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Developing an evaluative culture

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Abstract

Linda Ferguson is the Evaluation & Visitor Research Manager at the Australian War Memorial, one of Australia's leading museums and centres for military history research. The evaluation manager position was created in 1996, primarily to help guide the Memorial through a major redevelopment program. Since that time, evaluation has infiltrated most aspects of the Memorial's business and is now viewed as an integral part of the institution and its practices. In this paper, the author examines the evaluation journey undertaken by the Memorial and the factors that have supported the uptake of evaluation there, including structural, procedural, and attitudinal aspects. In discussing what it has taken for the Memorial to develop an evaluative culture, this paper also considers more broadly how organisations can learn from evaluative inquiry, and the importance of having an 'internal' evaluator.

Introduction

The Australian War Memorial was established to commemorate the sacrifice of Australians who have died in war. Opening in 1941, the Memorial uniquely combines a commemorative shrine, 11,000 square metres of exhibitions about the Australian experience of war, and a research library and archive holding official and unofficial diaries, documents and papers. The Australian War Memorial is a statutory authority within the Veterans' Affairs Portfolio of the Commonwealth Government of Australia. It was the first major museum in Australia to focus on the history of Australians; more than 60 years since opening, it is the most-visited museum in Australia.

During that 60 year period, much has changed at the Memorial. New buildings have opened, new technologies have been introduced, and innovative new design techniques have been developed to enhance the visitors' experience. One of the changes that most interests me has occurred over the past seven years; this change is the gradual development of an evaluative culture.

In this paper, I will describe some of the key factors and events that have supported the growth of an evaluative culture at the Memorial. In considering this development, I will discuss structural, procedural, and philosophical / attitudinal aspects that have had the most impact at the Memorial.

I'll begin by defining the term 'evaluative culture', and noting some of the factors that have already been identified as contributing to the development of evaluative cultures. From here, I will focus on the experience of the Australian War Memorial from the perspective of an internal evaluator. Where possible, I will link the Memorial's experience to the evaluation literature, to ground our experience in the broader sphere of organisational learning and development.

What is an 'evaluative culture'?

A number of commentators have spoken about evaluative or evaluation cultures. For example, Sedgwick describes culture as a pattern of shared beliefs and expectations; over time, these produce norms that influence the attitude and activities of groups and individuals. In an evaluative culture, these norms support and are supported by 'the process of striving to do things better' (Sedgwick 1994: 23). For Sedgwick, an evaluative culture is 'an attitude which routinely puts the client above the program', the essence of public service itself (Sedgwick 1994: 20).

Owen (2003: 43) describes an evaluation culture as 'a commitment to roles for evaluation in decision-making within an organisation'. For Owen, this means systematic (but not routine) enquiry, initiated and carried out by members of an organisation, to add to its 'working knowledge' for use in strategic decision-making. He claims that an organisation that both produces and transmits knowledge and is engaged in a 'search for meaning' in its work, has developed a culture of evaluation (Owen 2003: 44).

In his 1993 AES presidential address, Caulley argued that for evaluation to make a difference, organisations needed to develop 'an evaluative work climate...a culture of ongoing monitoring and self evaluation by program staff' (Caulley 1993: 13). This is a culture 'where public servants are reflective and evaluative about their day-to-day work practices and are responsible for their own quality control' (Caulley 1993: 15). In effect, this means that staff reflect on their work, take responsibility for their own quality control, actively address errors and problems, collaborate with other staff and managers, and work within an assertive (rather than authoritarian) management style. Staff members are thereby empowered and motivated, which in itself increases their productivity.

These descriptions of evaluative cultures share several characteristics:

- they denote an ongoing process rather than an end state;
- they encompass attitudes as well as actions;
- they are focused on improvement; and
- they affect people across the organisation.

From my own perspective, an evaluative culture is one in which people accept, think, do, and value evaluation. It is one in which evaluation has become a natural way of doing things.

What factors promote the development of evaluative cultures?

