WHEN NO ONE HAS TIME FOR EVALUATION

Building learning cultures that survive pressure

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Evaluation is valued, but often difficult to sustain

Most organisations do not need to be convinced that evaluation matters.

The difficulty appears between commitment and sustained practice.

When delivery pressure increases, evaluation is easier to defer than activity with an immediate consequence.



How established ideas translate under pressure

The focus is a practical implementation challenge

- Evaluative thinking
- Organisational learning
- Evaluation capacity
- Psychological safety

How can the conditions for evaluative thinking be established and sustained under pressure?

Established principles viewed through constrained organisational conditions

Evaluation and evaluative thinking are not the same thing

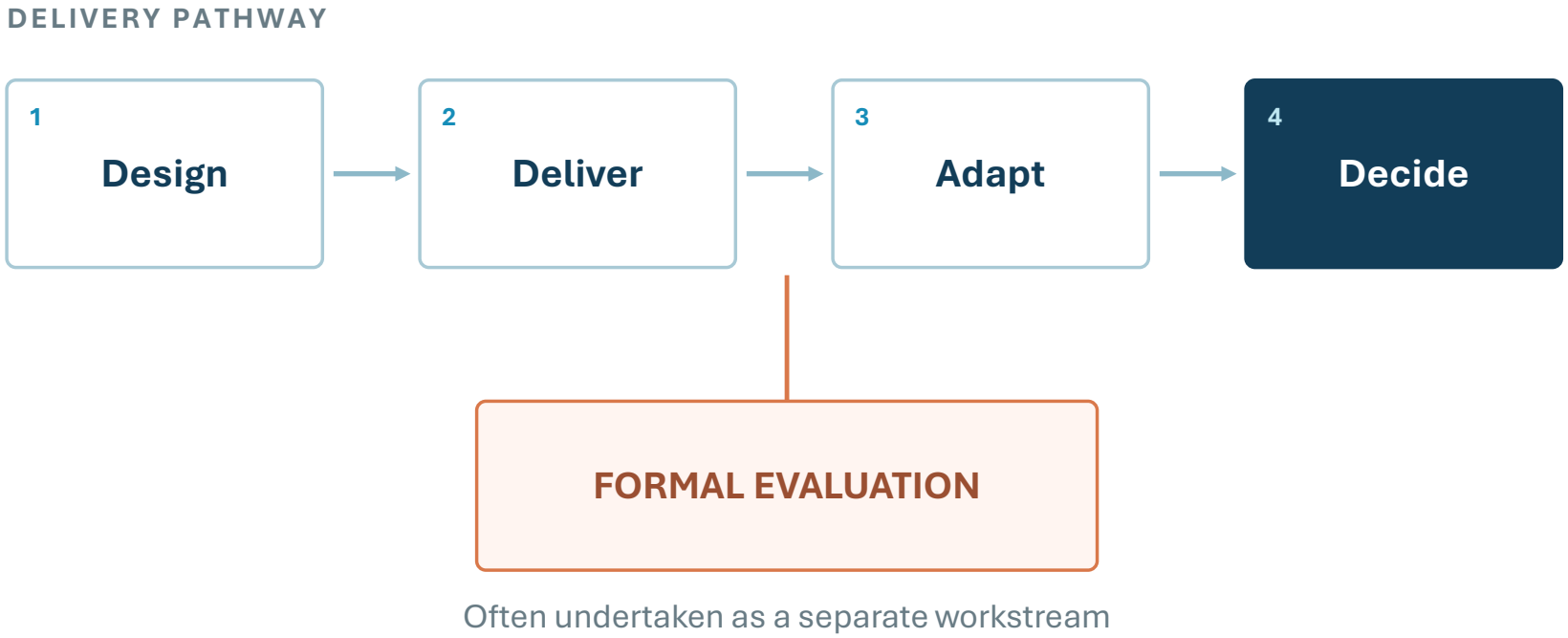
Evaluation

1. Scheduled activity
2. Dedicated process
3. Defined deliverable

Evaluative thinking

1. Ongoing habit
2. Part of everyday decisions
3. Questions, evidence and reflection

Evaluation is often positioned alongside delivery rather than being embedded





Promotes independence and recognises technical expertise, but can also make evaluation easier to defer.

Constrained conditions affect evaluative practice unevenly



Time

Immediate delivery takes precedence



Budget

Evaluation is treated as overhead



Changing priorities

Attention and tolerance shift

Under pressure, organisations often retain the activities of evaluation while losing the practices that make them useful.

