

van Dooren, W. & Van de Walle, S. (2004). Why Do Belgian Public Agencies Use the Common Assessment Framework (CAF)? In: Löffler, E. & Vintar, M. (eds.). Improving the quality of East and Western European Public Services, Hampshire: Ashgate, pp. 157-71.

Why Do Belgian Public Agencies Use the Common Assessment Framework (CAF)?

Wouter Van Dooren and Steven Van de Walle

Introduction

Public sector organisations throughout Europe are increasingly applying quality models such as the EFQM Business Excellence Model, the ISO 9000 or 14000 series, Balanced Scorecard approaches, Six Sigma, etc. Recently, the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) was added to this ‘hit parade’ of quality tools. It has been introduced as a self-assessment tool which will be widely used by European public agencies – and this shared nature means that it can give rise to interesting comparative analysis. It aspires to bridge the different quality models and to serve as a useful ‘starter model’ before moving on to more sophisticated quality management models.

However, why would a public sector organisation choose to introduce quality models? Sceptics of quality management often state that the use of such models is purely for window dressing, particularly when they are used in external assessments, as is the case in quality awards. Public agencies which are awarded a prize in such competitions may market this external recognition to justify their *raison d'être*, to protect them from budget cuts or to reduce the risk of being privatised. In these cases, the motivation for applying quality models is externally driven. Advocates of quality models, however, stress the benefits of quality models for the organisation. They assume that the internal use of quality models will lead to tangible improvements in the quality of public services through organisational learning. In other words, the use of quality models for self-assessment is driven by motivations internal to the organisation. It seems reasonable to assume that internal motivation to use quality management models leads to superior results in terms of public service quality. As Halachmi (1996) points out, organisations which have participated in quality awards successfully may easily become self-satisfied and complacent, which is counterproductive to continuous

improvement. Organisations which have not received a prize in a quality award, however, may perceive themselves as ‘losers’ and in frustration might discontinue their improvement efforts.

Therefore, it is important to analyse the kind of purpose for which quality tools are used, before we make a judgement on whether their benefits exceed the costs or the risks of introducing them. This chapter explores the motives of public sector organisations in adopting quality models. The authors present some empirical results for Belgian public agencies by using the example of the CAF.

In the next section, the authors provide a brief description of the CAF and its diffusion in the Belgian public sector.

The Introduction of the CAF within the Belgian Public Administration

The Common Assessment Framework

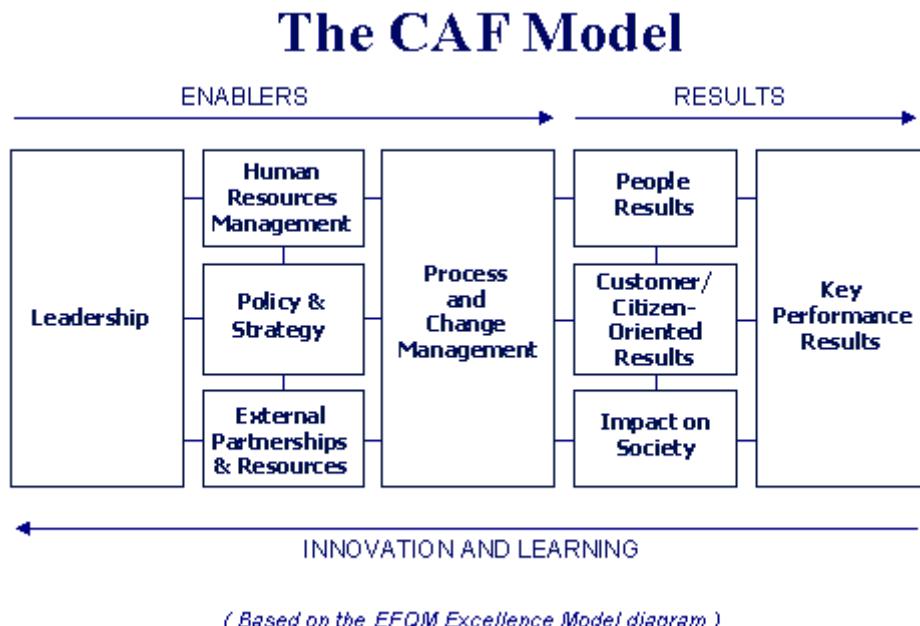
The CAF was developed as an instrument to help public agencies in Europe to become familiar with the principles of quality management (see chapter ??? in this volume). The European Institute for Public Administration refers on its website to four purposes for the CAF (EIPA, 2003):

- (1) “To capture the unique features of public sector organisations.
- (2) To serve as a tool for public administrators who want to improve the performance of their organisation.
- (3) To act as a ‘bridge’ across the various models in use in quality management.
- (4) To facilitate benchmarking between public sector organisations.”

