Success Case Method: Summary

The Success Case Method developed by Robert O. Brinkerhoff is a quick and simple process that combines analysis of extreme groups with case study and story-telling. The essential purpose of a Success Case study is to find out how well some organizational initiative (e.g., a training program, a new work method) is working. A Success Case study also identifies and explains the contextual factors that differentiate successful from unsuccessful adopters of new initiatives. A recent study, for example, discovered that the factors that explained why some trainees were able to use their new training to accomplish worthwhile results (while others were not) were support from their supervisors, access to certain data bases, and access to training soon after being assigned new business accounts.

The Success Case study process has two fundamental parts. First, the evaluator identifies the few program participants who were the most, and least, successful. This is usually accomplished with a brief 3-5 item survey. That is, all participants are surveyed to determine, by self report, to what extent they are using the new methods and tools a new initiative intended them to use, and what results, if any, they are accomplishing.

Survey respondents are sorted into those few that are most and least successful. Then, one selects a random sample from among the most and least successful and, interviewing these people (usually by telephone) "digs deep" into their experience to determine the exact nature and extent of their success. More specifically, the evaluator seeks to discover:

-   Exactly what they used, when they used it, how, when etc.
-   What results they accomplished
-   How valuable the results are (e.g., in dollars)
-   What environmental factors enabled their application and results.

Unsuccessful persons are interviewed to determine why they were unable to use or benefit from the program. Specifically, they are asked what got in the way, what factors kept them from being successful, and so forth.

The results of a Success Case study are communicated in "story" form. That is, the evaluator finds the most compelling and descriptive examples of success the program has achieved, then documents these examples in a few brief but richly detailed stories. In an evaluation of the business value of emotional intelligence training at American Express, for example, we told the story of how six different financial advisors, each in a different situation, had used their training to increase sales, increase customer revenues, and so forth. Comparing these stories with the stories of unsuccessful participants allowed us to pinpoint the several key performance system factors that enabled some to make very successful use of the program, while others were not nearly so successful. As a result, American Express was able to formulate new guidelines for program participation and support that were aimed at increasing the numbers of advisors who could successfully leverage the training into financial results.

The Success Case Method differs from typical more quantitative methods in that it does not seek to learn about the "average" or modal participant in an initiative, It intentionally seeks the very best that a program is producing, to help determine if the value a program is capable of producing is worthwhile, and whether it is likely that it can be leveraged to a greater number of participants. A "success story" is not a testimonial or a critical review. It is a factual and verifiable account – citing evidence that would "stand up in court" – that demonstrates how and how valuably a person used some new method or tool or capability. In the American Express study, for example, the stories of successful advisors cited actual data about their financial results that was verifiable and documented in office records and reports. When necessary, the evaluator seeks corroborating information from third parties, such as peers, customers, or supervisors.

Success Case Method Frequently Asked Questions

The SC method is not a comprehensive and "one size fits all" sort of approach. It is a useful tool that change leaders and others can use to help them get information, quickly and relatively cheaply, that they can use to more effectively guide change initiatives.

Question: Isn't the SC method biased since it looks only at a few cases? Answer: Yes. It is biased. A SC study intentionally looks for the most successful (and the least successful) participants and outcomes. It is very helpful to learn from those few users of a new innovation – the "pioneers" – who are experiencing the greatest success and those who were not able to use it. Their experience can tell us a lot about how to make improvements and get even more success with more people.

Question: How can you judge the whole success of a program based on just a few cases? Answer: You can't and the SC method does not try to. What we learn is this: If a program is working at all, then what is the best that it is doing? What seems to be working, and what is not? Decisions to keep or get rid of a program should usually be based on more information. But… if no one is using it, or the very best usage leads only to marginal outcomes, this may be enough to make the summative decision.

Question: What about the "average" participant and the overall effect of a program? Answer: The SC approach is not concerned with the "average" as in typical, or statistical mean performance. Almost always a new initiative will work quite well with some people, and not at all with others. When you add all these instances together and divide by the total number (as a quantitative analysis model requires you to do), you can misrepresent the reality of the program. In fact, there may be no such thing as the "mean" participant, since all the action is at the extreme successful and non-successful ends of the spectrum.

Question: Is the Success Case method scientific? Answer: Yes, it is based on solid rules and discipline of scientific inquiry. Success Cases must be supported by verifiable and pertinent evidence. The interview portion of the SC method relies on the rules of good naturalistic inquiry and reporting. Success Case stories should be supported with evidence that would "stand up in court". The survey portion of a SC study follows the rules of good survey methods.

Question: Do you have to be an evaluation expert to use the Success Case Method? Answer: No. People with a reasonable amount of interpersonal skill and common sense can implement many simple SC studies. But it would often be a good idea to get some expert assistance with some of the tasks if you are not familiar with surveys, interviewing, etc.

Question: How is the SCM different from other evaluation approaches? Answer: It is similar in that it uses many of the same tools of typical evaluation, such as survey, statistical analysis (sometimes) and interviewing. It is different, however, in that the SCM does not seek to be nor claim to be a comprehensive approach. Overall, the SCM is quite a bit more simple, faster, and often more credible, than more comprehensive and expensive evaluation methods.

References:

Robert O. Brinkerhoff, *The Success Case Method* (2003) Berrett Koehler : San Francisco

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