
ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE QUALITY MANAGEMENT (CAF MODEL) AS AN EFFECTIVE TOOL OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION MANAGEMENT – THE CASE OF NITRA MUNICIPALITY, SLOVAKIA

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Abstract

The standard quality assessment system is a comprehensive quality management tool created for the public sector. From now on, the Common Assessment Framework model (such as CAF) assumes that effective management in public administration organizations can achieve exceptional results in organizational performance. The CAF model scheme consists of nine criteria that fall under the categories of organizational enablers and results. Within the “leadership” criterion, the paper explores the aspect of motivation and support of human resources in the organization by focusing on assessing the current state of implementation of the CAF model using a case study of the municipality of Nitra, Slovakia. As a part of the research, we focused on several aspects: the way the municipality deals with human resources of the self-evaluation process, the way the CAF team’s training is implemented, the self-evaluation process and the interpretation of the results of the self-evaluation concerning the municipality office, as well as about the level of public involvement in the process of increasing quality. The paper also evaluates the questionnaire survey carried out by the municipal office of Nitra, thanks to which we were able to find out the view of the residents on the functioning of the researched municipality. In order to process the paper – to interpret results and outcomes and formulate conclusions, we applied a base of primary sources (qualitative research method of unstructured interview) and a base of secondary information sources (available results of the questionnaire survey published by Nitra municipality).

Keywords: CAF model, public administration, human resources

JEL Classification: H83, D73, M12

Introduction and theoretical background

In the private sector, quality is a concept that has become a fundamental element for the continuous running of an organization since at least the 1990s, and its influence is growing considerably. This has led to the development of supportive and educational models of quality that can provide a guide to excellent organizational management. Different quality management models adapted to the sector can be a helping hand for public administration managers in this area. We can mention benchmarking or the CAF model among the most used ones in the Slovak Republic. The CAF model is one of the most commonly used models due to its accessibility and ease of use. For employees of the municipal authority, this tool is an opportunity to advance the quality of the entrusted organization free of charge and with minimal effort. The CAF model's main benefits are understanding and describing internal processes defined by specific criteria and identifying strengths and weaknesses. In addition to improving internal processes, implementing the CAF model can also increase the institution's prestige.

The topic of local government performance is highly current, and its research is crucial to strategic planning (Matei & Enescu, 2012). Its absence is highly unreal; hence, we need to focus on processes that benefit public interests (Mitaľ, 2018). Globalization has introduced many processes aimed at increasing efficiency, and this is why it is necessary to discuss the implementation of the CAF model in public administration economies. CAF is an essential tool for quality management and improvement in the public sector. CAF combines the excellence model of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) and the model of the German Speyer Academy (Staes et al., 2010). It applies to all parts of government and can be implemented at national, regional, and local levels and is based on the premise that leadership strategy and planning, which translates into the management of staff, partnerships, resources, and projects, is the key to achieving excellence in organizational performance as well as outcomes for citizens/customers, employees and society (EUPAN, 2019).

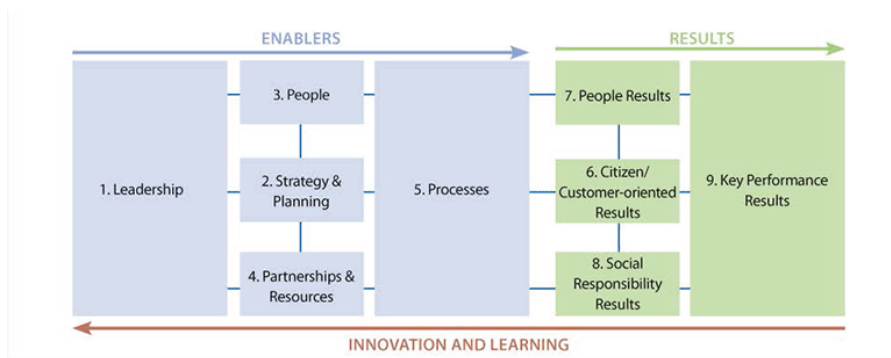
The EFQM model inspired the CAF, but it is more straightforward and beneficial for obtaining an accurate image of a public administration organization's efficiency (Paulová, 2014). Nevertheless, it can also be used for various other objectives (e.g. as part of a comprehensive reform program or as a foundation for directing public-sector improvement initiatives) (Paulová, 2014). Kollárová and Tománková (2012) examined the use of the CAF model in public administration using a case study. These authors identify that the use of the CAF model provides an effective system for an organization to initiate a continuous improvement process also because the CAF model provides the following:

