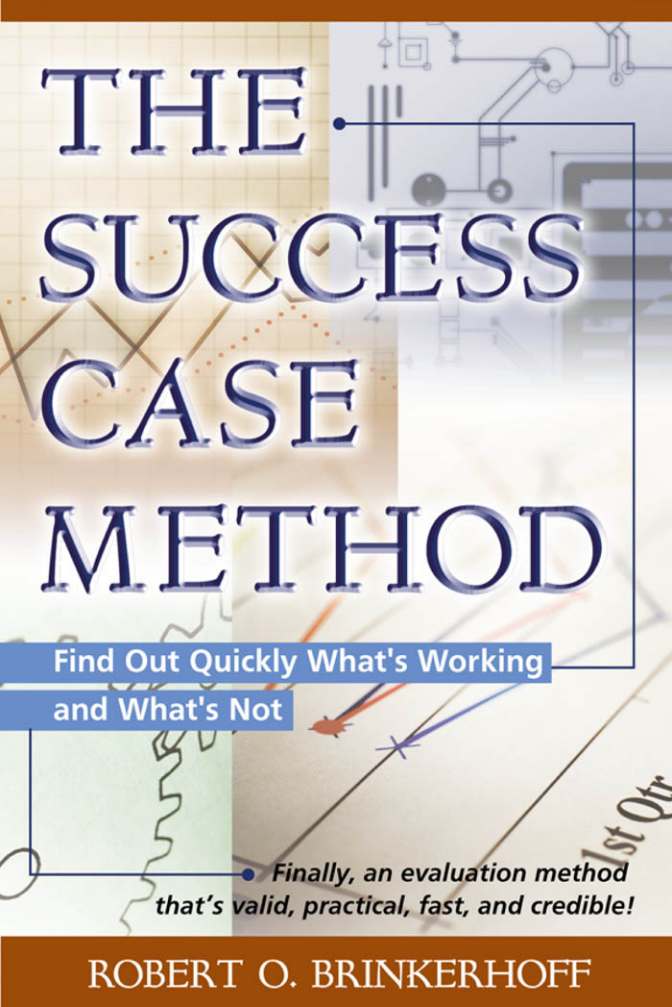
THE SUCCESS CASE METHOD
Find Out Quickly What's Working and What's Not
1st Qtr
Finally, an evaluation method that's valid, practical, fast, and credible!
ROBERT O. BRINKERHOFF

An Excerpt From

The Success Case Method: Find Out Quickly What's Working and What's Not

by Robert O. Brinkerhoff
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What is the Success Case Method and How Does it Work?

Truth, naked and cold, had been turned away from every door in the village. Her nakedness frightened the people. When Parable found her, she was huddled in a corner, shivering and hungry. Taking pity on her, Parable gathered her up and took her home. There, she dressed Truth in Story, warmed her, and sent her out again. Clothed in Story, Truth knocked again at the villagers' doors and was readily welcomed into the people's houses. They invited her to eat at their table and to warm herself by the fire.

Jewish Teaching Story (Simmons, 2001)

Organizations today are in a constant struggle to renew themselves and their processes, continuously trying out new ways of being more effective and competitive. People at all levels are faced with an endless parade of new technology, new ways of organization, new tools, new methods, new training programs, new jobs, and so on.

- An automobile manufacturer introduces a new team assembly approach
- A furniture company employs laptop computers to help salespeople present a dizzying array of potential office configurations
- Ambulance crews use wireless communications to communicate with a remote physician who provides real-time directions for care
- Airline security staff have access to new databases to scan passengers in an attempt to spot likely candidates for increased scrutiny
- Telecommunications operators receive listening training to help them better establish rapport, in an attempt to increase customer satisfaction
- A hotel chain provides cash incentives to housecleaning staff to help drive repeat business

How successful these innovations will be is anyone's guess, but what is always known is this: Some parts of these new initiatives will work some of the time with some of the people; other parts will work barely at all. Some people will experience success, and others will be frustrated and fail. Almost never will any of these changes work perfectly well with everyone. On the other hand, it is also unlikely that these changes will be a total failure—someone, somehow, will make at least some of them work.

Those whose job it is to make them work have a daunting challenge. They must have some ways of finding out—as quickly and easi-

ly as possible—which things are working and which are not; what parts of new innovations are working well enough to be left alone, which need revision, and which should be abandoned.

