

How the CAF Model Strengthens Staff Participation

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1. Introduction

This paper will aim to explain how the use of the CAF model can strengthen the level of staff participation as part of the process towards becoming a mature, high-quality and well performing organisation. The types of participation which the CAF model uses will be analysed according to the classification of participation types, as defined by Dachler and Wilpert, Locke and Schweiger, de Leede and Loise, and Cotton, and will be described in detail in section 1 (III). Overall, CAF can be perceived as a means of encouraging participation through co-decision on general policy, using direct informal participation. CAF encourages organisations to assess themselves from different angles at the same time – a holistic approach to analysis. This means that by its very nature, involvement of the employees is vital. If people are not involved in the diagnosis of their organisation and in the formulation and prioritisation of the improvement action plan as the result of the self-assessment, it will be very difficult to gain their ownership of the reform afterwards.

Potential challenges to the reinforcement of participation and involvement will be discussed, using information gathered from CAF users and national correspondents, with a particular focus on the recent 2011 study, *‘Five years of CAF 2006: From adolescence to maturity – what next? A study on the use, the support and the future of the Common Assessment Framework.’*¹ The purpose of this study was three-fold: a) to collect information on the use of CAF and the dissemination and support in the Member States; b) to analyse whether there was a need to improve the CAF model itself; and c) to look for new opportunities to further spread its use. The study presented an overview of all aspects of the use of CAF, including the strengthening of participation in the organisations which apply the tool.

Developing and involving staff in management activities is a key part of the rhetoric of all TQM tools², which acknowledge that quality improvement can only be successful when employees have the necessary skills and authority to participate. Whilst these ideals form a vital part of all TQM tools, not all succeed in creating a

¹ Staes, P., Thijs, N., Stoffels, A., Geldof, S. (2011). *Five Years of CAF 2006: From Adolescence to Maturity – What next? A study on the use, the support and the future of the Common Assessment Framework.* (EIPA)

² Farnham, D., Hondeghen, A., Horton, S. eds. (2005). *Staff Participation and Public Management Reform.* p.16

long-term culture of participation and this paper will seek to explain how CAF succeeds where other tools fall short.

Figure 1 highlights the reasons why institutions have decided to implement CAF, according to the survey mentioned above. It demonstrates that internal reasons such as increasing participation and involvement, as well as strengthening employee sensitivity towards issues of quality, were important factors in this decision.