- evidence-based evaluation using a set of criteria that are accepted in the public sector across Europe,
- opportunities to measure development and achievement of an exceptional level of achievement of the targets,
- a means of achieving a consensus of direction and agreement on what needs to be done to improve the quality of the organization,
- the link between the different outcomes to be achieved and the supporting practices or assumptions,
- creating enthusiasm among employees by involving them in the improvement process,
- opportunities to promote and share the best practices of different parts of their organization or another organization,

- integrating different quality initiatives into the organization's routine activities, measuring progress over time through periodic self-assessment.

The CAF model is based on nine criteria: leadership, strategy and planning, people, partnerships and resources, processes, citizen/customer-oriented centered results, people results, social responsibility results, and key performance results. The first five criteria deal with the management practices of the organization, called assumptions, and the following criteria are results (what the organization achieves) (EUPAN, 2019). The CAF also consists of 20 sub-criteria, and compliance with these core elements is required and recommended to be specific to the organization. As a result, 29 sub-criteria define the key concerns to examine while evaluating an organization. (Kalfa & Yetim, 2013 in Kalfa & Yetim, 2018).

Figure.1 Model CAF



Source: Kalfa & Yetim, 2018

The CAF score system, which quantitatively represents the organization's level of performance for each criterion and sub-criteria, must also be considered. It aims to achieve the following four objectives (Schwarczová et al., 2021):

- provide a path to follow while implementing improvements,
- track the own progress,
- determine the optimal practices based on high ratings for assumptions and outcomes,
- assist in identifying relevant benchmarking partners from which to learn.

Each of the nine criteria (e.g. leadership, people, strategy & planning) can be scored on a scale of 0 to 5, allowing the overall performance of each organization to be compared, which can then be benchmarked (Caddy et al., 2002).

In many European countries, CAF has been promoted and used since its introduction in 2000 to improve public administration through several activities. ("Study of the use", 2005) As a result of political constraints and the absence of competition, public organizations are perceived as less efficient at providing goods and services (Pesch, 2008). Moreover, in order for the public administration system to work and meet the needs of society, reform is needed. (Nunvářová, 2013) Over the previous 22 years,

the model has gone through multiple improvements, illustrating its flexibility and responsiveness to new difficulties, with each update spearheaded by representatives from European countries who make up the CAF National Correspondents Group (UNMS, 2022). It may seem that public administration reform is a fact worldwide, but certain countries require more of these reforms than others. (Prijon, 2012) Furthermore, the organizations are from a variety of sectors (e.g., judicial, municipal, social-service organizations), and their sizes range from small (10 people) to extremely large (over 5000), although we must assume that the middle category is the largest (Staes & Thijs, 2005).

Nenadal et al. (2008) defined advantages in the area of quality management in public administration organizations:

- introduce the principles of Total Quality Management into public administration,
- promote self-assessment of public sector organizations in order to obtain a structured picture of the organization and, consequently, ideas for improvements,
- to act as a link between the different models used in quality management,
- promote bench learning among public sector organizations.

Other significant advantages, according to Papalazarou & Tsoulfas (2018), include the following:

- the elimination of bureaucracy, which simplifies administrative procedures,
- promoting transparency,
- an attitude towards residents to develop trustworthiness in the institutions and procedures of the public sector institutions,
- a comprehensive strategy including all public organizations, with the degree of autonomy of individual public agencies being reduced,
- the most effective use of contemporary technology, particularly in the sphere of communications, both for the betterment of public services and the development of citizen-state interactions,
- MBO (management by objectives) may be introduced more efficiently, and relative indicators can be used to measure the efficacy of public services,
- the alignment of local authorities with mild socioeconomic changes.