The Success Case Method (SCM) is designed to confront and leverage this reality. The partial success of a new initiative, no matter how small it is or how few are able to make it work is, nonetheless, success, and success is what we are aiming for. The SCM searches out and surfaces these successes, bringing them to light in persuasive and compelling stories so that they can be weighed (are they good enough?), provided as motivating and concrete examples to others, and learned from so that we have a better understanding of why things worked, and why they did not. With this knowledge, success can be built on and extended; faltering efforts can be changed or abandoned, and premising efforts can be noticed and nurtured.

But most change leaders and managers are in a bind. On the one hand, they have to guide and manage new innovations to make things work better, and on the other hand, they have very little time to find out what they need to know to do this. The easiest way to find out if things are working is to rely on hunches, guesses, and informal bits of information picked up here and there. These casual methods, however, leave too much room for error and misinformation. At the other end of the spectrum are full-blown audits, program reviews, and formal evaluation studies, but these are almost always too costly and time consuming and can end up providing too much information, too late to be helpful, or in such a dry and abstract form that no one pays attention.

In between is the SC Method, a relatively quick and easy method of finding out what is working and what is not, which also provides accurate and trustworthy information that can be used to make timely decisions.

Storytelling is at the heart of the SCM, and the principal output of an SCM study is stories. Across human history, stories are what we have used to understand and make sense of the world around us. We use stories because they have, for untold millennia, enchanted, moved, and entertained us. Stories tap deep emotion and command attention. All of us remember our favorite stories from childhood and will recall with fond emotion the warmth and comfort of a storytelling session.

Stories, however, can also be suspicious and questionable, as in fables and fantasies. We will probably remember as children that we were admonished not to "tell a story" (that is, a lie). The SCM deals with the suspicion that stories can generate in two key ways. First, we don't use the SCM to find and tell just any old story. We seek out and document the best, and the worst, that a new change or innovation is producing, and carefully capture the essence of these positive and negative experiences in carefully documented stories. The second way that the SCM produces credibility and persuasiveness is with truthfulness. SCM stories are not hearsay evidence or opinion. As will be seen later in the book, they must be confirmable experiences that can be backed up with corroboration and evidence. A story that cannot be confirmed is not a success story. Our criterion for the veracity of a success story is that it must tell how a person actually used something, and the actual results they got, in a way that would "stand up in court."

The SCM is a carefully balanced blend of the ancient art of storytelling with more modern methods and principles of rigorous evaluative inquiry and research. But the SCM is also practical. We employ sound principles of inquiry to seek out the right stories to tell, and we back them up with solid evidence. On the other hand, we don't try to tell all the stories that could be told, nor go overboard with exhaustive data collection and statistical analyses.

A Story of the Importance of Credibility in a Story

A recent experience in reporting the results of a corporate innovation will make the importance of this point clear. My colleagues and I had concluded an SCM study of the use of newly trained emotional intelligence skills in a financial planning company. One of the success stories we told was very dramatic—obviously so dramatic that some in our audience found it difficult to believe. One financial advisor, we had discovered, had used her emotional intelligence training to hugely increase her sales productivity. Before her training, she had ranked dead last in her region, managing less than $250,000 in assets, placing her in the bottom 10% of all advisors nationally. Eight months after the training, and after clearly and specifically using some of her training in making new appointments and closing sales, she was managing more than $1.6 million in assets and was ranked in the top 15% of advisors nationally. She had risen to the number two sales producer in her region.

We had been warned beforehand that some executives in our audience might be skeptical, even harshly so. Sure enough, one quite senior executive took a very dim view of the training and decided to confront us. I had just finished reporting the general success of the program (many advisors had similar, though less dramatic results) and had told the story of Anne, the advisor noted previously. Before we could present any of our corroborating evidence, this person in the audience interjected a loud guffaw. Immediately after this barking interruption, he stood and stated loudly for all to hear that: (a) the training was really a bunch of "malarkey" (my words, not his), (b) that this advisor probably exaggerated her results and made up her story to tell us what we wanted to hear, and that (c) stories like these were just that: a "bunch of bs."

I paused thoughtfully and acknowledged his concern, admitting indeed that there was a certain chance that this story could have been a fabrication. Anyone, I noted, could and should make a choice to either believe, or not believe, the story of Anne. But if you choose to not believe her story, then

here is what you must at the same time believe is true in order to disbelieve Anne's story:

- *Anne was lying.*
- *Her manager was lying.*
- *Her peer advisors were lying.*
- *The regional office had falsified its training records.*
- *Anne had falsified her customers' files and had defrauded these same customers.*
- *The trainer was lying.*
- *The regional office had falsified its sales and productivity records.*
- *The national database the company maintained had been corrupted.*
- *And finally, everyone involved—Anne, her manager, her peers, her customers, and the training department—had conspired to create this story and falsify the records that documented it.*

So, I noted in closing, if you believe that these things happened, then by all means you should reject this story, and your claim that this training does not work is quite true.