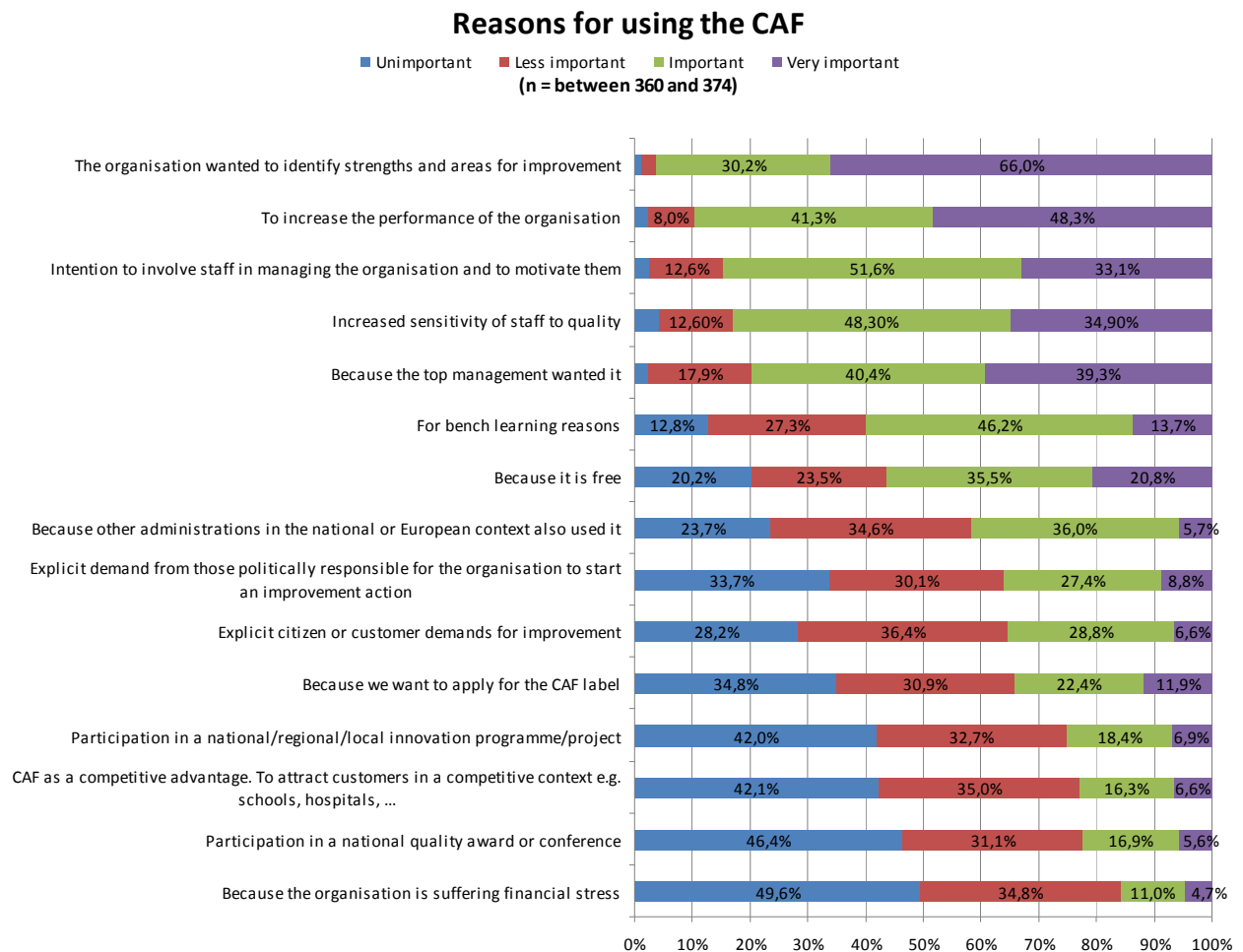


Figure 1 *Reasons for using the CAF*

1.1. The history of CAF

At the end of the 1990s, the EU Ministers responsible for public administration invited the European Public Administration Network (EUPAN) to promote exchange and cooperation between the EU Member States and to develop common instruments in the field of quality management.

In May 2000, a first product of the cooperation among EU national experts was presented: the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) – a real, common, European

quality management instrument for the public sector, developed by the public sector. The CAF is based on the premise that excellent results in organisational performance, citizens/customers, people and society are achieved through leadership driving strategy and planning, people, partnerships, resources and processes. Since its launch, nearly 3000 public sector organisations across and outside Europe have used the model, and the number of CAF users continues to grow.

The chart below illustrates the broad usage of the CAF throughout Europe and beyond.

Table. 1 *Number of CAF users per country and the EU institutions*

Italy 437	Czech Republic 73	EU institutions and EC 12
Poland 324	Slovakia 55	Bulgaria 11
Belgium 316	Greece 51	Latvia, Turkey 8
Germany 269	Romania 49	NL, UK 7
Denmark 248	Spain 47	Ireland, FYROM 6
Portugal 146	Switzerland 26	Iceland, Sweden, Croatia 5
Finland 118	France 25	Russia 4
Hungary 106	Lithuania 24	Malta 3
Austria 94	Cyprus 19	Montenegro 2
Dominican Republic 87	Estonia 18	China, Namibia, Ecuador, Tunisia 2
Norway 85	Bosnia-Herzegovina 18	Kosovo, Serbia, Morocco , Peru 1
Slovenia 70	Luxembourg 13	Brazil, Chile, Ivory Coast, South Africa 1

European institutions and EC: GS Council of the EU DGA2, European Court of Auditors, Europol, EC DG Admin, EC DG Trans, EC DG Trade, ERA, ECDC, Committee of the Regions, EESC, EU Foundation Improvement Living and Working Conditions, European Environment Agency.