From the literature, a number of factors have already been identified as contributing to the development of evaluative cultures, or affirming evaluative cultures that already exist. Sedgwick (1994) has identified the following factors:

- Linking of evaluation plans to corporate planning processes or the management cycle;
- Managers taking responsibility for program evaluation by encouraging its use and implementing results;

- Use of strategies to build ownership of and commitment to the use of evaluation findings;
- Senior executive support for evaluation (by actively promoting it);
- Good support structures (such as the existence of a central evaluation unit);
- Development of systems to collect performance information (to help managers manage, report, etc);
- Development of evaluation competencies via staff training;
- Managers being encouraged to use a variety of evaluation methods; and
- Evaluation findings being made available to the public.

In a case study of an internal evaluation unit, Owen (2003: 45) identified a number of key factors that contributed to the development of an evaluation culture. These factors included:

- A joint commitment from operational managers for the use of internal evaluation to help decision-making;
- Knowledge of where to get expert external evaluation assistance;
- Employment of external evaluators who use participatory/interactive forms of evaluation;
- High level support from the executive manager;
- The use of teams and committees to develop evaluation protocols and formally receive findings;
- Communication to all staff about how evaluation would or would not be used and how it might affect them;
- A requirement that staff actually use findings to improve programs;
- An initial focus on processes rather than outcomes, so that staff could change and improve their own programs;
- The identification of obstacles to collecting systematic data;
- The development of in-house capacity to undertake aspects of evaluation as a routine part of work; and
- Over time, changing the focus of evaluation efforts to outcomes, not just processes.

Three additional factors, identified by Sonnichsen (1988: 147) are:

- The strategic location of an internal evaluation unit within an organisation's structure (one with authority and influence);
- The staffing of internal evaluation units with experienced, competent people; and
- An operational philosophy based on advocacy.

Some of these factors are reflected in the experience of the Australian War Memorial. However, I'm also going to add several of my own factors to the equation, as I recount some of the key events and features that have contributed to the development of an evaluative culture there.

The Australian War Memorial's experience: developing an evaluative culture

I want to begin by describing the Australian War Memorial as it was in the mid 1990s, shortly before I arrived.

At that time, the Memorial was going through a major period of turmoil. Visitor numbers were falling, and there were concerns about whether the Memorial would still be relevant in the future. The exhibitions were old and dated, with an average age of 15 years. Morale was at an all-time low, with the Merit Protection Review Agency having investigated allegations levelled at various staff members, and a turn-over of senior staff. Furthermore, the Memorial was in a serious financial position; a 1994 review of budgetary arrangements had identified a funding shortfall, and the Memorial had commenced a five-year Financial Recovery Strategy to turn its financial situation around. Part of the recovery strategy included a Scoping and Alternatives Review looking at the Memorial's organisational structure and staffing levels, resulting in a net loss of 13 positions.

Would I describe the Memorial as having an evaluative culture in 1996? No. Several evaluation studies had been done (dating back to 1988), including a major Portfolio Evaluation in 1993. However, these were exceptions rather than the rule, and there is little evidence of either instrumental or conceptual use of their results (Patton 2001: 331).

Despite – or perhaps because of – the bleak situation I have described, the seeds for the Memorial's current evaluative culture were sown in this period. There were two key factors that set the Memorial on this direction:

- The development and adoption of the Gallery Master Plan, a shared vision to renew the exhibitions and facilities at the Memorial; and
- The decision to hire an internal evaluator.

1. The development of a Gallery Master Plan

The Gallery Master Plan was a strategic, visioning document. Developed over 14 months by a series of working groups, it outlined the broad directions and principles that would guide the development of new exhibitions and facilities at the Australian War Memorial. Several of the principles that guided the Gallery Master Plan explicitly stated the requirement that the Memorial consider and consult with visitors:

'An awareness of the characteristics and needs of its visitors is fundamental to the development of galleries under this plan...Visitors' needs and views should be considered and sought actively through consultation in the development of galleries.'

(Australian War Memorial 1996: 20)

The Gallery Master Plan legitimised and gave weight to the notion of bringing an audience perspective to the process of developing exhibitions. This made it possible to bring objective information about the needs of visitors to the exhibition development process, and for decisions to be made on the basis of rational information, not just on people's own whims or judgements (Rist 1997).