The executive took his seat and was quiet and complacent during the rest of the report session. On the plane returning from the meeting, my colleagues and I noted how thankful we were that we took the time to follow our own SCM rules for gathering corroborating and documenting evidence!

The Basic SCM Questions

An SCM study can be used to get answers to any, or all, of four (4) basic questions:

- What is really happening?
- What results, if any, is the program helping to produce?

- What is the value of the results?
- How could the initiative be improved?

The SC inquiry directed to these questions can range from the very simple to the more complex. At the simplest end of the spectrum, an SC inquiry can be used just to discover and illustrate the ways in which a new innovation is being used or helping determine whether anything good is happening as the result of a new program or change. More complex, an SC study can indicate what proportions of people, in what organizational units, are using new tools and methods, and what success they are having. At the even more complex end of the spectrum, an SC study can provide estimates of return-on-investment and help make decisions about how much more value a program is realistically capable of making above and beyond its current level of impact.

Here, in more detail are four basic SC questions and some illustrations to demonstrate the range of inquiry that might be directed to each:

1. *What is really happening?* This basic SC question has a range of applications. At the most fundamental end of the complexity spectrum, a quick SC study could be used to simply illustrate the sorts of things that are happening, and not happening, in a new initiative. In a company that was trying to introduce a new team approach to selling, for example, we quickly discovered that only a few of the intended team applications were really being implemented. Almost all sales reps, for instance, were meeting each week to plan their sales calls in conjunction with one another's schedules. But almost none of them were making joint sales calls, and competition was still relatively rampant, as fears of sharing commissions overrode desires to cooperate. In another study of usage of new laptops in a sales firm, we found that all but a few

applications were being effectively used. Some of the unused applications turned out to be incompatible with some of the sales reps equipment; others were tried but deemed to be too complex or otherwise not helpful.

In a more complex study of usage of simulators for training computer repair technicians, we found that usage varied dramatically among geographic districts. In some districts, regional managers were providing incentives to attend simulator training and had created innovative scheduling schemes to allow their staff to participate. Overall, however, the expensive simulator facility was under-used or misused by nearly 40% of all technicians. This represented huge waste, and service management took quick steps to remedy the situation.

Some of the more specific questions that Success Case studies can be used to answer are:

- Who is using the new methods, and who is not?
- What parts of new innovations are getting used, and what parts are not?
- How widespread is usage?
- What groups or subgroups are making the least, or most, use of new techniques?
- When are methods being used, and with whom?

2. *What results, if any, is the program helping to produce?* Even very simple SC studies can quickly gather evidence about the most poignant and compelling results that a change initiative is producing, and they can provide rich illustrations of these "best case" outcomes. In a recent study of an innovative online supervisory support system, for example, we found that some supervisors had

used the new tools and methods to increase production. Others had used the tools to decrease staff turnover. A few had used the methods to keep minor complaints and misunderstandings from escalating into costly grievances and legal suits.

Of course, if there are no positive outcomes for the program, the SC Method will quickly discover this fact. One company, for example, had invested in a training program that was meant to assist managers in helping their employees create development plans. As it turned out, hardly any of the managers even tried out the new approach, and only a few of these had led to new development plans for employees. Of the employees who did create development plans, none felt that the process was constructive. Fortunately, this SC study was conducted after only a small pilot test of the program was implemented, so little damage was done and there was time to reconsider the entire initiative.

The SC study can be used to discover intended as well as unintended outcomes. In a similar study of another company trying out a new development planning approach, it was likewise discovered that only a few employees actually created formal development plans. But, it also became clear that the dialogue that the program stimulated between managers and employees was viewed as highly constructive. In almost every case, employees whose managers engaged them in a planning discussion felt more valued and understood. As it turned out, the managers of these appreciative employees used only a very small part of the intended process, but that single part turned out to be highly effective. As a result of this unintended outcome, the process was drastically simplified and distributed to many more managers.