The design and contents of the CAF are very similar to a 1999 version of the European Excellence Model designed by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). A few extra elements have come from criteria used in the Speyer Quality Award, which is an award for public sector organisations in Germany, Austria and Switzerland (Venna and Kelly, 2002: 7). Further elements were brought in from adaptations of the EFQM model developed

in the United Kingdom and Denmark to make the CAF more appropriate to public sector organisations in those countries. Consequently, the CAF has the same nine-box structure as the European Excellence Model, including five so-called ‘enablers’ and four ‘results areas’. Apart from key criteria ‘process and change management and ‘customer/citizen-oriented results’, the headings of the boxes are identical.

Figure 1: The Nine Box-Structure of the CAF



Source: <http://www.eipa.nl/home/eipa.htm> (Copyright © European Institute of Public Administration, 2003, reprinted by the permission of the European Institute of Public Administration)

The major difference between the EFQM model and CAF is the scoring method. The EFQM model is based on a sophisticated scoring approach that distinguishes between ‘*results criteria*’ and ‘*method criteria*’ in the RADAR chart. For ‘*method criteria*’, organisations assess their performance in terms of approach, deployment, assessment and review. For ‘*results criteria*’, the terms are trends, target values, comparisons and clarification, and scope.

The CAF offers five alternative assessment responses in relation to every sub-criterion in the enablers and results sections (see <http://www.eipa.nl/CAF/en/GuideLines.htm>). According to

the response selected by the self-assessment team, performance is scored from 1 (no actions have been taken/no results have been measured or results are declining) to 5 (the highest possible score). Compared to the EFQM model, the CAF claims to offer a rather '*light*' approach towards scoring.

The Role of the CAF in the Quality Conference for Belgium Public Administration

In May 2000, the 15 member states of the EU presented their 'best administrative practices' at the 'First Quality Conference for Public Administration' in Lisbon (see also www.2qconference.org). As a follow up, the three ministers of the civil service in Belgium, both at the federal and at the regional level, organised a conference entitled '*First Quality Conference for the Public Services in Belgium*' on October 10-11, 2001 (www.publicquality.be). The conference, which was subtitled, 'the exchange of good practices', had three aims (Staes, 2000):

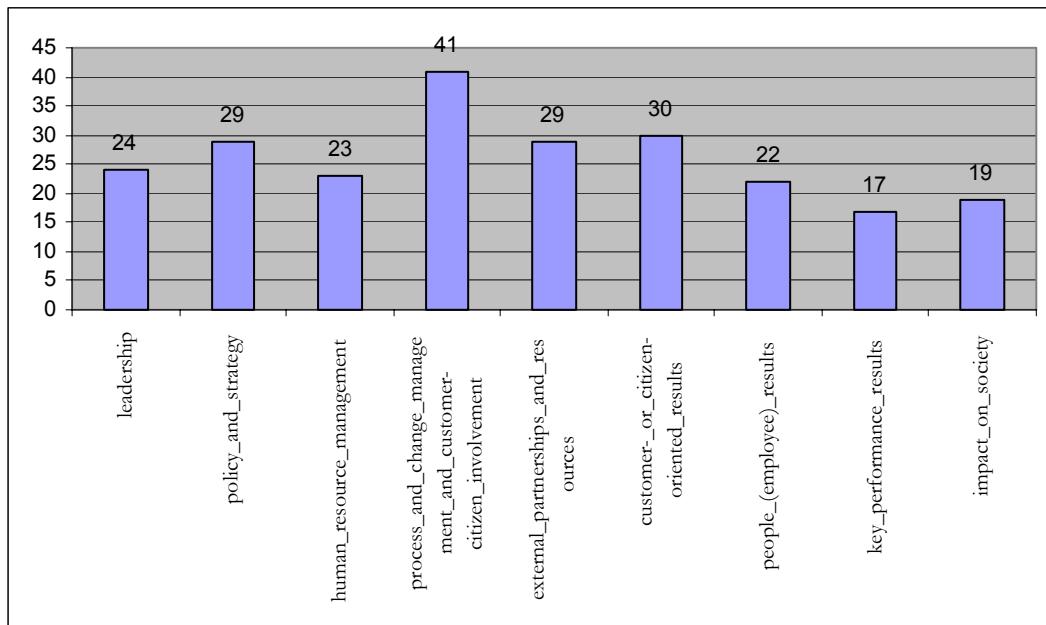
- to promote a permanent learning process by sharing good practices between public agencies at all levels of government;
- to reward public agencies and their staff for using good practices;
- to support quality management by promoting the use of tools of self-assessment.