It can also be helpful to examine the profiles of the users of the CAF model

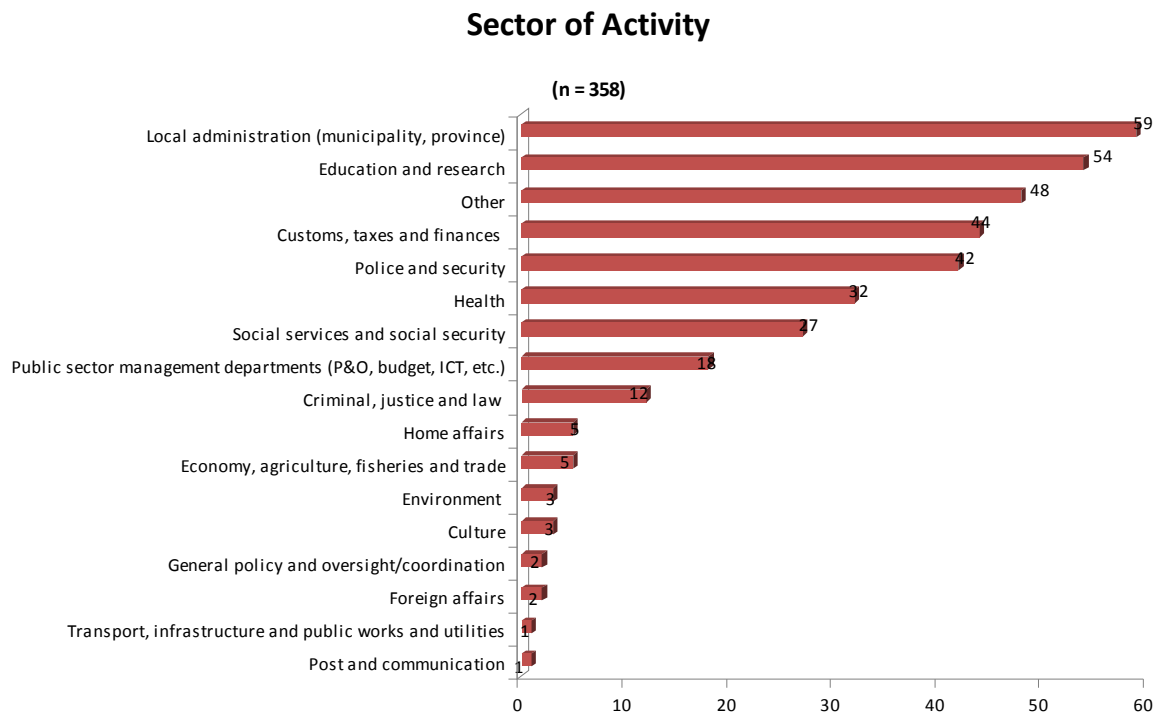


Figure 2 *Sector of activity of CAF users*

1.2. The CAF instrument itself

The nine-box structure identifies the main aspects requiring consideration in any organisational analysis. Criteria 1-5 deal with the managerial practices of an organisation: the so-called **Enablers**. These determine what the organisation does and how it approaches its tasks to achieve the desired results. In criteria 6-9, **results** achieved in the fields of citizens/customers, people, social responsibility and key performance are measured by perception and performance measurements. Each criterion is further broken down into a list of sub-criteria. The **28 sub-criteria** identify the main issues that need to be considered when assessing an organisation. They are illustrated by **examples** that explain the content of the sub-criteria in more detail and suggest possible areas to address, in order to explore how the administration fulfils the requirements expressed in the sub-criterion. These examples represent a lot of good practices from all over Europe. Not all of them are relevant for every organisation, but many can be considered as points of attention during self-assessment. Integrating the conclusions from the assessment of the enablers and results criteria into the managerial practices constitute the continuous **innovation and learning** cycle that accompanies organisations on their way towards excellence.