2. The decision to hire an internal evaluator

The second 'seed' that was sown during this period was the decision to hire an internal evaluator. This decision was made as part of the Scoping and Alternatives Review. The evaluation and visitor research position (the Audience Advocate & Evaluator as it was known then), was established with a long-term goal in mind – to underpin all planning with reliable and valid data about visitors and programs. However, in the first instance, the most pressing need was for the position to undertake significant evaluation and visitor research to inform the Gallery Redevelopment project.

In creating a new, permanent, internal evaluation position, the Memorial followed in the footsteps of several other major Australian museums – the Powerhouse Museum (1991), Australian Museum (1994), and the Museum of Victoria (1994) (Scott 1997; Casey and Wehner 2002). This trend towards the use of internal evaluators has occurred not only within the Australian museum industry, but more broadly throughout the public and private sectors.

The trend towards internal evaluation has been noted by a number of commentators (e.g. Love 1991; Patton 1997; Rist 1997; Sonnichsen 2000; Barkley 2001). A variety of reasons has been given: disenchantment with external evaluation; concerns about the lack of utilisation of results; funding cuts; improved training opportunities for internal evaluators; legislative requirements; change in government policy. Some commentators have cited the benefits that internal evaluators and evaluation can bring to organisations as reasons behind this trend. Such benefits include greater opportunities to collect data; a better understanding of organisational structure, culture, context, goals and objectives; access to decision makers; the ability to undertake follow-up work to 'pursue the approval of recommendations' (Sonnichsen 1987: 35); the development and preservation of a corporate resource (institutional knowledge and memory); and the opportunity to participate in long-term, strategic planning, and influence organisational direction and policy (Cummings, Nowakowski et al. 1988; Love 1991; Rist 1997).

A less-well documented benefit, but one which I believe will be of increasing importance, is that of helping in the development of evaluative organisational cultures (Sonnichsen 1988).

3. Formal requirement to conduct and use evaluation in projects

A third factor that contributed to the development of an evaluative culture at the Australian War Memorial was the formal requirement that evaluations be conducted and used in the development of new exhibitions.

When the Memorial began the Gallery Redevelopment project in 1996, it introduced a best-practice model for exhibition planning. This was based on the model used at Te Papa Tongarewa, the Museum of New Zealand (Fitzgerald 1995). The model identifies seven different stages in the process of exhibition development, and has a formal requirement that evaluation be structured into this process at specific stages. The following diagram outlines the exhibition development process and the stages at which evaluation is used (adapted from Fitzgerald 1995):

Table 1 - Exhibition development & evaluation processes

Stage of exhibition development	Evaluation	Evaluation purpose		
Concept description <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial ideas for exhibition Communication objectives, storylines, and themes defined Target audiences identified and researched Key collection items identified 	<p style="text-align: center;">↔ Front-end ↔</p>	<p>To discover the target audience's reactions to the proposed exhibition theme, including their knowledge, interest, motivations, preferences</p>		
Concept development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Storyline and themes developed and detailed 			↔	↔
Concept design <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preliminary plans and elevations drawn and assessed 				
Design development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final layouts developed Collection items finalised Text & graphics developed Audio-visuals produced 	<p style="text-align: center;">↔ Formative ↔</p>	<p>To test and improve the effectiveness of exhibits</p>		
Documented design <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Construction and tendering drawings completed 				
Construction and Installation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Production of exhibition Installation of collection items & tertiary dressing of exhibition 				
Occupancy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open to the public 	<p style="text-align: center;">↔ Remedial ↔</p>	<p>To gain feedback on how the exhibition works as a whole, with a focus on improving it</p>		
	<p style="text-align: center;">↔ Summative ↔</p>	<p>To find out what the exhibition has achieved and how it is working</p>		

The best-practice model for exhibition planning used at the Memorial involved the establishment of a project team for each exhibition. Each team consisted of 3 members, drawn from existing staff, plus myself (the evaluator) as a part-time team member. My role was to work closely with the project teams, to help them identify their information needs and provide them with the required information. However, other team members also had responsibilities that involved evaluation. The duties statements for the different positions specified that they be aware of and promote the needs of audiences as identified in evaluation, and that they ensure evaluation findings be appropriately addressed. Indeed, there was a formal reporting requirement at the end of each stage of the exhibition development process, whereby project teams needed to demonstrate what evaluation had been done, and how the findings had been incorporated into the exhibition design, before they received approval to advance to the next stage of the project.