In brief, the conference was used as a catalyst for making the CAF familiar to Belgian public administration. A CAF self-assessment was the prerequisite for being allowed to make a presentation on 'good practice' (Bouckaert and Thijs, 2002). Over 60 self-assessment reports were submitted. A jury selected twenty good practices for presentation at the quality conference. The jury based its decisions on the self-assessment reports and a review by an external assessor. Some 800 civil servants attended the quality conference. A second quality conference is planned in 2003.

The 63 public organisations which submitted a self-assessment report also had to indicate which area they believed to be their main strength. In practice, this meant that they had to indicate to which of the nine boxes of the CAF model their 'good practice' referred. In addition, the organisations had to provide some evidence in their self-assessment report as to why they thought they have developed a 'good practice' in the area which they had specified.

Figure 2 shows how many times a key criterion of the CAF was indicated by the organisation as being an area of good practice in the organisation.

Figure 2: ‘Good Practice’ Cases Reported in CAF Self-Assessments



‘Good practices’ are reported most frequently in ‘*process and change management and customer-citizen involvement*’ with 41 hits. The least mentioned criteria are ‘*impact on society*’ (19), ‘*key performance results*’ (17) and to a lesser extent ‘*people (employee) results*’ (22). These latter three key criteria are within the result categories of the CAF. This finding may be interpreted in different ways: it may illustrate a lack of results orientation on the part of public agencies or simply incapacity to measure results. (Sixteen organisations indicated to be a good practice on all the criteria. However, this was an explicit option on the application form. Therefore, the above conclusion may be a bit too daring)

Research Methodology

The Conceptual Framework: Internal and External Motivations

The demand for quality tools such as the CAF may come from within or outside the organisation: ‘internal motivation’ implies that the rewards for improvement are internal or that the improvement process is rewarding in itself, while ‘external motivation’ implies that the potential rewards for improvement come from sources external to the organisation. In the following, we will identify factors that may condition internal or external motivations.

Internal Factors

Several internal factors can be identified. First, public organisations may have a strong focus on service quality and recognise a need for routine quality assessments. In this situation, applying quality models is part of organisational operations and is rewarding in itself. The literature on total quality management, and indeed most literature on change management, emphasises the importance of involving the entire organisation - including all departments and processes - in quality initiatives and continuous quality improvement. Quality initiatives should result not only in efficient management and satisfied clients but also in job satisfaction. This vision is represented in Denhardt's concept of the 'pursuit of significance' (Denhardt, 1993). Commitment to values is seen as a driver of change towards the development of professionalism, integrity, service and quality. In brief, dedication to public service – the key value which is normally highlighted - may motivate public sector organisations to employ quality models.

A second internal factor might be that top managers may want to control or reduce the discretion of front-line staff. Lipsky (1980) showed that public servants who are close to the public have considerable freedom to interpret rules and guidelines, in ways different from those intended by the top of the organisation. The top of the organisation may want to reduce the discretionary power arising from the individual decisions of 'street-level bureaucrats'. In this case, it may be intended that quality models will lead to enhanced control in the organisation. Of course, it may not necessarily be the case that top management intends to exercise this control in an authoritative way. It may be seen as more about convincing the 'hearts and minds' of the street level bureaucrat in relation to the (top management's) vision of quality. Quality models may be considered as a valuable tool in this respect (Halachmi, 1996).

On the other hand, there may be bottom-up pressures for reform because street-level bureaucrats believe that quality management may help them '*get the job done*'. Hypothetically, street-level bureaucrats may see quality models as a means to increase their autonomy. Often, intra-organisational decision-making is hierarchical, while quality models

are often associated with team work (see Chapter ??? in this volume). Quality models serve as a communication tool that intersects traditional hierarchical lines.