It is very easy to combine estimates of results with estimates of how many people are making different sorts of use of a program. For example, in one SC study we concluded that "Sixty percent of the participants used the program to accomplish worthwhile results that are either helping to drive more new sales, retain customers, or increase revenues-per-customer. Of these successful participants, one out of five (20%) have achieved profit margins in excess of the company's goal of 15%. On the other hand, 28% of the program's participants have reported no use of the program's tools at all and are likewise achieving no impact on sales, retention, or revenue. The remaining 12% have reported some success, but their accomplishments are below profit margin expectations."

3. *What is the value of the results?* In many cases, and when it is desirable to do so, it is possible to extend the SC Method to estimate the dollar value of the successful results being achieved. In one case, a pharmaceutical sales rep used a new sales leadership technique to help secure a new HMO client worth annual sales revenues in excess of $5 million. In another instance, a production supervisor used some online support tools to defuse a sexual harassment problem and eventually avoid a costly lawsuit

   When dollar values of results are estimated, they can then be compared to the costs of the program, and an ROI (return-on-investment) or cost-return comparison estimate can be made. In the case of the pharmaceutical sales rep who won the big account, it was evident that the profits on the increased revenues would have covered the costs for him and all his colleagues to participate in the sales effectiveness program.

Such value and cost estimates are, of course, only as good as the cost and value assumptions on which they are based. Such estimates are never complete, and assumptions are always open to question and debate. For these reasons, we usually avoid making value and cost-return claims except where such claims are clearly and uncontroversially defensible. In the case of the financial advisor who used a support program to increase her productivity, there was no arguing with her results; the record of accomplishment was valid and public. Further, there was incontrovertible evidence that she had used the new techniques with her clients and that this usage was brand new to her. Further, her manager agreed that she had mastered the new technique and used it regularly. Likewise, it was clear from training records that she had used the intended resources in the intended ways. Finally, both she and her manager were adamant that the success could not have been achieved had it not been for use of the new method. Given this, we felt comfortable that any reasonable person should have to accept our conclusion that the program had indeed produced a worthy result.

Sometimes, it is useful to combine estimates of the dollar-value of results with estimates of the scope and distribution of usage of new methods and tools. This sort of combination of Success Case data produces what we call an estimate of the "unrealized value" of the program. In other words, if a new initiative is shown to be producing good results, but for only a small portion of participants, then it is possible that there is a considerably larger amount of value yet to be gleaned from that program. In other words, the "good news" is that the program can work, and when it does, it produces valuable results. The "bad news" is that only a few

participants are getting these results. But maybe this is really "good news," because if more people got the same results, then a lot more benefit would be realized.

In a recent study of a new supervisory database in a large company, for example, we were able to show that the program was probably "leaving more than a million dollars of value on the table." That is, the SC study provided clearcut and convincing evidence that the program was capable of producing highly valuable results. On the other hand, it was producing highly successful results with only a relatively small handful of participants. By making some modest changes in the program and helping managers of users be more supportive, a 20% increase in the number of successful users—at just half the level of effectiveness of the most successful users—could produce benefits worth several million dollars. It was quite clear from the SC data that a 20% increase in usage was not an unreasonable expectation.

4. *How could the initiative be improved?* This SC question extends the inquiry to assess those program factors that are associated with success, so that additional program users can increase their success and come closer to the very highest levels of success being achieved by the most successful users. Often, it is not the program's tools or methods themselves that are making the greatest difference in success, but certain workplace environmental factors are being leveraged to make the innovation work. In a training program, for example, it may be that one part of the organization uses an additional incentive and that this incentive combined with the training is achieving unparalleled results. This sort of SC inquiry helps to pinpoint the success-adding factors and enables suggestions to maximize the impact for all participants.

If it is found that an initiative is helping some people achieve valuable results, and it is also apparent that more results of the same (or better) value would be both possible and worthwhile, then it makes sense to identify ways to improve the initiative. In a study of a large computer company's use of a simulator facility, for example, we discovered that a large number of users had not ever used their simulator training in a client engagement. It was clear from comparing success with nonsuccess stories (a frequently used SC technique) that many technicians were being sent to the simulator training even though they had no current clients who had purchased the server equipment that the simulator training targeted. Managers of technicians were, apparently, combining flawed sales forecast data with their own misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the simulator facility to send technicians to training when it was not needed. Senior leaders used the SC results to help service managers do a better job of scheduling their technicians for training. As a result, the usage of simulator training to achieve worthwhile client service outcomes improved from less than 60% to more than 90%. This outcome was of great benefit to the company because the simulator had previously been fully booked (with lots of people who didn't need it) and there was a waiting list for additional technicians to get access—some of whom really did need the training to meet customer needs. Interestingly, all of the positive changes to get more value from this training facility were made without revising anything at all about the training or simulator itself.