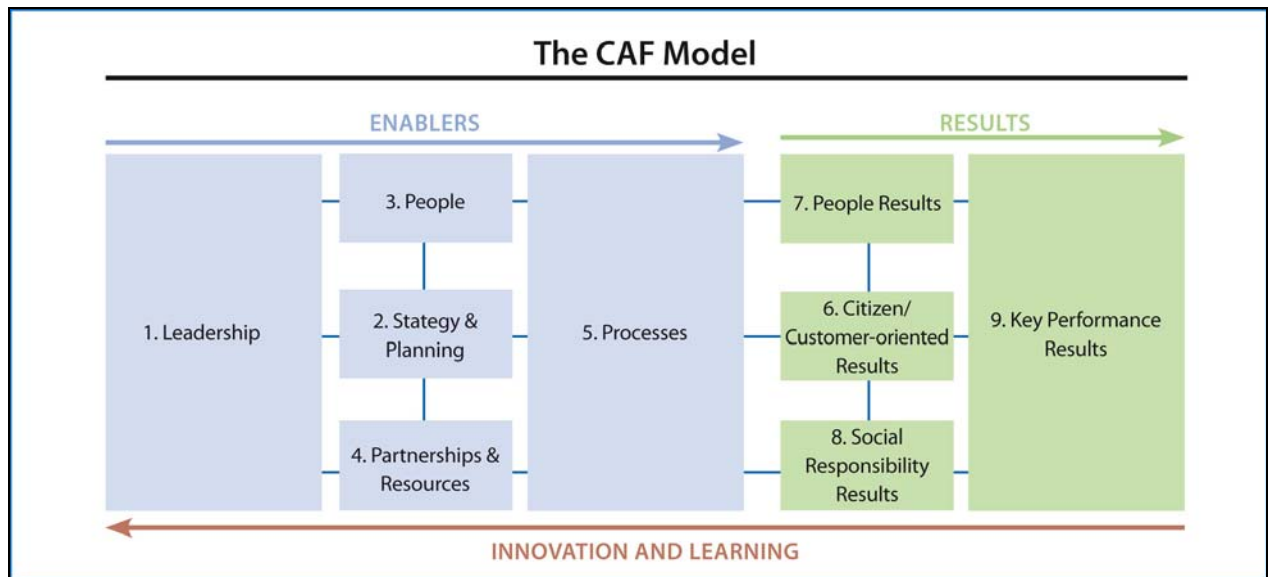


Figure 3 *The CAF Model*

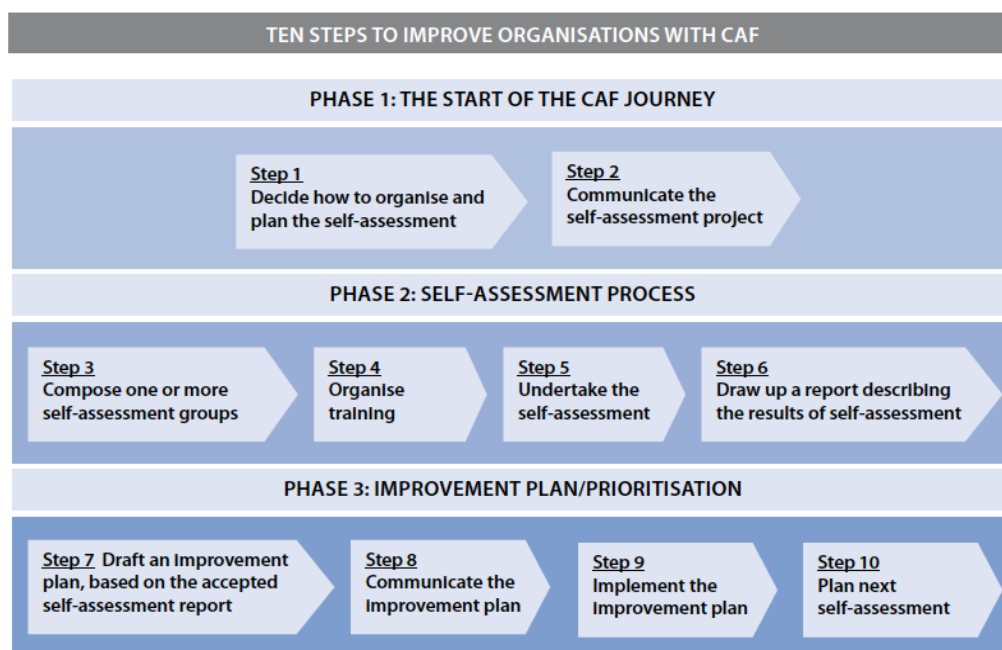
As a Total Quality Management (TQM) tool, the CAF model subscribes to the principles of excellence as initially defined by the EFQM, but deepened further for the public sector by the European CAF network: results orientation, citizen/customer focus, leadership and constancy of purpose, management by processes and facts, people development and involvement, continuous learning, innovation and improvement, partnership development and social responsibility. Principle five, 'People development and involvement', is obviously the most relevant to this paper and stresses that 'People at all levels are the essence of an organisation and their full involvement enables their abilities to be used for the organisation's benefit. The contribution of employees should be maximised through their development and involvement and the creation of a working environment of shared values and a culture of trust, openness, empowerment and recognition.' So a strong involvement of the staff in the self-assessment of the organisation, but even more so, their involvement in the different aspects of the functioning of the organisation as described in the CAF model is a key success factor for an excellent organisation.

The five **aims and objectives** are also vitally important to the model:

1. to **introduce** public administrations to the culture of excellence and the principles of TQM;
2. to guide them progressively to a **fully-fledged ‘Plan-Do-Check-Act’ cycle**;
3. to facilitate the **self-assessment** of a public organisation in order to obtain a diagnosis and a definition of improvement actions;
4. to act as a **bridge** across the various models used in quality management, both in public and private sectors;
5. to facilitate **bench learning** between public sector organisations.

When discussing the use of CAF in any organisation, there are 10 clear steps to improvement, which can be grouped into 3 broader stages. Firstly, the self-assessment process must take place. Second is the formulation of the actions to be undertaken, and finally their implementation. In nearly all 10 steps the involvement of the people working in the organisation or a relevant representative group is a condition qua non for success.

This is obvious for steps 2, 5, and 8, but also crucial in step 1, 7 and 9. These 10 Steps are shown below:



2. Classification of Participation types

Participation is ‘the degree to which a person participates or continually engages in organisational activities’ (Allen, Wagner, 1997). In order to understand the extent and forms of participation which the CAF model offers, it is necessary to classify them.

2.1. *Formal-informal participation*

Formal participation has an explicitly recorded system of rules and agreements imposed on or granted to the organisation. Three bases of legitimisation for formal participation can be distinguished: legal bases, contractual bases and management policies. Informal participation in contrast is a non-statutory consensus emerging among interacting members. Informal participatory schemes are based on a consensus among interacting social units or individuals and become legitimised through practice and evolving norms or customary procedures (Dachler & Wilpert, 1978). The degree of formality or informality of participation is closely tied to the underlying values of the designers, to the goals and objectives which participation is to serve, and to the particular organisational and societal context in which the participatory system exists (Dachler & Wilpert, 1978).

2.2. *Direct-indirect participation*

Direct participation involves immediate personal involvement of organisation members, while indirect participation involves the mediated involvement of organisation members in decision-making through some form of representation (Dachler & Wilpert, 1978). Gill and Krieger (2000) note that whilst in earlier days the emphasis was on indirect (or representative) representation, since the beginning of the 1990s a focus on direct forms of participation can be seen. This shift has gone hand-in-hand with a rediscovery of the human factor in work organisations, which can be seen as a response to the increasing competitive pressures facing enterprises and the growth of human resource management (HRM).

2.3. *Access in decisions*

Access is the amount of influence organisation members can exert over a decision (Cotton et al., 1988). Dachler and Wilpert (1978) describe participation as a continuum reflecting the different forms of access that organisation members have, or

the amount of influence they can exert over a decision. Heller *et al.* (1998) speak in this perspective of the 'Influence-Power-Continuum'. Along this continuum the following behaviours can be found:

- a) no (advance) information is given to employees about a decision;
- b) employees are informed in advance;
- c) employees can give their opinion about the decision;
- d) employees' expertise and input are taken into account;
- e) employees can veto a decision;
- f) the decision is completely in the hands of the employees.