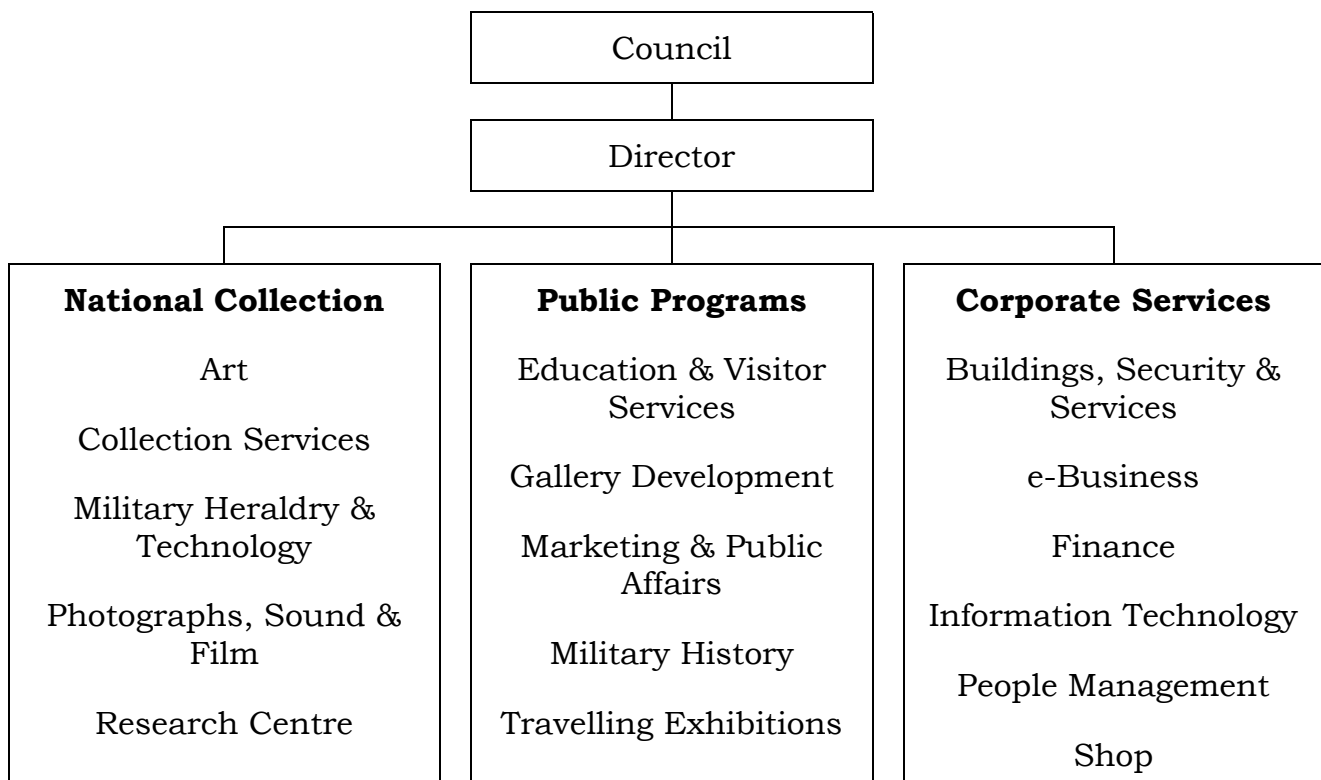
The adoption of this process with its automatic integration of evaluation achieved a number of things. Firstly, it ensured a focus on the needs, wants, interests, and perceptions of our clients in the new galleries. It provided objective data for decision-making during the planning stages of the project, the time at which evaluation can have most impact in modifying and improving concepts and their implementation (Reussner 2003: 88) Importantly, by the completion of the Gallery Redevelopment project, many of the staff who had been involved had witnessed the benefits and uses of evaluation; they in turn became advocates for the wider use of evaluation when they returned to their own sections.