Uses for the Success Case Approach

The Success Case Method has a variety of beneficial uses. As the years have progressed and we have conducted more studies in a range of settings, new benefits have emerged, and I am convinced that readers who use the method will experience more yet. In Chapter Eight, several strategic SCM uses are discussed in more detail. Here, though, is a summary of the SC uses that are most common.

- *Quickly and easily discover what is working and what is not with new changes and initiatives.* Any new change initiative is highly predictable in one respect: It will almost never be entirely successful, nor will it likely be a total bust. Something good comes from almost anything new. With a new initiative that is getting mostly good results, the challenge is to sort the wheat from the chaff in that new initiative and leverage its successful components for greater impact. With an initiative that is mostly not working, the trick is to avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater; those few elements of the program that are worth saving must be recognized and leveraged for a greater return.
- *Illustrate results and accomplishments in a way that is interesting and compelling.* Even when a program is doing well, there will always be some people who question its effectiveness and will want to see proof that it is making a difference. Because it uses stories of actual users getting real results of demonstrable value, the SC Method produces compelling and dramatic illustrations. The SC stories capture the attention of people and provide them with hard-to-argue-with evidence.
- *Identify best practices and increase the knowledge base of an organization.* A leader at the computer company Hewlett Packard is purported to have said, when asked what might make the com-

pany even more successful "If only Hewlett Packard knew what Hewlett Packard knows." Many knowledge management research studies have shown that companies rarely fully recognize and share the expertise within their own walls. Successful practices can go unrecognized for years, dramatically slowing the pace of competitive improvement. The SC Method can be used to quickly unearth best practices and diffuse them into the working knowledge base of the organization in a rapid and convincing way.

- *Provide models and examples to motivate and guide others.* In a similar vein, the SC Method helps new users of an innovation discover the ways in which others have applied tools and methods, serving as a guide and inspiration for their own practice. A common reaction among trainees who return from a training session is this: "I really enjoyed it and I learned some good stuff. But I'm really not sure exactly how I could use it in my job." The SC Method is especially helpful in overcoming this problem because it provides new trainees (or others struggling to adopt an innovation) with a concrete and specific illustration of exactly how some of their peers have put something to use and made it work.

- *Meet demands, quickly and practically, to evaluate the success or failure of a new initiative.* At some point, a new program or change comes under critical scrutiny and review. The SC Method is a powerful and convincing evaluation approach that provides compelling evidence—evidence that would "stand up in court"—about how well a program is working and what sort of valuable results (if any) it is producing.

How the Success Case Method Works

An SC study has a very simple, two-part structure. The first part of an SC study entails locating potential and likely "success cases"—those individuals (or teams) that have apparently been the most successful in using some new change or method. This first step is often accomplished with a survey. Although a survey is often used, it is not always necessary. It may be possible to identify potential success cases by reviewing usage records and reports, accessing performance data, or simply by asking people—tapping into the "information grapevine" of the organization. A survey is most often used, however, because it provides the additional advantage of extrapolating results to get quantitative estimates of the proportions of people who report using, or not using, some new method or innovation. Also, when careful sampling methods are employed, then probability estimates of the nature and scope of success can also be determined.

In the second part of an SC study, we interview the handful of identified success cases to determine and document the actual nature of success being achieved. The first portion of the interview is aimed at "screening." In this part, we try to quickly determine whether the person being interviewed represents a true and verifiable success. Assuming that this is true, the interview then proceeds to probe, understand, and document the success. This interview portion of the study provides us with "stories" of use and results. Importantly, these interviews focus on the gathering of verifiable and documentable evidence so that success can be "proven." Typically, an SC study results in only a small number of documented success cases—just enough to poignantly illustrate the nature and scope of the success the program is helping to produce. In our study of success with emotional intelligence training, for example, we surveyed several hundred financial advisors. In the end, however, it was necessary to report only five success case stories in order to amply and fairly illustrate the impact of the program.

Almost always, an SC study also looks at instances of nonsuccess. That is, just as there is some small extreme group who has been very successful in using a new approach or tool, there is a likewise some small extreme group at the other end who experienced no use or value. Investigation into the reasons for lack of success can be very enlightening and useful. Comparisons between the groups are especially useful. In the case of successful use of laptops by sales reps, for example, we found that almost every successful user reported that his or her district manager provided training and support in the use of the new laptop. Conversely, a lack of district manager support was noticed in almost every instance of lack of success. Identifying and reporting the apparent factors that made the difference between success and lack of it (notice we avoid the use of the word failure) can be a great help in making decisions to improve a program's impact.