What is critical here is the point at which organisation members gain access to the flow of information relevant to a particular decision. In behaviours b) through to d) all information handling remains with the role of management, while the function of participating organisation members is to receive and provide information. However, the psychological meaning of these behaviours is likely to differ. In behaviour e) organisation members can manipulate information and enforce their preferences. The capacity of employees to veto a decision implies a decision-making arrangement in which exclusive participation of management ends, and a new organisational influence and power system emerges, involving processes such as bargaining and negotiation. Behaviour f) represents the complete power equalisation as all members of an organisation have equal access to the making of a decision and an equal potential to influence the decision (Dachler & Wilpert, 1978).

2.4. Content of the decision involved

Locke and Schweiger (1979) noted that the outcomes of participation might vary in terms of content of the decisions involved. The types of decision which might be included in participation schemes would generally fall into four broad categories:

- a) routine personnel functions (e.g. hiring, training, performance evaluation);
- b) work itself (e.g. work methods, job design, speed of work);
- c) working conditions (e.g. hours of work, rest breaks);
- d) company policies (e.g. profit sharing, fringe benefits).

De Leede and Looise (1994) follow Ramsay (1991) and distinguish three domains (the author's translation):

- a) content of the work ('*werkinhoud*')
- b) personnel policies ('*personeelsaangelegenheden*')

c) organisational policies (*'algemeen beleid'*)

2.5. Duration of the participation

This concerns whether or not the participation has a permanent character (Cotton et al., 1988). Short-term, incidental participation often concerns a once-only definition of policy goals by management and employees (representatives). Most forms of participation however are based on long-term commitments between management and employees, or are those with a permanent character (de Leede & Looise, 1994).

2.6. Degree of force

Participation in decision-making can be forced or voluntary (Locke & Schweiger, 1979). The force is applied by law or government decree; partially forced participation would occur in cases where it results from a contract between management and labour, but where management is legally compelled to bargain; voluntary participation would occur where management initiates the idea of participation and the employees agree to it, or vice versa (Locke & Schweiger, 1979).

All these dimensions of participation are presented on the participation cube, (de Leede & Looise, 1994) which allows us to visualise the various dimensions of participation, and to place different processes on the cube to contextualise their role.

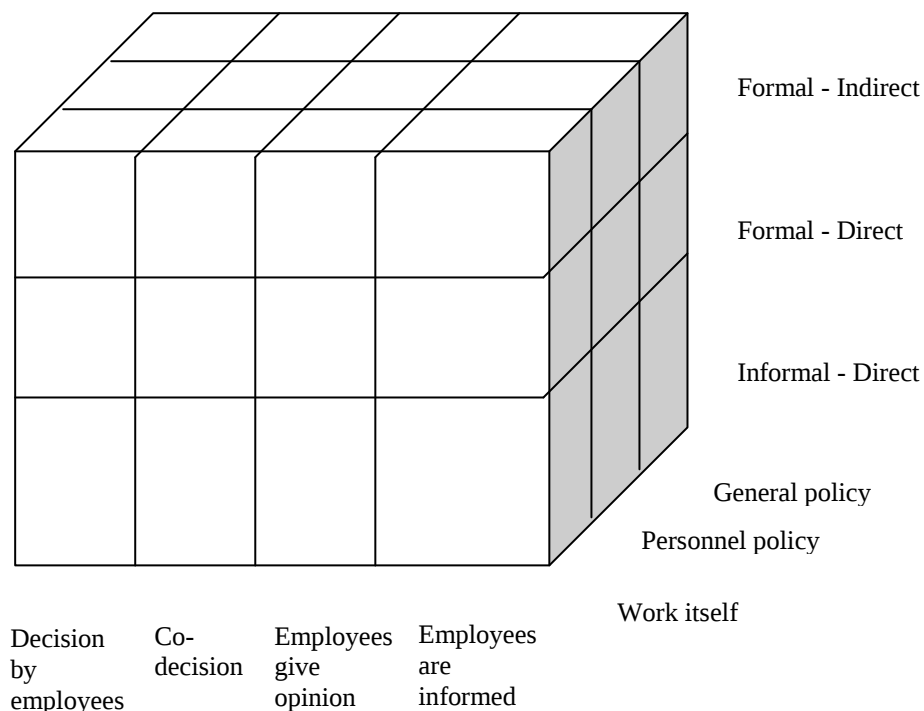


Figure 4 The participation cube (de Leede & Looise)

3. CAF and strengthening staff participation

3.1. The three broad stages of CAF implementation

It is possible to analyse the ways in which CAF strengthens participation by breaking it down into the three broad stages of the 10-step guidelines for improvement:

- a) self-assessment stage;
- b) formulation and prioritisation; and
- c) implementation of the improvement actions and achieving involvement in the long run.