4. Location of evaluation within the Memorial's Executive section

A fourth factor that has helped in the development of an evaluative culture at the Memorial has been a change in the physical and organisational location of the evaluation position.

From an organisational and operational perspective, the Memorial is divided into three major branches: the National Collection, which is responsible for the thousands of items in the Memorial's care; Public Programs, which is the 'public face' of the Memorial; and Corporate Services, which provides financial, administrative, and other support. Each of these branches comprises a number of sections, as shown on the following table:

Table 2 - Australian War Memorial Corporate Structure



Overall responsibility for Memorial management rests with the Memorial Council. The Director, as Chief Executive Officer of the Memorial, is responsible to the Council, and manages the Memorial's operations in accordance with their directions, the Australian War Memorial Act, and policy. Three Assistant Directors – one per branch – support the Director in senior management matters, and together provide strategic leadership and management of Memorial

operations (they are the Corporate Management Group, CMG). CMG, together with their support staff, make up the Memorial's Executive section.

When the Memorial's evaluation position was established in 1996, there were two potential locations for it to be placed, both within the Public Programs branch. The first was in Gallery Development – however, as a new section, there was pressure for this to be established with minimal staff. The alternative location was in the Education & Visitor Services (E&VS) section; E&VS was seen as having the strongest client focus and the most contact with visitors, and was therefore considered an appropriate place for an 'audience advocate' to be located.

In 1999, as the activities of Gallery Redevelopment began to wind down, the evaluation position was relocated from E&VS to the Executive section, answering directly to the Assistant Director of Public Programs (ADPP). This involved both an organisational and a physical relocation. The move was justified by several reasons. Broadly speaking, the aim was for evaluation to be used more widely across the Memorial, and to be embedded in most projects and processes. Apart from staff in the Education & Visitor Services and Gallery Development sections, there was limited corporate knowledge and understanding about the evaluation work that had already been undertaken and its usefulness in planning; the move therefore provided an opportunity to raise the profile of evaluation and signal its importance from a corporate point of view. The move would improve accessibility to the evaluator by all Assistant Directors, Branches, and sections, thereby increasing the opportunity for expert assistance in the evaluation of a wider range of projects. The move coincided with the introduction of accrual accounting and outputs/outcomes reporting, and with a new 3-year corporate planning period; it therefore enabled greater involvement by the evaluator in both of these processes.

The relocation of the evaluation position has had a remarkable impact on the institutionalisation and acceptance of evaluation within the Australian War Memorial. As a tool for management, evaluation has been widely adopted in both the Public Programs and Corporate Services branches, and is starting to make inroads into the National Collections branch. It's also been used very broadly in cross-Memorial project teams (such as the introduction of e-business, exhibition development processes, Service Charter Review, and so on).

The location of internal evaluation positions has been identified as a key factor affecting the degree to which evaluation makes an impact within a number of organisations, including museums (Sonnichsen 1988; Reussner 2003). A recent study on the status of evaluation and audience research in the Australian cultural heritage sector recommended that internal evaluation positions be 'embedded in a supporting infrastructure...associated with a neutral department with organisation-wide functions, such as the executive area, as high as possible in the hierarchy in order to ensure its relevance to the institution as a whole' (Reussner 2003: 97). The Memorial is fortunate to have its internal evaluation position located in such an area.

5. The use of Steering Committees to oversee major evaluation projects

A fifth factor in the development of an evaluative culture has been the strategic use of Steering Committees to oversee key evaluation projects, to build ownership of evaluation projects and findings, and to increase senior managers' understanding of the evaluation process.