However, as a quality tool, the model is only as good as how it is implemented; in other words, how the individuals in charge of its implementation “run” it determines its correct usage and potential use (Ramatta, 2011 in Papalazarou & Tsoulfas, 2018). This is also why we must consider the importance of self-assessment, which should lead to creating an efficient action plan for the areas of the organization that need improvement (Vakalopoulou et al., 2011). Organizations may use the self-assessment approach to examine themselves by analyzing leadership, human resources, planning, social effect, and citizen satisfaction, and the findings allow them to improve themselves based on the outcomes. (Balci, 2007 in Kalfa & Yetim, 2018) However, the long period of implementation makes it difficult to maintain the right pace and motivation, and this is why external feedback must be considered to be very important, as it keeps the focus on improvement and allows the organization to check that it is still working on its improvements according to plan (Thijs & Staes, 2010). Due to the need for third-party validation, the CAF network of National Correspondents inside the Public Administration Innovation Task Force has established an external feedback loop that evaluates the success of the following six fundamental objectives:

- to ensure the quality of the CAF model's implementation and its impact on the organization,
- to determine whether the CAF model has resulted in the organization applying TQM values,
- encourage and revive excitement for the organization's constant progress,
- promote peer review and bench learning,
- support organizations which have launched on a continuous improvement path without assessing their degree of excellence,
- to promote the involvement of CAF users in the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) (Paulová, 2014).

Between 6 and 12 months following the preparation and finalization of the self-assessment report, organizations attempt to obtain external feedback in which assessors examine the documents provided by the organization, interview CAF team members and relevant stakeholders about the CAF model's implementation, and conduct an on-site assessment (EIPA, 2020). The goal of this external feedback is to help the organizations better understand what they have done and provide more possibilities for future high-quality work. At the same time, the CAF label is only available to public administration organizations that make a concerted effort to use CAF successfully (Thijs & Staes, 2010). The CAF model's external feedback is built on these three pillars:

- self-evaluation process including a questionnaire covering six steps,
- improvement process,
- maturity of TQM in the organization (broader understanding of excellence).

Moreover, there are four assessment levels: "0 = Initiation level not reached, I = Initiation level, R = Implementation level and Z = Maturity level" (Valach et al., 2019). The aim of the external feedback is not to assess the actual results but to determine whether the improvement process is designed and managed correctly, in line with the requirements of the model, and therefore even those organizations that have not yet achieved significant results can be successful in the process (Paulová, 2012).

The European Contributors actively participate in model updates and work on various shared duties, with the Slovak Republic represented by the NMS SR (Slovak Office for Standardization, Metrology, and Testing) (UNMS, 2022). Each public organization can use the CAF model at its discretion, as it is available and accessible (Caddy, 2002). In the future, the CAF could, among other things, serve as a tool to promote international cooperation in European public administration, including international benchmarking, and may also provide a reliable basis for measuring or comparing performance between public sector organizations (Caddy, 2002).

CAF's experience over the previous two decades has shown that this simple instrument may be tremendously valuable for any public organization and can be successfully implemented by considering operational and personnel aspects (Asensio M. et al., 2021). However, compared to other European countries, the Slovak Republic does not yet have sufficient information regarding the application of CAF in organizations that are part of the public administration. This is one of the main reasons we have focused on specific features of the implementation process in the Nitra municipality.

Material and methods

In order to process the assessment of the implementation process of the CAF model on the example of the Nitra municipality, the study of related available references and related scientific research works were used in the first phase. Basic scientific methods such as analysis, synthesis, comparison, deduction, and unstructured interviews were applied in the next phase.

In the paper, we applied information and facts based on public materials available on the website of the municipality, internal materials, which were made available for inspection by the Municipal Office of Nitra, and last but not least, the information provided by the representatives of the municipal office in the unstructured interview. On behalf of the Nitra Municipal Office, the interview was conducted by Ing. Monika Reiskupová, an employee of the Project and Strategic Management Department and the Head of the Department, Mgr. Martin Horák. Based on the findings, we formulated conclusions that will improve the use of the CAF model.

