Evaluating Food Systems Change through Stories: A Hands-on Workshop

Lesli Hoey, Lilly Fink Shapiro, Sue Ann Savas – University of MIchigan
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Youth | Good food access | Farms and farmers | Institutions | Food system infrastructure

Good Food Is:

Healthy - It provides nourishment and enables people to thrive

Green - It was produced in a manner that is environmentally sustainable

Fair - No one along the supply chain was exploited for its creation

Affordable - All people have access to it

THE MICHIGAN GOOD FOOD CHARTER

http://www.michiganfood.org/

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CRFS

Farm to Institution Network

Food Hub Network

Good Food Charter Steering Committee

Shared Measurement Project

Michigan Good Food Fund

Local Food Council Network

The **Most Significant Change** approach is a participatory evaluation method that is a: "dialogic, story-based technique"

- Dart and Davies (2003)

Stories of food systems change are often being collected already

Why stories?

Stories are powerful tools of influence: Easier to understand and remember than facts/statistics; they humanize information

When issues are difficult to discuss, stories depoliticize information and open a dialogue

Storytelling relies on people to make sense of their own experiences and environment

Stories reflect contextual factors that influence outcomes

The MSC is a *systematic* way of integrating storytelling into an evaluation. It makes sense to use it when:

- interventions are highly participatory
- there may not (yet) be agreements on what outcomes are the most important
- outcomes will vary widely across participants and contexts
- it's not possible to predict in detail or with certainty what the outcomes will be

A panel of designated stakeholders discuss "significant change" stories emanating from the field and define what the "most significant change" is. (©Rick Davis and Jess Dart)

The standard MSC process

Selection of most significant stories by management team

Selection of most significant stories by field staff

Stories collected from program participants and stakeholders

Management team

Field staff

Field staff

Field staff
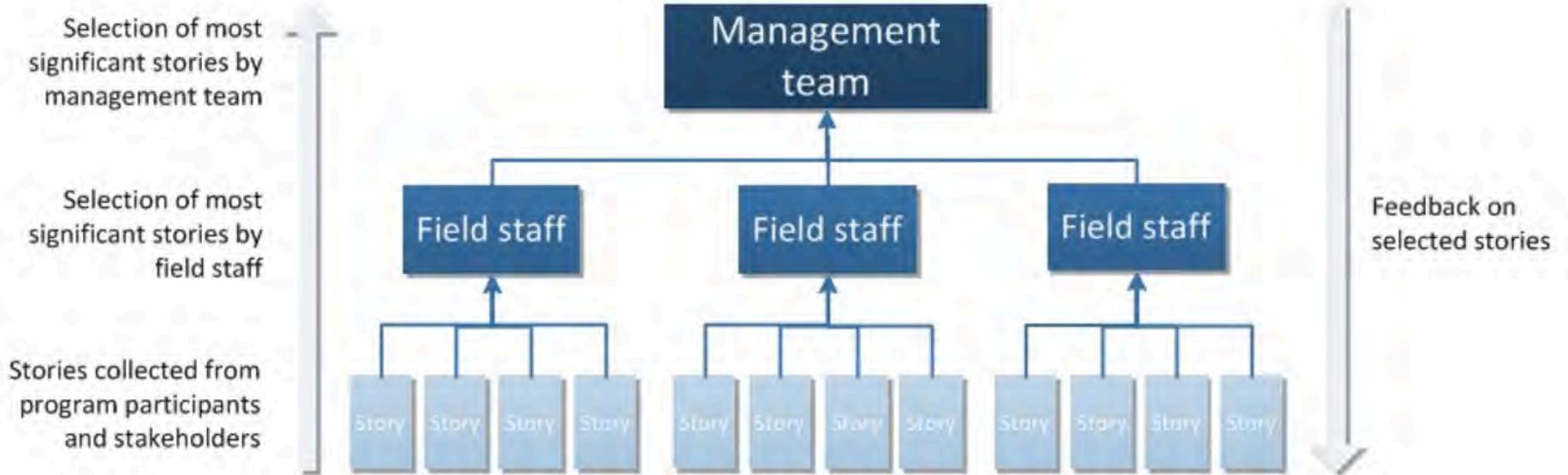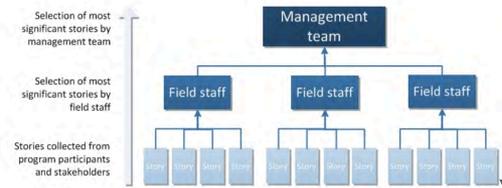
Over the last month, what do you think was the most significant change in…[domain]?

Domains offer guidance and are deliberately fuzzy. Examples:
- the quality of people's lives,
- the nature of organizational partnerships,
- food systems change, etc.
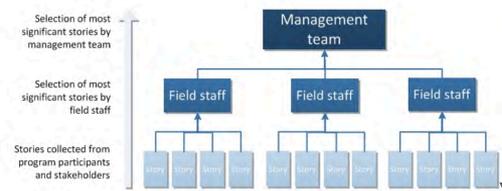
WHY is this change significant to you?

Asking "why?" helps others to accurately interpret the story, encourages second order learning (re-examination of organizational goals), and helps to build a shared vision.

Other decisions about stories

Scale and unit of change: individuals, organizations, policies, partnerships, communities, etc.

Causes of change: your organization or general changes

Length: Short (1/2 page) or long (2 pages or more)

Frequency of collection: Weekly, monthly, quarterly, yearly, etc.

Storytellers: Program participants (those ultimately impacted), other stakeholders in the wider community, field staff, managers, etc.