One of the best features of the exhibition development / evaluation model that was adopted by the Memorial is that the primary audience or client group is clearly identified for the first three stages of evaluation (front-end, formative, and remedial). This audience is the exhibition project team, which has a keen and vested interest in finding out the answers to their evaluative questions. By the time the final evaluation stage occurs – summative evaluation – the exhibition project team has disbanded and the relevant staff have returned to their respective positions. While they maintain an interest in the outcomes of the evaluation, they are no longer the drivers in this process: their role as primary audience has ended. It is at this point that a new, primary audience needs to be identified for the evaluation to be of worth. With a focus on outcomes, this audience would typically be the organisation's senior management – however, it can be difficult to actively involve senior management in evaluation if evaluation is perceived to be 'the job of the evaluator' (Patton 1997: 139).

To overcome this difficulty, I formed a Steering Committee at the completion of the Gallery Redevelopment project, to oversee an evaluation of its outcomes. The Steering Committee comprised two of the three Assistant Directors, the Gallery Development manager, one of the exhibition project team leaders, and me as the evaluation manager. The Steering Committee developed the Terms of Reference, agreed upon methodologies, and gazetted evaluation reports. While the use of a Steering Committee involved handing over some control of the evaluation, this was well worth the result of senior management owning and promoting the evaluation and its findings. Following the success of this approach, I have continued to use Steering Committees to oversee major evaluation projects as one way of gaining the support of senior management.

6. Reflection on key learnings at the end of major projects

The Memorial's Gallery Redevelopment project was a major undertaking. It involved substantial building and refurbishment works to two-thirds of the Memorial's public spaces, and took more than three years to complete. Over that time, it affected every staff member to some degree.

As such a significant project, the Memorial acknowledged the importance of learning what we could from it. At the end of the Gallery Redevelopment project, we undertook an evaluation of the process we'd followed. This involved:

- 15 debrief sessions with staff from the different sections across the Memorial, addressing matters such as communication and teamwork and why these had or hadn't worked;
- a workshop, conducted by a consultant facilitator, that was attended by representatives from each of the debrief sessions;
- a series of working papers highlighting strengths, weaknesses, and recommended actions for future projects; and

- formal discussions by senior management and section leaders.

This process emphasised personal and organisational learning, and highlighted actions that could be undertaken by individuals, sections, and branches to improve the Memorial's business practice 'next time'.

In hindsight, this evaluation could be considered a defining moment for the Australian War Memorial. It considerably enhanced the visibility and credibility of evaluation within the organisation, (and of me as the evaluator), and demonstrated that the evaluation process can be as important as evaluation outcomes. In effect, it realised Caulley's vision of a workplace in which staff reflect on and evaluate their own work, take responsibility for their actions, and work collaboratively with others to improve the organisation's business (Caulley 1993).

7. Programs, processes, products – not people

A seventh factor, and one that was reinforced by the evaluation I've just described, is that the Memorial's internal evaluation efforts cover programs, processes, and products, but not people. The internal evaluator does *not* undertake personnel evaluations (the Memorial has a separate, performance appraisal system for this task). As such, evaluation is not something that is 'done' to staff at the Australian War Memorial. This allows evaluative activities to be positioned as positive rather than threatening, and removes the possibility of the evaluator being considered a 'spy' who collects information about people's job performance (Love 1991: 9). This has helped to reinforce both the independence and the credibility of the internal evaluator.

8. Inclusion of evaluation in corporate and business planning processes

The Australian War Memorial uses a consultative process to develop its three-yearly corporate and annual business plans. Used over the past ten years, this process has gained wide approval and acceptance from staff. The process involves teams and sections coming together to use SWOTs and other planning tools to review and assess past achievement and to identify future directions. These are brought together and considered by the Corporate Management Group and Council to reach an agreed plan.

As part of routine business practice, evaluation activities have been incorporated into the Memorial's annual business plans since 1996. The annual business plan formally identifies the projects or programs in which evaluation will be undertaken and used in the year ahead. These projects typically reflect the Memorial's business priorities, although smaller projects are included when the manager has demonstrated an interest in evaluation. (Over the years, the provision of evaluation support for smaller projects has been an important way of fostering advocates who have gone on to champion the benefits of evaluation to colleagues and team-members and become powerful allies in the Memorial's evolution into a more evaluation-centred organisation). Where evaluations recommend remedial actions that can not be met within the operational budget of that financial year, follow-up actions are costed and included in the subsequent year's business plan.