The paper's main aim was to assess the current state of implementing the CAF model in the Nitra municipality. Based on the main aim, we have defined the following partial aims:

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- to assess how the Nitra municipality dealt with the personnel aspect of the self-assessment process - i.e., how the project manager was identified, how the CAF team was assembled, how the team leader was selected, whether anything was changed in the course of the other self-assessments, and if so, for what reason; the staffing of the quality unit - i.e., whether a separate position of "quality manager" has been allocated for this area,
- to find out how the CAF team has been trained or whether other staff have been trained,
- to analyze how the self-assessment itself was carried out, at what time intervals (how often) the individual self-assessments were carried out, how the municipality adapted the model to its needs, what method of assessment was chosen,
- to assess what the results of the self-assessment were and, in particular, how the municipality has followed up on them, what methods the municipality used to build on the knowledge gained from the self-assessment, and to what extent the public is involved in the self-assessment process and the quality improvement process in general.
- to assess the results of the questionnaire and the citizen's perception of the municipality in terms of image, services provided, and staff behavior.

Concerning the above partial aims, the following research hypotheses were defined, where four latent variables were used: perception of the municipal authority, staff behavior, preference for reporting complaints, and provision of quality services:

H1: Citizens' perception of the municipal authority significantly influences the provision of quality services by the municipal office.

H2: Employee behavior significantly impacts the delivery of quality services to the municipal office.

H3: Reporting preferences significantly by citizens and employees influence the provision of quality services by the city government.

The Nitra municipality collected data for the analysis from February to April 2021. 1,063 respondents completed the questionnaire, of which 744 were female, and 319 were male. Most respondents (340) were in the 31-40 age group with a university degree (636). Descriptive statistics and demographic characteristics of the respondents, such as gender, education, and age, were used for the analysis. The chi-square test of goodness of fit was applied to confirm or reject the stated hypotheses whose values we found based on calculations using AcaStat software.

Results and discussion

The self-government of the fifth largest city in Slovakia is facing the successful implementation of the CAF model and thus joining more than 4000 modern European organizations, which strengthened their position in the public administration sector thanks to the CAF model.

The idea of introducing quality management through the CAF model originated long before the Nitra Municipal Authority joined the self-assessment model. It was the effort and work performance of Mr. Mgr. Horák and Vice-Mayor (Mgr. Špoták) at IUVENTE (Slovak Youth Institute) during the implementation of the model was the trigger for the initiative of modernization of the home city administration, and the positive impacts of the implementation in the given state institution were perceived in particular. The process and staff audit itself is costly, and some of the steps in today's action plan would be indispensable for the Office. This was one of the reasons for contacting the Slovak Office for Metrology, Standardisation, and Testing, which provided more information on the process of the call aimed at municipalities, in which the Nitra Municipality was subsequently involved together with seven other cities. Assignment of consultant Assoc. Ing. Iveta Paulova, PhD., MBA, who also had the role of a trainer at the beginning of the process, was considered by the municipality as one of the most useful contributions of the Office. She guided the entire CAF team through the training for each phase, presenting an intensive consultancy activity where she drew on her own experience. The schedule for the training sessions was sufficient in terms of time (partly due to the consultancy work), yet flexible enough to allow for more days if needed. However, longer training could have a better impact on the staff regarding collaborative problem-solving and acquiring more knowledge. However, this would place a burden on the staff themselves, in addition to providing services to citizens, and for this reason, we can conclude that the duration of the training is fit for purpose. The Office for Metrology, Standardisation, and Testing has also supported funding to cover the costs of consultation and training, which the municipality would have had to allocate without their support. Other costs associated with implementation are based on the specific organization, which defines its errors and shortcomings, based on which it will take individual measures associated with such costs. The Office's readiness prior to the decision to implement the project was also at a high standard due to the high staffing capacity numbers. Based on an awareness campaign with the slogan "The best officials sit on the CAF," up to 32 staff signed up for the model. The formation of the CAF team itself was voluntary and was based on recommendations, including the involvement of the municipality's top management. The voluntary involvement of the members was reflected in the performance, and the greatest satisfaction came after