This allows for analysis of participation at each stage. The first step to analysing what users and national correspondents thought of the participation element in the CAF tool was to discover from where the initiative to instigate CAF originated. For 39% of organisations, the use of CAF was not mandatory, which indicates a pre-existing motivation to improve within the organisation; whilst in 51.8% of organisations the use of CAF was made mandatory by a top-management decision. This also implies a keenness among the top management to focus on improving the organisation, which can create a participatory culture throughout the organisation. As described in the CAF itself in sub-criterion 1.2, visionary leadership should consider stimulating continuous improvement as one of its major tasks and show their people the way forward. The percentage of organisations for whom the CAF was mandatory for another reason (such as by law, political decision or internal action plan) was much lower, altogether adding up to only 13.2%. These statistics are encouraging as they illustrate that a feeling of ownership of the CAF process by management and staff and the improvements it will lead to, was, in a large majority of organisations, present from the outset. This is vital for the smooth-functioning of the self-assessment groups, and for creating a culture of motivation throughout the process.

3.2. Self-assessment phase

The stage of self-assessment is vitally important for the involvement and participation of staff at all levels. The CAF brochure includes guidelines on how organisations can improve using CAF, highlighting that ‘the self-assessment group should be as representative of the organisation as possible.’ It also stresses that in most cases where the CAF is used, people from different sectors, functions, experience and levels are included in the process. This provides a detailed internal perspective from direct

informal participation. The CAF acknowledges that different organisations can have very different cultures and traditions, particularly concerning levels of participation. If this is the first use of CAF, or indeed of any TQM tool, there can be resistance to the structure of the self-assessment groups, and also issues concerning the presence of management, such as group members feeling inhibited by the presence of a management figure. Due to the flexibility of CAF, these issues can be confronted in each individual organisation.

The composition of the self-assessment groups is an important factor in ensuring an effective and relatively informal working style. A group of 6-10 members was the most common, and was also considered the most efficient. The average self-assessment group, the study found, contained a member of every function level within the organisation.

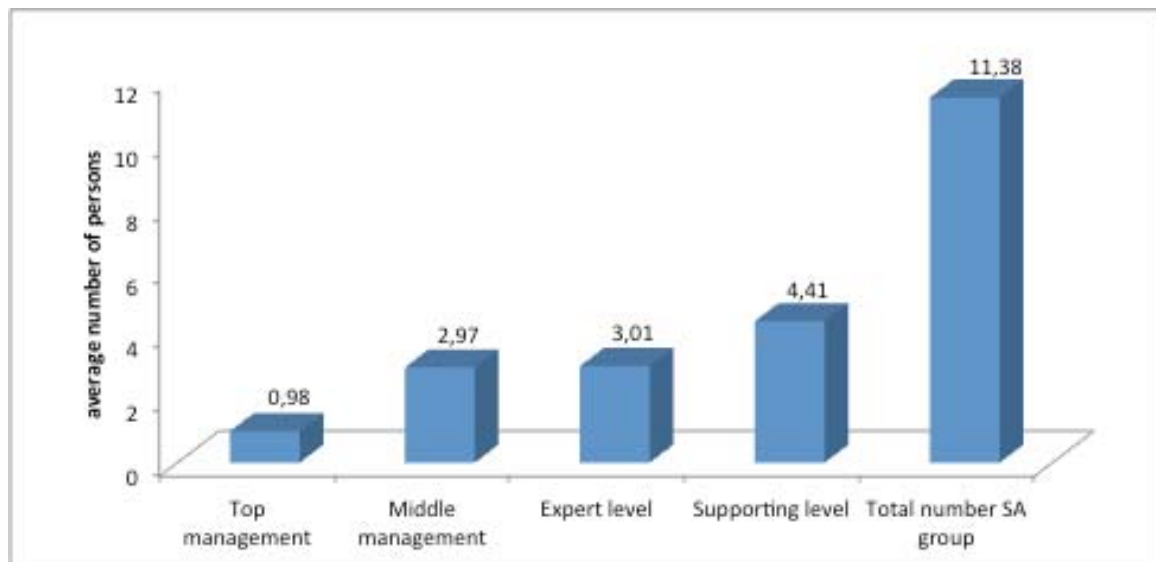


Figure 6 *Composition of a single self assessment group*

After the creation of the groups there must be a process of preparation before performing the self-assessment; which in the majority of organisations was undertaken in the form of explanations of the CAF (over 85%), whilst 78% of organisations provided documentation for their employees on the CAF. Training was also widespread, with only 6% of organisations providing no training at all. These statistics show a willingness to educate the members of the self-assessment groups in order to achieve the most accurate results in the scoring, demonstrating a dedication to encouraging participation.

