

2018 Michigan Good Food Summit

Breakout Session #11: Collecting Stories of Food Systems Change

1:45 pm

Speakers: Lilly Fink Shapiro and Leslie Hoey, University of Michigan

- The presentation was 25 minutes, then there was implementation of the process below through a hands-on activity.
- The “Most Significant Change” approach
 - A story selection technique
 - This method works for food systems, because they are often very complex
 - Allows you to talk to leaders and track changes through stories
- Why Stories?
 - Powerful tools of influence: make it easier to understand or remember, as opposed to abstract facts or statistics
 - They can depoliticize and humanize information
- The MSC (Most Significant Change) method is a systematic way of integrating stories into an evaluation and works well when:
 - Projects are participatory, outcomes will vary, when there are many factors involved
- How it works
 - Ask storytellers a question:
 - Over the last ... (insert any time period), what do you think was the most significant change in... (insert domain here) ?
 - The domain is kept vague, ex. quality of people’s lives, nature of organizational partnerships, etc.
- Also ask WHY
 - Why is this change significant to you?
 - This helps us understand and interpret the story, builds a SHARED VISION to clarify and learn about expectations, encourages second order learning, and helps to reexamine goals
- Lessons that emerge from the story
 - Asking about lessons helps to further interpret why a story is significant
 - Even stories of failure can encourage thinking, ex. cautionary tales
 - Lessons of what not to do to reach a goal
- Other decisions to consider about stories you tell and collect:
 - Scale and unit of change: from individuals, organizations, policies
 - Causes of change: changes within your organization or general changes
 - Length: ½ page or 2+ pages, long or short
 - Frequency of collection: weekly, daily, monthly, yearly

- Who are the storytellers: program participants, other stakeholders, managers, staff
- Story collection strategies: unsolicited, self-written, interviews, discussion
- Standard MSC process
 - Management team > field staff >> story
 - Stories are first read by the field staff and narrowed, then top option goes to the management team
- Typical story selection process
 1. Everybody reads the story
 2. The group discusses the stories
 3. The group decides which story is the most significant (voting, scoring, secret ballot)
 4. The reasons for the groups choices are documented
- Different analysis options: What do you do with the stories?
 - Thematic coding: lots of stories over time, qualitative analysis, read stories and pull out themes to see what's common/different, see how often the stories align with the goals of the organization, are there other themes and goals that consistently show up?
 - Positive vs negative lessons
 - Difference between what selected vs not selected: why are some getting chosen and some not
 - Who is and is not telling stories: is anyone underrepresented?
 - Number of stories submitted
 - How are they changing over time?
- Common questions about the MSC method
 - What do you mean by SIGNIFICANT when selecting stories?
 - Purposely open to interpretation, during selection you need to discuss priorities and values and this will help facilitate that
 - Why select only ONE?
 - Making a definite choice stimulates debate and helps people learn about one another's values
 - Isn't this subjective?
 - Yes, in a way, but by doing this you want to make values transparent. This helps bring them out clearly
 - Is this biased towards success?
 - Not always. You can ask about lessons of failure, invite known critics of your organization to be storytellers
 - The MSC isn't trying to understand the average condition, it wants to understand the extraordinary conditions

Following the presentation, the group engaged in an activity in putting this method to use by writing personal stories and selecting the most significant change from the stories provided.