Fourthly, experience with other quality models might explain why organisations apply the CAF. We are here dealing with path dependency theory and historical institutionalism (Thelen, 1999), whereby the historical path of the organisation explains present options. Past experience with quality models might trigger the wish to experiment with some new tool such as the CAF.

External Factors

Secondly, the use of quality tools may be driven by external motivations. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000) identify legitimacy problems and fiscal stress as the main pressures for public management reform in the last decades. Legitimacy and fiscal stress are intertwined: fiscal stress causes governments to disinvest in public services (Elcock, 1991). It is widely assumed that disinvestments result in a loss in effectiveness, which in turn causes a decline in trust and satisfaction (Bouckaert and Van de Walle, 2003). In this situation, a public organisation may consider quality models as a tool to achieve savings while increasing the quality of public services. However, as Reinholde (see Chapter x in this volume) points out the effective use of quality tools needs considerable investment in staff training. In particular, politicians who are eager to achieve some quick ‘wins’ are often unwilling to invest in the necessary staff training, which is why quality tools often have short life-cycle.

Another external factor which is often cited as a trigger of organisational change is ‘isomorphism’ (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983). In essence, the argument is that organisations become increasingly similar as they change, due to coercive, mimetic and normative processes. Coercion refers to authoritative power. Normative isomorphism stands for the norms that people in organisations share, e.g. absorbed through their common professional education. Mimetic isomorphism suggests that an organisation applies a quality model simply because it has become a fashion. Quality models are seen in this respect as a standard response to uncertainty.

Quality models are also often used for public marketing. Organisations may use quality models simply to show the world that they are modern. A second, more sophisticated external use of the CAF is to ‘export’ the quality management system developed on the basis of the CAF to other public agencies. A prominent case in Germany is the City of Saarbrücken which has done a lot of marketing in order to become nationally known for its quality management initiatives, even though the benefits of the reforms in Saarbrücken have remained less visible.

The Empirical Database of the Study

As mentioned above, all the organisations which wished to present a ‘good practice’ case at the Belgian quality conference had to do a self-assessment based on the CAF. The self-assessment report was assessed by an external assessor who evaluated the quality of the self-assessment exercise and the ‘good practice’ case study. The data used in this chapter were taken from the 63 self-assessment reports and the external assessors’ reports of the self-assessment. In addition to this, the authors undertook a web-based survey of the 63 public organisations, which had submitted a self-assessment report and a ‘good practice’ case study.

The organisations were invited by the authors to fill out an on-line questionnaire of about 150 questions on their experiences with quality management in general and the CAF in particular. Thirty-two organisations replied, which gives a response rate of about 50 %. About half of the respondents were central government agencies, while the other half were public agencies from regional and local levels of government.

The Importance of Internal and External Drivers for Using Quality Models – Survey Results

The survey focussed on the following issues:

1. What is the importance of internal factors?

Key question: what is the importance of experience with other quality models?

2. What is the importance of external factors?

Key question: what was the importance of the quality conference as an external motivator?

3. Considering internal and external drivers together, which is the most important (internal, external, or both internal and external)?

The Importance of Internal Factors

We asked those public organisations which applied to participate in the Belgian quality conference why they decided to apply the CAF. They had to indicate the importance of a series of motives on a 10-point scale (1 = not important at all; 0 = very important). Another series of questions asked about what kind of motivations were important in applying the CAF (1 = not important at all; 5 = very important).

Table 1: Internal Motivations for Using the CAF

Internal variables <i>We started to use the CAF</i>	Scale	Mean	Std Dev
...to give our staff insight into our organisation	1-10	5.94	2.85
...to sensitise all staff to quality issues	1-10	6.69	2.62
...to create one vision of quality in our organisation	1-10	6.50	2.69
...because of demands from front-line staff	1-10	4.25	3.07
...to increase job satisfaction and morale in the organisation	1-5	2.78	1.45
... to strengthen group cohesion	1-5	3.69	1.18
... to increase the efficiency of the organisation	1-5	4.31	0.74
... to make the organisation more customer-oriented	1-5	4.38	0.83
... to increase quality awareness in the organisation	1-5	4.34	1.04
... to increase the managerial capacity of the organisation	1-5	4.16	0.92

As Table 1 shows, internal motivation was significant in determining the use of the CAF. The respondents indicated increasing the efficiency, quality awareness and management capacity of the organisation as the most important factors. Furthermore, the development of a single vision of quality in the organisation also seems to have been an important motive, but to a lesser extent than the other motives mentioned above. Finally, increasing job satisfaction and group cohesion seem to be of less concern.