Foundations of the Success Case Method

As already noted, the Success Case Method combines the ancient craft of storytelling with the more current evaluation approaches of naturalistic inquiry and case study. It often (though not always) employs simple survey and questionnaire methods. It also employs the social inquiry process of key informants, which is a sociologist's fancy term for the notion that, when you want to know something, you should talk to the people who know the most about it. The SCM borrows a bit of methodology from journalism and judicial inquiry. In a way, we are journalists looking for a few dramatic and "newsworthy" stories of success and nonsuccess. When we find them, we seek corroborating evidence and documentation to be sure that the success story is defensible and thus reportable.

The Success Case Method likewise leverages the measurement approach of analyzing extreme groups, because these extremes are masked when mean and other central tendency measures are

employed. This is the same concept applied in Shainan quality methods that are employed in some manufacturing operations to assess and diagnose quality of machine parts. The Shainan method directs quality assessors to analyze a sample of the very best parts produced by a manufacturing process as well as a sample of the very worst. From these extreme samples, manufacturing process elements are targeted and revised to assure a greater consistency of only "BOB" (the best of the best) parts and reduce the frequency of "WOW" (worst of the worst) parts.

Stories are also at the heart of the SC approach. Storytelling is as old as people themselves and has always been a powerful influencer. Although there has been some psychological research on the power of stories and storytelling, it is probably not necessary to review it, because the power of stories is well known to most of us from our life experience in general. My first encounter as an evaluation practitioner with the power of stories was highly instructive.

Meet Sonia Morningstar

I was a graduate student providing technical support to the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) during budget hearings in front of congressional oversight committees. One USOE program officer, making a plea for funds, had just delivered a lengthy presentation, with many mind-numbing graphs, charts, and statistics that were intended to show the breadth and characteristics of the many audiences served in his program area. The yawns of the bored and inattentive congressional representatives were almost audible. The presenter was thanked for his pallid presentation and advised that decisions would be pending.

Then a second program officer came to the podium. He held up a large photograph of an obviously poor, young Native American child, dressed in dirty and tattered clothing, clutching a worn schoolbook in her dirt-covered hands. "Meet Sonia Morningstar," he intoned. The panel representatives were

immediately attentive. The presenter went on to briefly tell the story of little Sonia, who had been born years earlier in a dirt-floored hogan in the arid Southwest near the Mexican border. His tale retold how she had attended a local school where she was fortunate enough (thanks to the astute funding decisions of this very panel) to have been provided with special attention to her learning deficits. To the greater surprise of the audience, Sonia herself—now five years older and dressed in neat and simple native garb, materialized next to the program officer. She thanked the panel for their efforts on her behalf and spoke humbly about her success in mastering reading skills. She was now, she told them, the first person in her family to succeed in high school, was working in a medical clinic after school, and had already secured a foundation scholarship for medical school.

The congressional panel members applauded at the end of her talk, and, one at a time, stood to shake her hand. They thanked the program officer and asked a few questions about how many others like Sonia were being helped by their funding (for which the program officer had ready responses and even a concise chart). As clearly as they could promise within the constraints of their agenda, they assured the program officer that continued funding would be forthcoming. This happened more than thirty-two years ago. Yet I remember clearly to this day the bright, beaded necklace on the child's throat, the glisten of the tear I saw in the eye of one of the panel members, and the lump in my own throat as I listened to her compelling tale.

As already noted, a Success Case study begins with a search for stories of success worthy of the telling. Once these apparent success cases are identified, we then interview them (using a method to be explained in more detail later in the book). If the qualification phase of the interview uncovers evidence of results that could be verified, the interview proceeds to document the nature and scope of the success. It also seeks

to determine why that person was successful—especially to identify the organizational factors, supervisory assistance, for example, that supported and enabled the success. Again, a success case is not a testimonial of emotional reactions or other favorable feelings. Rather, it is a detailed and objective story about action and behavior, relating exactly how something was used, what results were achieved, and what specific factors enabled or interfered with success. Even more important, a success story must be confirmable and supported with verifiable evidence. A success story is not considered valid and reportable until we are convinced that we have enough compelling evidence that the story would "stand up in court"—that indeed, the case the story relates is a true success, and we could, if pressed, prove it beyond a reasonable doubt.