Story collection strategies: Unsolicited (staff who hear/see stories), self-written by participants, or interviews/group discussions with participants

Davies and Dart 2005

Selection of most significant stories by management team

Selection of most significant stories by field staff

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Management team

Field staff

Field staff

Fie...

Story | Story | Story | Story | Story | Story | Story | Story | Story | Story
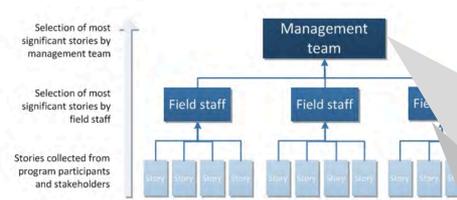
Typical story selection process

1. everybody reads (or hears) the stories
2. the group discusses the stories
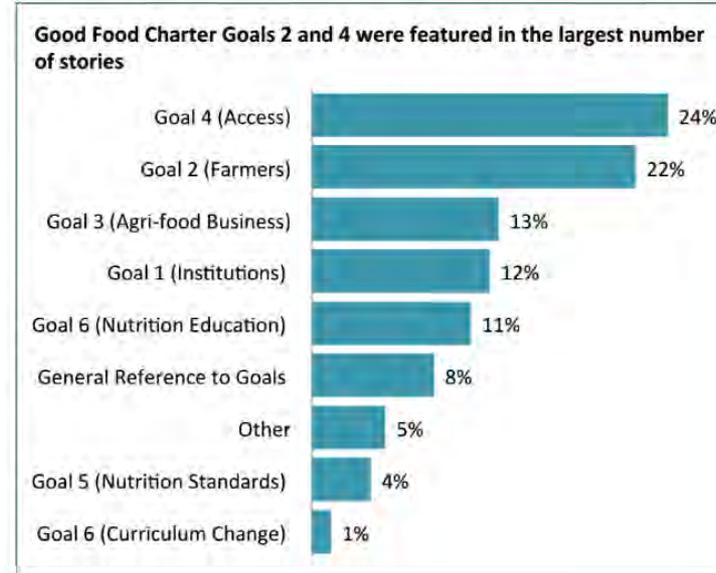3. the group decides which story is most significant (via consensus, voting, scoring, pre-scoring then group vote, secret ballot, etc.)
4. the reasons for the group's choice(s) are documented.

Analysis options

- Thematic coding (e.g., stories associated with Charter goals)
- Logic model coding
- Positive vs. negative/lessons
- Differences between stories selected vs. not selected (and reasons)
- (If solicited): who is (and is not) telling stories, number of stories submitted, changes over time

Good Food Charter Goals 2 and 4 were featured in the largest number of stories

Goal	%
Goal 4 (Access)	24%
Goal 2 (Farmers)	22%
Goal 3 (Agri-food Business)	13%
Goal 1 (Institutions)	12%
Goal 6 (Nutrition Education)	11%
General Reference to Goals	8%
Other	5%
Goal 5 (Nutrition Standards)	4%
Goal 6 (Curriculum Change)	1%

Long Term Impact 0%

Short Term Outcomes 10%

Process 50%

Inputs 40%

Common questions

What do you mean "significant"? Open to interpretation - requires negotiating different priorities and values. Another way to think about significant change is "differences that make a difference".

Why one story? Making a choice stimulates debate, learning about each other's values and thinking more deeply about each story.

Isn't much of this subjective? The point is to make organizational or stakeholder values transparent. This is why reasons for selecting stories are documented.

Isn't the sampling selective and the approach biased towards success? Yes, but this isn't about trying to understand the "average condition" – it requires triangulation with other methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups, or surveys to see if emerging impacts are widespread). Exceptional stories teach us the most about how to "move towards success and away from failure". You can also ask about "lessons" or intentionally invite critics for story telling or selection.

Davies and Dart 2005

Learning MSC by doing

1) Three minute essay: your story + why + lesson (3 min)
2) Break into groups
3) Individuals share stories + why + lesson (3 min **each**)
4) Group discussion to select + why + lesson (7 min)
5) Report out – spokesperson different
   from the original storyteller
   (3 min **per table**, depends on time)

All stories are important!

Three minute essay

1) From your point of view, describe the **most significant change** you have observed in your community related to food systems since 2010. Describe who was involved, what happened, where and when.
2) **Why** is this change significant to you?
3) What key **lesson** – about food systems change – emerges from this story for your community or other communities in Michigan?

Learning MSC by doing

1) <u>Break into groups</u>: numbers on back of sheets

2) <u>Individuals share</u>: stories + why + lesson (3 min **each**)

3) <u>Group discussion</u>: select story + why + lesson (7 min)

4) <u>Report out</u>: spokesperson different from the original storyteller (3 min **per table**, depends on time)

For more information

Davies and Dart 2005 Guide:
http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf

A shortened version: Dart, J & R. Davies. (2003). A dialogical, story-based evaluation tool: The most significant change technique. *American Journal of Evaluation,* 23.

Or visit this website: http://www.kstoolkit.org/Most+Significant+Change

Lesli Hoey

lhoey@umich.edu

University of Michigan

Urban and Regional Planning Program

Sustainable Food Systems Initiative (SFSI):
http://sites.lsa.umich.edu/sustainablefoodsystems

A panel of designated stakeholders discuss "significant change" stories emanating from the field and define what the "most significant change" is. (©Rick Davis and Jess Dart)

Collaborators:

Lilly Fink Shapiro, Sue Ann Savas, MSU Center for Regional Food Systems

THANK YOU to our note takers! Mariah, Ben, Emily, Rachel, and Leah