Three observed factors consistently emerge in practice

01

Permission

People can speak honestly about mistakes and uncertainty

02

Routines

Observations remain connected to decisions

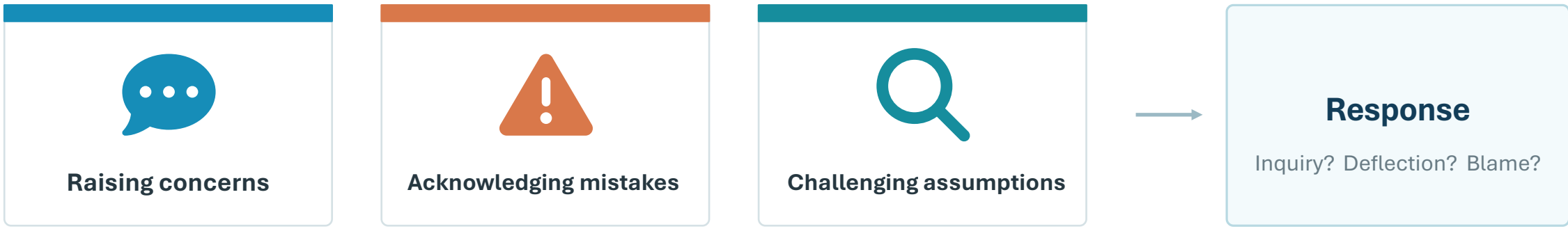
03

Broader participation

Evaluative thinking extends beyond one specialist

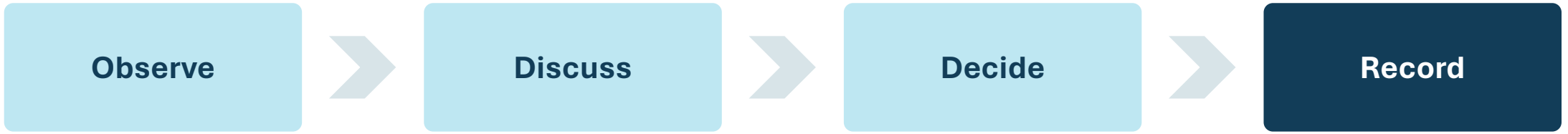
These factors provide places to act at different levels of influence.

Permission is established through behaviour



People learn whether reflection is safe by observing what happens when difficult information is raised.

Evaluative thinking needs a place in everyday work



Without a routine

Observations are forgotten and reasoning is reconstructed later (or guessed).

With a routine

Evidence stays close enough to decisions to remain useful.

Use processes that already form part of delivery

Team meeting	Milestone	Governance forum	Project tool
One standing question	Review one assumption	Consider what has changed	Record decision reasoning

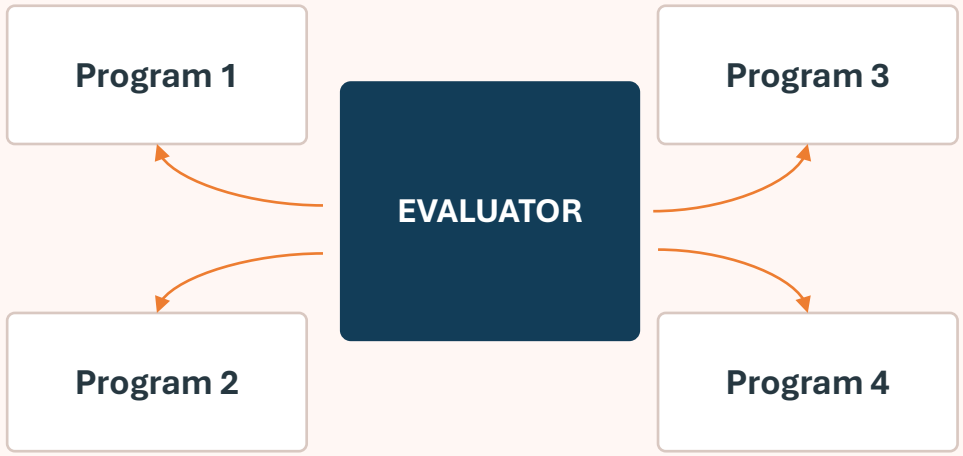
More process is not necessarily more evaluative.

If a routine does not inform a decision, it’s just administrative.