Other evaluators and researchers have used approaches similar to the Success Case Method. Bob Stake at the University of Illinois has long promoted the use of illustrative case studies (Stake, 1995). Egon Guba (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) and others have promoted the use of naturalistic inquiry and case methods. These are just a few of the practitioners and theoreticians whose thinking has influenced the creation of the SCM. As sometimes happens, inventors follow parallel paths of discovery unbeknownst to one another. Barry Kibel, author of the book *Success Stories as Hard Data* (Kibel, 1999) is a case in point (after finding his book, I was interested to note that we had very similar academic training and were influenced by the same evaluation progenitors). Kibel's work is used in social welfare settings and employs success stories, but applies a considerably complex and rigorous quantitative scoring method to the stories to compare program outcomes.

Here is an interesting story of an SC study that some colleagues and I conducted recently. It illustrates nicely some of the ways that the SCM is rooted in solid scientific and evaluative inquiry. It also shows how the SCM can be used to fruitfully respond to and cope with some tricky organizational scenarios.

A Success Case Beer Story

Human resources executives in a multimillion-dollar national beer distributor named "Bulltoad" asked my colleagues and I to help them solve a vexing and important business problem they had encountered in attempting to implement a change in operations. First, a little background: This beer distributorship was one of several hundred such firms, all exclusively licensed by the national brewery to sell beer to retail outlets (supermarkets, convenience stores, and so forth) in specific geographical regions. The national brewery demanded that each distributorship adhere to certain quality standards and procedures. In this case, the national distributor had initiated a "freshness date stamp" campaign, which was intended to assure consumers of the freshness of the product. As part of this campaign, all distributors were required to keep the cases of beer refrigerated at all times. The human resources executives were having a bit of a problem working with one of the key distributorships.

Prior to the change, beer truck drivers (who were also the sales force) drove their fully loaded trucks to each potential retail buyer, tried to sell what they could, then returned at the end of the day. On their return, the truck would be parked in a locked and guarded lot. The next morning, warehouse loaders would get more beer from the cooler and replenish the truckload, which was then driven out on a new route. Under the new freshness campaign requirements, the unsold beer had to be unloaded and put back into refrigerated coolers, then totally reloaded the next morning. The distributor owner (a feisty and voluble eighty-six-year-old woman) was considerably concerned and somewhat angry about this new change, as it could drastically increase her costs. Not only would the electric bill for refrigeration go up, but also the increased handling would create damaged cases, which could then not be resold to retailers. No, she said, this whole freshness campaign was a sorry affair and would drive her to an earlier grave, if not out of business.

Unfortunately, she was very nearly right. The average route sales driver returned with nearly 40% of the load unsold, thus dramatically increasing the total amount of handling and refrigeration needed. Worse news yet, more than 80% of the sales route drivers returned with at least 30% of their beer load still on the truck. More warehouse loaders would need to be hired, and increased damage was virtually assured. But there was a small ray of hope. Our review of truck loading records showed that a small number of the drivers (just three of the total of fifty-two employed) returned consistently with a nearly empty truck. Further, since the announcement of the change in handling requirements just a month earlier, these three drivers had even improved their percentage of load sold. The improvement was slight, however, as they were already selling their trucks nearly empty each day since well before the new campaign began.

So, we had our handful of possible "success cases" identified. We then proceeded to interview each of them and dig into the how and why of their effective behavior. Though each of them was somewhat different, they approached their work in a very similar fashion. The story of their success was quite simple. First, each of them had worked closely with warehouse employees and had formed a sort of "partnership." They talked to the warehouse loaders frequently, told them what was working and what was not, and provided them with support and encouragement for the things they did right to help them. Secondly, these three salespeople took extra pains to understand the markets in which their key retail buyers operated. Each of them read the local newspapers, for example, and identified upcoming events (a college homecoming, a large family reunion, a softball tournament, for instance), which were traditional beer-consumption activities. Armed with this information, they guided their retail buyers' purchase decisions, encouraging large purchases when needed and suggesting cutbacks if market conditions seemed to indicate such a move. Interviews with some of these retail buyers confirmed this behavior and showed as well that the beer route driver was seen as a sort of "partner" by the retailer, a person who cared and could be trusted.

Clearly, there were a small number of clearly specific things these three drivers did that helped them adjust their loads on a daily basis, so that predicted sales and actual sales were highly congruent. They helped their warehouse loaders understand these requirements and left each day with a "customized" load of beer that was almost always totally sold.