Since 1999, the evaluation position has also been intimately involved in the development of the Memorial's three-yearly corporate plan. For the current corporate plan, this included a review of the Australian museum sector so that CMG and Council could compare the Memorial's performance and planned direction with that of similar organisations.

The inclusion of evaluation within an already-established corporate and business planning process has placed it 'out in the open', and helped to institutionalise evaluation activities as part of routine business practice. Evaluation is now considered an automatic inclusion (rather than an added extra) in major programs and projects.

9. The use of monitoring and performance indicators by senior executive staff

At the beginning of 2000, the Memorial's Corporate Management Group introduced a monthly corporate performance statistical report. This report brings together trend data and interpretation on key areas of the Memorial's operations, such as visitation, staffing levels, sales and donations, financial statements, energy usage, and other aspects. The information included in the report addresses both performance and management indicators, with some (but not all) directly related to the Memorial's outputs/outcomes framework.

Each month, CMG carefully considers, reflects upon and questions the information that is presented in the performance reports. In doing so, the members of CMG have provided excellent role-models for the consideration and use of systematic, objective data across the organisation, as well as visible support for evaluation processes.

10. Use of interactive evaluations as a way of increasing ownership of findings and building evaluation capacity

A tenth factor that has assisted in the development of an evaluative culture at the Australian War Memorial has been the use of interactive forms of evaluation (Owen and Rogers 1999). Interactive evaluations generally provide information about the delivery or implementation of programs; as such, they are particularly relevant to operational managers and program staff. Interactive evaluations are based on the premise that the people who are responsible for managing and delivering programs should also be responsible for making decisions about those programs, with the use of evaluation findings.

In practice, the use of interactive forms of evaluation has meant that the people who manage and deliver programs or products at the Memorial are jointly responsible for negotiating evaluation plans, collecting (at least some of) the data, interpreting and judging the evaluation findings, and suggesting and implementing recommended changes. The close involvement of the primary audience in this way has led to their increased ownership of evaluation findings (Patton 1997), and enhanced the Memorial's evaluation capacity.

Conclusion

"Be not afraid of evaluation: some are born evaluators, some become evaluators, and some have evaluators thrust upon them."

With apologies to Shakespeare, Twelfth Night

Over the past seven years, the Australian War Memorial has undertaken an important journey. Where it was once a workplace with limited usage of evaluation, it has now been transformed into an organisation where evaluation activities are a normal and integral part of business.

Through the course of this paper, I have highlighted ten factors that have been instrumental in supporting the uptake of evaluation at the Memorial. These are listed below:

Structural factors

- The appointment of an internal evaluator
- The location of evaluation within the executive area

Procedural factors

- Formal requirement to undertake and use evaluation in projects
- Reflection on key learnings at the end of major projects
- Inclusion of evaluation in corporate and business planning processes
- The use of Steering Committees to oversee major evaluation projects
- The use of monitoring and performance indicators by senior executive staff

Philosophical / attitudinal factors

- An agreed vision that underpins the importance of evaluation (the Gallery Master Plan)
- Evaluation of programs, processes, products – not people
- Interactive evaluations as a way of increasing ownership of findings and building capacity

A number of these factors have been previously identified in the evaluation literature: the linking of evaluation plans to corporate planning processes; use of strategies to build ownership of findings; senior executive support for evaluation processes (Sedgwick 1994); commitment and requirement to use evaluation findings; the development of in-house capacity; (Owen 2003); and the strategic location of an internal evaluation unit within an organisation's structure (Sonnichsen 1988). This suggests that these factors can play an important role in the development of evaluative cultures in other organisations, not just the Australian War Memorial.

For evaluation to fully realise its potential and make a significant contribution to organisational learning, decision-making, and performance, it needs to be

accepted, integrated, and valued within organisations (Sonnichsen 1988, Rist 1997, Torres and Preskill 2001). The factors I have listed above have combined to create an evaluative culture at the Australian War Memorial; their implementation in other settings may enhance the development of evaluative cultures elsewhere.

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