3.3. Formulation and prioritisation of improvement plans

The next broad stage of the improvement process is the formulation of the improvement actions, including their prioritisation. Participation at this stage can be complex, as a good understanding of the organisation as a whole is required, and evidently not all employees can have this level of understanding. The model itself stresses the importance of Senior Management endorsing and fully accepting the self-assessment reports and discussing the improvement plan with their staff. As with the previous stage, much depends on the tradition and the culture of the organisation. Therefore, the obstacles which the study illustrates are as expected. The survey found that in particular, some organisations found it difficult to involve both, top management and members of the self-assessment group. In addition some faced a challenge in finding project owners for each action. However, these obstacles were by no means encountered by all the participating organisations and most did not find these participation elements an issue, thus demonstrating the success of the self-assessment groups in encouraging participation.

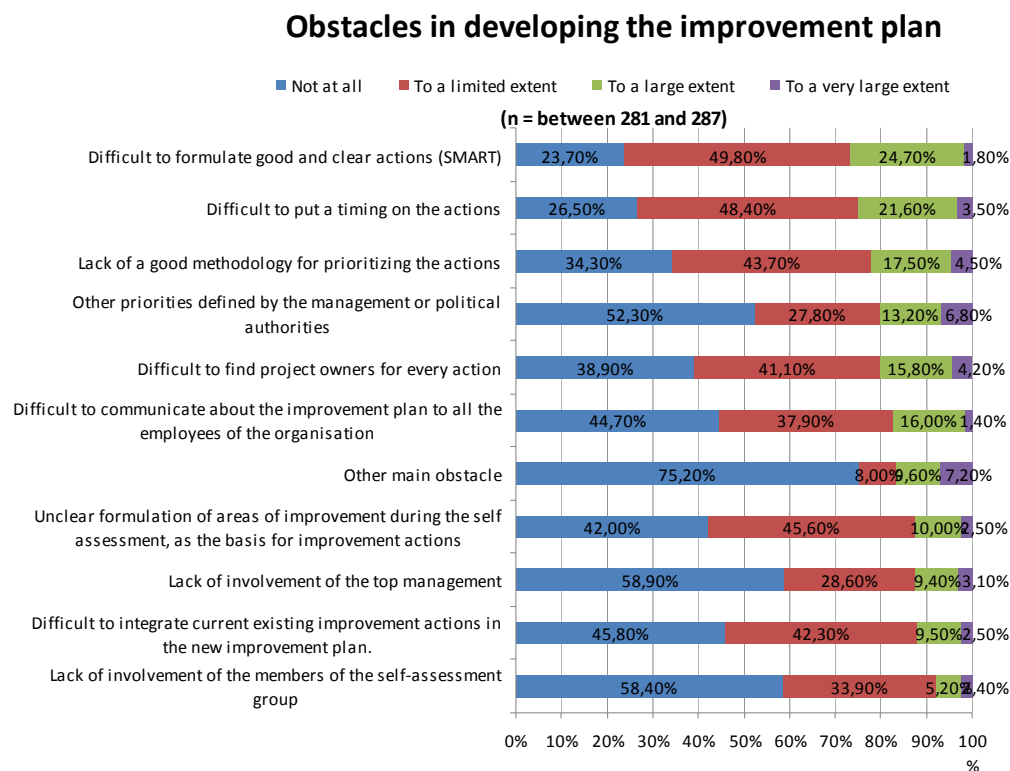


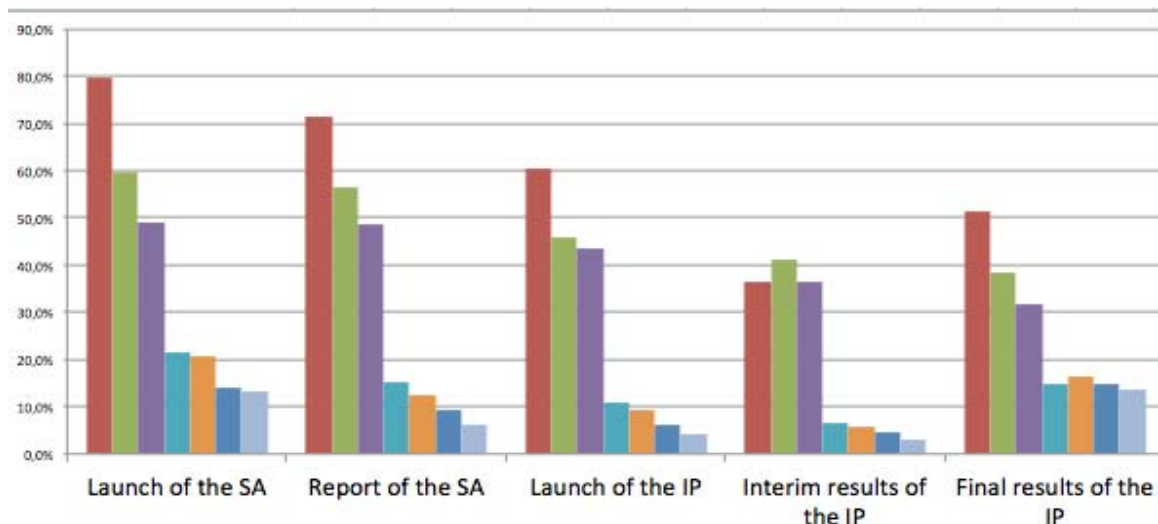
Figure 7 *Obstacles encountered by organisations in developing the improvement plans*