A quick interview with a few of the drivers who did not sell all of their loads showed a very common though opposed approach. These drivers communicated only a little with the loaders and instead met in a local restaurant while the loaders were at work. As far as the loaders knew, the drivers expected a fully loaded truck. As one driver put it, "Don't ever let me down, friend. The last thing I need is a buyer who wants sixty cases, but I only got fifty on the truck!" With this sort of admonition in mind, the undirected warehouse loaders fully stocked each truck, each day. Of course, they complained bitterly about having to unload the unsold product each afternoon, but received little sympathy from the drivers. "My job ain't so easy either, pal. Get another job if you don't like this one."

Our analysis of the success cases allowed us to prescribe some specific new tasks and actions for all of the drivers to begin to use and some relatively simple training that the distributor owner could begin. We captured the stories from the few loaders, drivers, and retail customers on audiotape, which the owner found highly persuasive. Armed with this clear evidence and compelling direction, the owner embarked on a training intervention to teach all of the drivers and loaders the techniques that the few were using so successfully. The training alone was not sufficient, of course, but combined with a new (though remarkably small) pay incentive for matching actual sold loads to predicted loads, and some special coaching for drivers who had difficulty, the problem was eased in a short while. Within two months, the returned load percentage was at historical lows and improving weekly. The feared cost and damage increases never materialized, and our feisty owner went on to find new things to worry about.

Limitations of the Success Case Approach

As noted earlier, the SC Method is not a comprehensive and "one fix" sort of approach. Rather, it is a single but useful tool that change leaders and others can use to help them get the information they need to more effectively guide change initiatives. There are other evaluation approaches that are more comprehensive and thorough. But, of course, these are often more expensive and time-consuming.

The very simplicity of the SC Method causes some to raise important questions about its usefulness and validity. Here are some of the common questions, and an answer for each:

Question: *Isn't the SC Method biased because it looks only at a few cases?*

Answer: Yes. It is biased. An SC study intentionally looks for the most successful (and often the least successful) participants and outcomes. The SC approach rests on the assumption that it is very helpful to learn from those few users of a new innovation—the "pioneers"—who are experiencing the greatest success. Their experience can tell us a lot about how to make improvements and get even more success with more people. But, although the method is biased in its selection of cases to illustrate, the success stories themselves are very objective and rigorously supported with confirmable evidence.

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? If the best that is being accomplished is not very good, or if hardly anyone is using anything, then we certainly have discovered something useful. But we shouldn't make an overall summative judgment without more evidence.

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. It is almost always true that 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), then you can misrepresent the reality of the program. In fact, there may be no such thing as the "mean" participant, because all the action is at the extreme successful and nonsuccessful ends of the spectrum. Again, the SC Method looks for the very best that a program is accomplishing, because it is based on the assumption that this is well worth knowing.

Question: *Is the Success Case Method scientific?*

Answer: Yes, it is based on solid rules and the 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 (e.g., case study) inquiry and reporting. Success Case stories should be thought of as judicial court testimony; they must be supported with evidence that would "stand up in court." The survey portion of an SC study follows the rules of good survey methods. When these rules are followed and solid sampling methods are employed, then it is entirely possible to make good-faith estimates about the breadth and scope of impact. That is, we might confidently create a conclusion such as "It is likely that 80% of all participants are achieving results of at least the same value."

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 sometimes be a good idea to get some expert assistance. When survey data will be relied on to make estimates of a broader scope of impact, it is recommended to use a person who has survey design and construction skills. Many organizations have people on staff with technical research skills who could, after reading this book, plan and implement a thorough and effective SC study. People who want to make use of the SC approach but who have no research or evaluation experience would be wise to get some expert help, using this book as a guide and resource.

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. Nor does the SCM try to make a summative judgment about the worth or merit of a change initiative. It just collects some information about it so that those responsible can figure out what parts of it seem to be working, what parts are not, and how they might make it more successful. If an SCM study found very little usage or impact, it could certainly lead to a more comprehensive study to decide whether to keep a program at all. Overall, the SCM is quite a bit more simple, faster, and often more credible than other more comprehensive evaluation methods. It is not intended to replace more rigorous and comprehensive evaluation, just offer an alternative and useful tool.

The next chapter provides a detailed look, step by step, at how to plan and conduct an SC study, be it very simple or more complex. This chapter also expands on the purposes for SC studies and provides a number of illuminating examples and illustrations.

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