the external feedback of the self-assessment report, which was scored higher than that assessed itself. Unfortunately, the municipal authority in Nitra had to unexpectedly take unavoidable measures to cope with the pandemic, which, together with implementing the CAF model, required widespread changes in the necessary scope associated with process modifications and technical preparations. Gratitude, in this regard, belongs especially to the methodologist Ing. Monika Reiskupova, who is the driving force and, even in the most challenging conditions, managed the implementation and preparation of the self-assessment report in an admirable way together with the whole team. Although the implementation process had to be postponed by one whole month and the situation was not ideal, the Municipality of Nitra successfully submitted the self-assessment report as the first of all participating municipalities. However, looking at the whole implementation process as a long-term approach is necessary. With the help of the PDCA cycle, the introduction of regular questionnaires, and the monitoring of the satisfaction of employees and customers of the Office, the mistakes are gradually eliminated, and the steps are implemented to set up the right process and to prepare the second self-evaluation report. The management of the Nitra municipality recommends that other public administration organizations implement quality management tools, which provide a broad view of what should be urgently addressed and feedback, which is an important part of a proactive company. It is also important that public administration organizations look at the partners affected by the institution's work in a much broader context. The current management of the city of Nitra considers it to be a city with enormous potential, open to the challenges of the present day, and that is why the implementation of a common quality assessment system will contribute to the streamlining and improvement of the operation of the Municipal Office with an ultimate impact on the citizens. According to the city management, it can be highlighted as an advantage that the CAF model was created by the public administration for the public administration and tailored to the specific needs of public sector organizations. Another positive aspect of the model is that it is free of charge, which organizations welcome.

In addition, it turns out that implementing the CAF model in practice does not represent a financial burden for the organization. Even if the model were demonstrably beneficial but with the financial burden associated with it, it could be the case that for many organizations, it would simply not be worthwhile to implement the model.

The CAF self-assessment method primarily opens up an internal process of reflecting on the municipality's work and identifying the institution's weaknesses and strengths. The employees of the municipality perceive the following weaknesses and strengths:

Weaknesses:

- there is weak customer feedback,
- does not emphasize the importance of respecting fundamental human rights, such as the right to equal treatment,
- there is a bias in the results if permanent members are appointed to carry out the self-assessment.

Strengths:

- for its use, it is necessary to establish a vision or strategy for the institution, which significantly increases the possibility of managing the quality of work in the implementation of sub-tasks for its fulfillment,
- enables the strengths of the institution to be identified and thus the right processes and good practices to be found and shared,

- the CAF self-assessment identifies weaknesses in the institution's operations, identifies inefficient processes and faulty behavioral patterns that can be avoided,
- the fact that it is an evaluation of their work, the institution's staff is more motivated to implement changes, find better ways of working and more efficient processes,
- detailed methodological instructions for conducting the self-assessment, i.e., manageable and comprehensible use of the model,
- focusing on the customer - the citizen - and getting feedback on the work of the municipality,
- an opportunity to showcase the institution's efforts to improve the quality of its work and services,
- An external evaluation can complement a comprehensive evaluation of the organization's performance as an added value.

According to the CAF team, the CAF self-assessment does not require actively asking the customer about satisfaction with the institution's services at each step. The customer's opinion can be replaced by evaluating the employee involved in the self-assessment. The number of complaints received about the work of the institution is then placed in direct proportion to the evaluation of the improvement of the quality of the work of the institution - i.e. by the logic of the fewer complaints, the better the quality of the work. However, from the customer's point of view, they may be reluctant to share their negative experiences with authority because of fear that the matters they have come to the office may not be resolved.

This may result in the customer feeling that the authority is seeking their evaluation for the sake of the evaluation, not for the sake of service improvement that would be visible and valued by the customer. Public under-awareness of self-assessment and its outputs may also play an essential role.