Presumably, the answers may be biased, as respondents may not wish to admit that their management decisions are driven by external motivations. In order to test the validity of the answers, we compared the self-assessment reports of the organisations and the respective report of the external assessor. We assume that the scores of internally motivated organisations will be more or less in line or even lower than the scores of the external assessor. Externally motivated organisations, however, are likely to attribute themselves higher scores than the scores of the external assessors. We found that 20 organisations had overestimated their score. The scores of 25 organisations were in line with scores given by the external assessors while seven organisations had underestimated their score. Again, this suggests that, in most cases, internal motivation was prevailing.

A second check comes from the question asking who actually applied the CAF in the organisation. If internal improvement is an important motivation, the use of the CAF should be supported by the top management. The results are presented in Table 2. The respondents strongly agree that the whole organisation was involved and that support from the top was important. Of course, the high score on the item 'support from the top' is not surprising since top management filled out the questionnaire in several cases ($n = 9$). However, even when we filter the answers of top management, the mean is still 6.71. This shows that in most cases, support from the top and involvement of the whole organisation seem to be given a high importance, which supports the hypothesis that internal motivation was predominant.

It may seem surprising that external consultants have not had a big role in introducing the CAF to the organisations which responded to the survey. However, this may be explained by the fact that the CAF, unlike the EFQM Excellence Model, does not have yet a pool of trained external CAF assessors who could be contacted by public organisations asking for help.

Moreover, the CAF is presented as a light assessment tool, which may contrast with substantial investment in external advice.

Table 2: Persons Driving the Use of the CAF in the Organisation

<i>To what extent do you agree with the following statements?</i>	<i>Scale</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Dev</i>
the application of the CAF fails or succeeds due to the engagement of one particular person	1-10	5.30	3.16
the application of the CAF is mainly a concern of the top management	1-10	5.74	2.86
the application of the CAF is mainly a concern of front-line staff	1-10	5.03	2.70
the application of the CAF is a concern of a quality department	1-10	3.40	2.58
the application of the CAF is a concern of external consultants	1-5	1.27	0.83
the application of the CAF is a concern of the whole organisation	1-10	6.70	3.24
without the explicit support of the top the self-assessment would be impossible	1-10	7.90	2.59

As the survey results show, the window dressing hypothesis does not hold up in the majority of organisations. However, the fact that most respondents (mean 5.3) thought that the use of the CAF was strongly dependent on the engagement of one particular person raises issues of ownership of the CAF. As always, the big question is whether these 63 public organisations which participated in the quality conference will still use the CAF after the person who has introduced it leaves. Unless self-assessment becomes part of the organisational culture the

CAF (or any other self-assessment tools) may turn out to be only a short-lived initiative driven by a single manager who wants to raise his/her profile through the use of a new tool.

The Importance of Experience with Other Quality Models

The survey also tried to identify to what extent experience with quality management accounts for the quality of the ‘good practice’? In other words, do organisations which have experience with other quality models come up with better examples of ‘good practice’ than organisations which do not have such experience? If so, experience becomes an important internal factor in producing better applications of quality models and better service delivery and innovative capacity. Experience with quality models may then be seen as an organisational asset.

In order to examine the effects of experience with quality management on the quality of the ‘good practice case’, we checked whether organisations with experience did better in the external assessor’s assessment (Table 5). The results show that experience was significantly associated with the scoring by external assessors.

Table 3: The Effect of Experience with Quality Management on External Evaluations

<i>External assessment of the ‘good practice’</i>	<i>Experience with other quality models</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	
Judgement of the external assessor			
Qualifies as ‘good practice’	21 43.75	13 86.67	34
Unclear - jury should decide	11 22.92	2 13.33	13
Does not qualify as ‘good practice’	16 33.33	0 0.00	16
Total	48	15	63

As Table 3 shows, the external assessors rated the ‘good practice’ case studies presented by organisations with experience of working with quality models much more positively than the case studies submitted by organisations without any prior experience in quality management.