Capability concentrated in one person/team = fragile

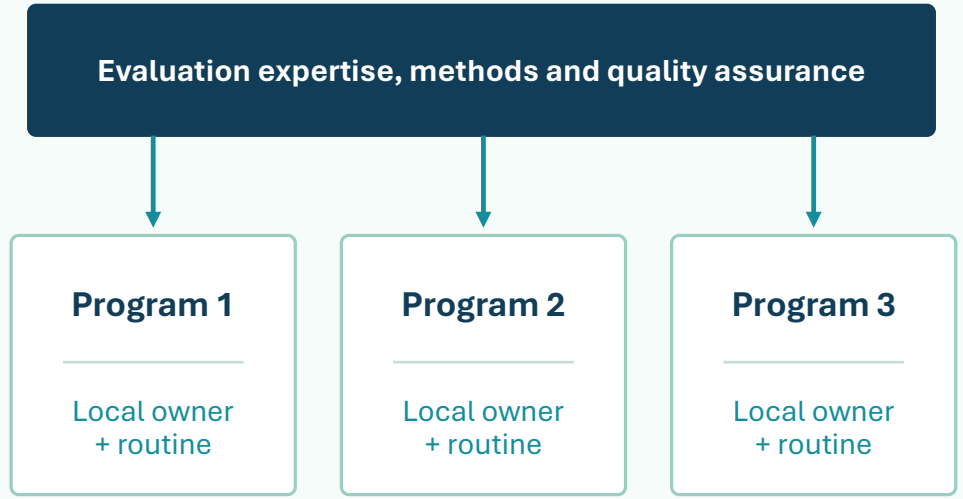
How do can we retain expertise while reducing dependency?

Capability depends on one evaluator



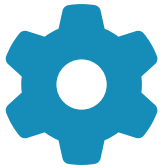
Absence or departure = interrupted support to every program

Expertise supports practice across the programs



Everyday evaluative practice continues between formal evaluations

Evaluative thinking cannot remain the sole responsibility of evaluators



Technical support

Methods, standards and professional judgement



Trusted participation

People can question and interpret with support



Visible reinforcement

Contributions are acknowledged and acted on

Broader participation does not require pretending everyone has the same expertise.

Evaluators and commissioners can shape the conditions for learning

01

Scoping

Identify the decision the work needs to inform

Clear use gives reflection a legitimate purpose

02

Commissioning

Provide time for participation and sense-making

Building this into the contract signals that learning is part of the work

03

Delivery

Bring evidence into an existing decision forum

Findings can influence action before the final report

04

Transition

Leave routines and ownership with the program team

Evaluative practice is less dependent on the evaluator

Practical choices for evaluators and commissioners

As an evaluator

1. **Link the evaluation to a real decision**
   Ask the program team which decision will be different because this work exists.

2. **Use an existing forum for interpretation**
   Bring evidence into a program or governance meeting rather than creating a separate learning process.

3. **Share the work before the final report**
   Involve program staff in testing assumptions and interpreting emerging evidence.

As a commissioner

1. **Commission for decision-making, not just reporting**
   Specify the decisions, participants and forums through which findings will be considered.

2. **Invest in participation and sense-making**
   Allow time and budget for program staff to engage with evidence

3. **Require a useful legacy**
   Expect the evaluator to leave transferable routines, records or capability, not only a report.

For the next evaluation ...

Three points at which evaluative thinking can be strengthened

At the start

Which decision should this evaluation inform?

Identify the decision, who will make it and when it will be made.

During the work

Where will the team review evidence and test its assumptions?

Use a forum that already influences delivery.

Before the evaluator leaves

Which practice will continue without the evaluator?

Agree on an owner, a routine and its immediate purpose.

If none of these questions has a clear answer, the evaluation is likely to remain separate from everyday practice.

Evaluative thinking becomes durable when it is designed into the work

Permission

The response to difficult evidence supports inquiry

Routines

Evidence is considered where decisions are made

Broader participation

Program staff participate with specialist support

Each evaluation can leave the organisation better able to question, learn and act on evidence.

Testing these observations against your experience

- Where have evaluators successfully influenced these conditions?
- Which commissioning choices have made evaluation easier to use?
- Which organisational constraints remain hardest to shift in your context?

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References and resources

Evaluation policy and evaluative thinking

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Evaluation capacity and capability

- Australian Evaluation Society. *Evaluators' Professional Learning Competency Framework*. https://www.aes.asn.au/evaluation-resources/evaluator-competencies
- Rogers, Alison & Gullickson, Amy. (2018). *Evaluation Champions: A Literature Review*. Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation. 14. 46-63.
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Practical resources

- BetterEvaluation. *After Action Review*. https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/methods/after-action-review
- BetterEvaluation. https://www.betterevaluation.org

Thank you

Let's continue the conversation

- building evaluative thinking in practice
- creating learning cultures under pressure
- strengthening evaluation capability
- creating evaluation that gets used

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