The CAF self-assessment method is a very suitable tool for continuously improving the efficiency and performance of the Nitra municipality. The continuous use of this tool offers the city authority the opportunity not only to find shortcomings that need to be improved but also to identify good practice and share it further. This enables improvements in work and access to customers. However, it can be considered insufficient to inform the public, i.e., the authorities' customers, that processes to improve the authority's work are also underway and with what results? A further improvement in the use of the CAF is the inclusion of more frequent surveys of customers' views on the quality of the authority's services and the provision of information on how to make complaints and suggestions. These helpful steps are offered to promote a positive perception of the authority by placing information on the authority's involvement in the quality improvement process in a separate section on the office's website. This also provides an opportunity to comment online or in other ways on the authority's work. This 'Help us improve' can be essential in promoting good customer/citizen relations with the municipality.

Based on the questionnaire survey (carried out by the Nitra municipality in 2021.), we can demonstrate that up to 48.39% of respondents have a positive perception of the municipality's image. Respondents consider the municipal office as open and client-oriented, but up to 53.61% of respondents do not consider the municipal office as modern. Respondents rated the overall behavior of the staff they came into contact with positively (67.47%). When assessing the behavior of the staff, respondents reported that they most liked the polite behavior and pleasant manner (72.19%), and the least

liked the consistency or coordination of the approach of several departments or staff (41.59%). The municipal office provides quality services, which was marked by 52.54%. Office hours were mentioned by 65.87% of respondents as the best quality service, and the slightest quality service (level of innovation and digitalization) was marked by 44.17% of respondents. 39.53% of respondents answered that they do not have the opportunity to get involved in improving the quality of services of the municipality, and 87.40% would welcome the introduction of the possibility to make suggestions to improve the quality of services.

Regarding reporting complaints, the respondents prefer the electronic form (59.28%) and the least through the Municipal Council (10.74%). Respondents often use the social services of the municipal office and the Client center. The results presented in Table 1 show that all regression coefficients are statistically significant. Given that the regression coefficient (0.641) demonstrates that the relationship between citizens' perception of the city government and the provision of quality services is favorable and relatively high, it can be concluded that Hypothesis 1 ($0.001 < 0.05$) is confirmed and statistically significant. Hence, the perception of the municipal authority significantly influences the provision of quality services by the municipal authority. A positive regression coefficient was also obtained for the relationship between employee behavior and quality service delivery, so this statement is also statistically significant. Since the p-value (0.017) is at < 0.05 level in this case, Hypothesis 2 can also be confirmed. Another relationship tested is between citizen and employee reporting preferences and the provision of quality services, for which a positive regression coefficient (0.035) was obtained. With the above relationship, it can be concluded that Hypothesis H3 is rejected as the p-value (0.514) is at 0.05 level.

Table 1: Statistical verification of the stated hypotheses

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
Citizens' perception of the M/provision of quality services	0.641	0.643	0.051	11.095	0
Staff behavior/quality service delivery	0.596	0.601	0.047	9.654	0
Reporting preferences from citizens and employees/ provision of quality service	0.035	0.031	0.056	0.612	0.514

Source: Author's editing

Conclusion

Thanks to the CAF model, interpersonal relations within the Nitra municipal office have improved, teamwork has improved, employees have become more interested in what is happening in the office, and the office's running has improved. The office has become more interested in what the residents think about their work, their perception of their suggestions, where the office should improve, and what they are satisfied with. In principle, we believe that the CAF model is a good tool for the self-assessment of authority; it is an essentially universal, simple, but effective tool.

It allows an authority to know its strengths and weaknesses and gives the authority a clear signal of what needs to be worked on and what direction to take in quality management. The CAF model is not a miracle that instantly transforms a dysfunctional office into a flawless, customer-oriented institution. However, as a cornerstone for setting the quality of an organization, it can be a suitable model that can be of great benefit to the organization if its implementation is appropriately “grasped” and the outputs are then used to improve processes and procedures. The CAF model opens up enormous room for improvement for a city authority precisely by identifying its strengths and weaknesses. Each employee has the opportunity to stop and reflect on how they work, the performance of the authority’s duties as a whole, or effective processes that could be implemented. Evaluating these criteria and continuously striving for improvement in individual points and processes is a driving force and a solid motivational element for employees. By involving the staff member in self-evaluation, addressing and managing the efficiency and way of working of the authority, it transforms from a work matter to a personal one. At the same time, the employee gains insight into the scope for improving his work and his further personal development.

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