The Importance of External Factors

Table 4 presents the responses in the survey about the influence of some external variables. The items ‘making the organisations better known’ and ‘giving insight into the organisation’ on the part of politicians and citizens are given relatively high scores. On the other hand, the items ‘to cope with fiscal stress’, ‘to be able to make the necessary savings’ and ‘to deal with market pressure’ are given relatively low scores. Apparently, legitimacy concerns are more important than cost savings in the decision to introduce quality models. Moreover, the mimetic isomorphism hypothesis does not find support from the data in Table 4. (However, this finding needs to be interpreted with caution as a survey might not be the optimal research instrument to identify motives related to mimetic behaviour). Finally, the relatively high score for the item ‘top managers wanted to be seen as modern’ worth noting. Moreover, the mean for this item does not change when the questionnaires answered by top management (n = 9) are left out.

Table 4: External Motivations for Using the CAF

External variables <i>We started to use the CAF</i>	<i>Scale</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Dev</i>
... to cope with ‘fiscal stress’	1-10	2.31	2.31
... to be able to make the necessary savings	1-10	3.52	2.43
... to deal with market competition	1-10	2.47	2.31
... out of the desire to make the organisation better known	1-10	5.73	3.14
... to give politicians insight into our organisation	1-10	4.66	3.00
... to give citizens/clients insight into our organisation	1-10	5.19	3.03
... because comparable organisations are using the CAF or other quality models	1-10	3.53	2.21
... because such initiatives are taken everywhere	1-10	3	2.57
... because the chief executives wanted to be seen as modern by their environment	1-10	5.50	3.23

A comparison of Tables 1 and 4 shows that, in general, external variables have a lower score than internal variables. Nevertheless, ‘external communication’ and ‘making the organisation better known’ are important external factors for applying the CAF. This is not very surprising since the data consist of organisations that wished to present a ‘good practice’ at a national quality conference. Therefore, it is interesting to assess the importance of the quality conference as an external motivator.

The Importance of the Quality Conference as an External Motivator

Figures 3 and 4 present the survey results related to two questions:

- (1) Did the quality conference stimulate your organisation to introduce the CAF?
- (2) Would your organisation have introduced the CAF without the conference?

A 1-5 scale was being used whereby 1 signified ‘certainly not’ and 5 signified ‘certainly’.

Figure 3: The Importance of the Quality Conference for the CAF Application

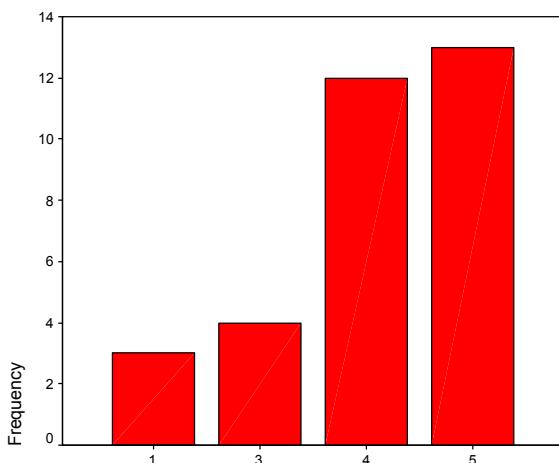
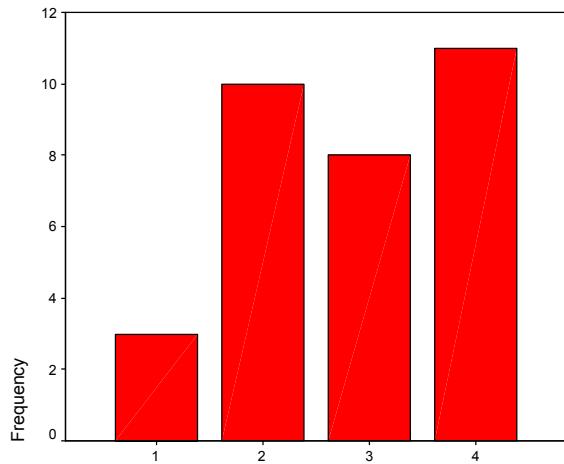


Figure 3 shows that most respondents thought that the quality conference has been an important driver to introduce the CAF in their organisation - 25 out of 32 organisations acknowledged that the quality conference was important or very important (4 or 5). The results for the negative question which are shown in Figure 4 confirm the validity of these results - thirteen organisations said that they would certainly or probably not have applied the CAF without the prospect of presenting a ‘good practice’ at the quality conference.

Figure 4: Use of the CAF without the Organisation of a Quality Conference?

