feel quite challenging, at first. But the results are extremely valuable.

If you don't like the word 'panel', feel free to come up with a term that works better for you.

Panel discussions
Allow around 1-2 hours for discussion. Hopefully everyone will have read the stories in advance; in reality, time may be needed for reading at the start of the meeting.

Record the discussion (using the best method for you), because it needs to be shared. You're asking everyone to say – *which story stands out most to you, and why?* Ideally, everyone agrees on one story. But if the group is split:
- Invite the competing parts of the group to say why they've made their decision
- See if that encourages anyone to change their mind.

It's fine if people stick to their original choice – just make a note of, for example, the two stories chosen, the discussion, and maybe the numbers who chose (*five people wanted story 2 because … three people chose story 6 because …*)

Next stages
You can keep recording stories and having panel discussions over time. Each time stories are collected, recorded, and discussed would be a 'story cycle'.

You can also then have more than one panel. Here's one example:

You decide to:
- Have 3 story cycles, one every 6 months
- Each cycle of stories collected are discussed by a panel
- You decide to use the same panel each time (but you could have different panels)
- In Cycle 1, one story stands out the most
- In Cycle 2, there are 2 stories that stand out the most
- In Cycle 3, there is 1 story the panel feels is most significant
- In total across the 3 cycles, 4 stories have been identified as most significant
- A different – and final - panel meets to discuss these 4 stories. They choose the story out of these 4 that's most significant to them.

Remember to record why they reach that conclusion! And don't forget that the 'why' discussion gives you as much material to draw on as the 'which' story.

We hope these notes help as you begin further to explore MSC.

Please get in touch if you would like us to work with you to develop specific MSC tools, timelines, or training, for your project or service or organisation.