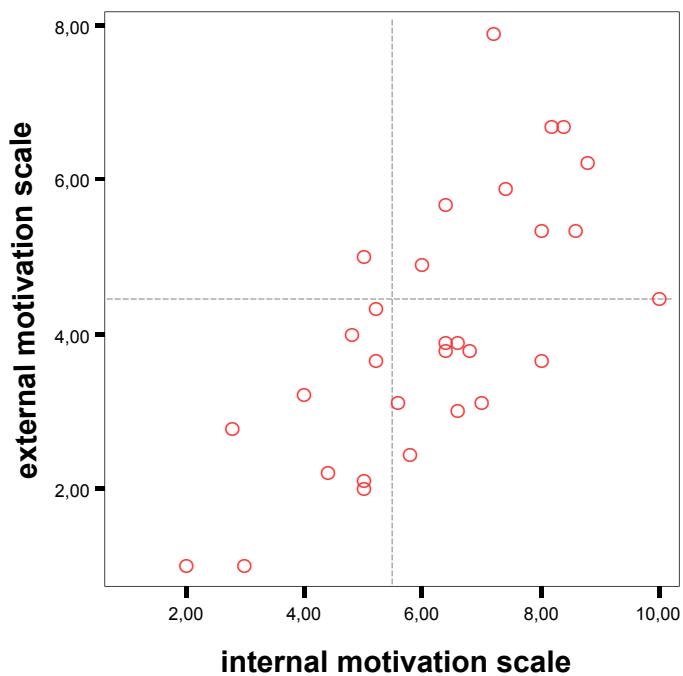


Brief, in the case of the Belgian public agencies, the quality conference definitely was an important catalyst for applying the CAF.

Bringing Internal and External Motivations Together

When we bring internal and external motivations together, which motivational pattern prevails (internal, external, or both internal and external)? First, we aggregated the different internal and external items into two respective scales. Next, a scatter plot with quadrants was calculated (see Figure 5). A merely external motivation is not found in our respondents - the top left quadrant of the figure is almost empty. Therefore, the window dressing hypothesis is rejected for this data set. Indeed, internal motivations are much more frequent. This is a remarkable result given that the data set consists of public organisations which submitted a 'good practice' for a quality conference which is an important external stimulus in itself.

Figure 5: The Importance of Internal Versus External Motivations



Conclusions

The sceptics about quality models are wrong. Quality models are not merely used for window dressing but internal motivations play an important role. Even in a case where there was clearly an important external motivator such as the national quality conference, internal motivations were paramount. Organisations want to improve their operations and increase management capacity by using quality models. That is what quality models are designed for. Secondly, organisations want to align the understanding of the quality concept within the organisation. It may be important, especially for organisations with a lot of street-level discretion, that all staff share the same concept of quality. Quality models may serve as a valuable tool. Moreover, experienced organisations also had better 'good practices'. Thus, quality models are not only for external use. They are used in organisations which want to bring about tangible improvements in public service quality.

Therefore, the advocates of quality models are right - but not entirely. Self-assessment is not only a tool for internally-driven improvement. Organisations do not only apply quality models to enhance performance. External motivations do play a significant role. Amongst the external factors, the wish of a modern image for the top managers of the organisation stands out. In

addition, the desire to increase legitimacy appears to be of concern. Quality models are also used as a communication tool to give politicians and citizens insights into the organisation. Obviously, the big question is to what extent citizens are interested in managerial issues. Specific users may have some interest in quality issues but public organisations are only learning now to present the right kind of information for specific target groups. The study also showed that savings are a relatively unimportant factor in driving the introduction of quality models. Finally, the importance of the Belgian quality conference as a catalyst for the CAF in Belgium confirms the existence of external motivations.

In general, both internal and external motivations play a role when a public organisation decides to introduce a quality tool. Some organisations appear to be more externally motivated than others, but we did not find any purely externally motivated organisations. External motivation alone will not make organisations apply a quality model.

Finally, we end by noting some constraints of this study. The data set was limited to thirty-two questionnaires and sixty-three dossiers from Belgian public agencies. It is not yet known whether the results would be the same in other countries. Qualitative in-depth research may deliver interesting findings which may support the Belgian findings or contradict them. Furthermore, we did not address many topics. For example, the chapter did not investigate what the organisations do with the results of the CAF exercise, or whether they are likely to do self-assessments again, even without the impetus of a new conference. Finally, internal organisational dynamics and external pressures need more detailed scrutiny in order to establish the weight of the different internal and external factors. This may be the next step in uncovering the motives behind the quality movement.

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