3.4. Implementation stage

In the final implementation stage, participation at all levels once more comes to the fore. The model encourages the members of the self-assessment groups to become involved again, as this can be personally rewarding, boost morale and inspire confidence. These employees can also then become ambassadors for further improvement initiatives in the organisation. This is a very important way of strengthening a culture of participation in the organisation in the long term. Another significant part of the implementation process is the appointment of a person responsible for each action, an 'owner', who might come from one of the self-assessment groups. According to the 2005 survey of CAF users, these members, even if they were reluctant at the start, upon seeing that their contributions were valued by management, became motivated to participate more. If we examine the graph once again we see that lack of involvement of top management was one of the smallest obstacles, and further investigation into the profile of the respondents demonstrated that this was not due to the respondents coming from top management themselves; they genuinely had a greater interest and involvement in CAF. Overall we see that many methods of boosting staff participation are offered throughout the CAF process, and it is up to each individual organisation to determine the extent to which they include their employees. However these graphs, and the study as a whole, testify that organisations who implement CAF have a good understanding of the benefits of strengthening staff participation.

3.5. Communication to participation in CAF

Communication as a part of TQM tools is hugely important. Constant communication with employees and stakeholders throughout the journey towards total quality is considered to be a vital part of CAF. The figure below shows how communication to the different stakeholders evolves during the different steps of the CAF process. But at all stages, the whole staff is the first target group for communication.



- To the whole staff
- To the management
- To an existing improvement team (group, department, unit)
- To the political authority
- To customers/citizens/users
- To strategic partners
- To society in general

Different messages through different media have to be in line with the specific communication needs in the different phases. Often the process of improvement within an organisation focuses partly on creating new methods of communication towards employees, such as newsletters or e-Bulletins. While these are very significant, it is important

to not only prioritise information to such an extent that the actual bottom-up involvement of staff becomes neglected, and whereby top management feels that they are doing enough simply by informing the people in the organisation of the changes that will occur. Real communication is always a two-way experience – bottom-up and top-down – and as such, inevitable for participation. In spite of the appointment of a communication manager and a change manager, involvement and communication remained limited amongst the civil servants as a whole. The leadership should in any case be the first actor in the internal and external communication of an organisation, and often this skill is still missing. All initiatives such as this must have the full support of all staff, which evidently requires good communication channels in the first place, stimulated and created by the management. The success of the model in encouraging both communication and participation is apparent from the CAF Users' study of 2011, which showed that only 4.9% of organisations did not communicate at

all to the whole staff during the CAF process, and that communication about the launch of the whole process, and the self-assessment specifically, was given much greater importance than in the study of 2005. It is very possible that by encouraging public sector organisations to communicate about the process of implementing CAF, a culture of communication (hand in hand with participation) can be established for all future projects of that organisation. It is here that a distinction between involvement and participation can be made: employee involvement is a low-level form of direct staff participation – and in its simplest terms can be seen as the step between merely communicating and full higher level participation. Involvement according to this definition consists of greater increased passing down of information to employees (one-way downward communication), and taking into account knowledge and opinions provided by employees through surveys, meetings and conferences (two-way upward communication)³. This provides opportunities for staff to contribute to discussions about work-related issues. Therefore total participation with the aim of moving towards excellence comes down to the synthesis of communication, involvement and participation, without allowing one method to diminish or regress back to low-level participation or to the level of solely communicating with employees.

4. CAF compared to other TQM tools

The key feature of the CAF model where participation is concerned is its status as a self-assessment tool, and the form that this self-assessment takes. For the past 30 years models which aim to help organisations to improve have strived to advance the role of participation and involvement with citizens, customers and stakeholders, but not all have embraced the bottom-up structure which the CAF allows. While it is not within the scope of this paper to analyse all other TQM tools and their approach to strengthening participation, some case studies can be used to shed light on the elements of CAF which promote this area of improvement.

The challenges of ensuring participation at the early planning stages are often seen as problematic, and it appeared that ‘it is only the implementation stage that shows real means of employee participation’. Whilst this is a problem which could face any organisation using any quality management tool, the CAF model, with its 10

³ Farnham, D., Hondeghen, A., Horton, S. ed. (2005). Staff Participation and Public Management Reform. 70

steps and process of training staff and providing documents and scope for learning before the implementation of CAF begins, seeks to prevent such a culture from developing.

By nature some management models have a top-down approach, with a focus on ‘cascading’ across the so-called ‘vision barrier’, which refers to employees’ understanding of the strategy⁴. It is clear that less emphasis is placed on participation, as Niven states that ‘support groups such as human resources, finances and IT rarely receive an invitation to the strategy table.’

The problematic aspect in various quality management approaches is the central and overly great role for the quality manager or quality department/unit, while ideally, CAF encourages the appointment of a project manager and working groups, including staff from all organisational levels, as well as incorporating trade union representatives. In this respect, the tool demonstrates a high level of involvement.

When comparing the CAF briefly to the other leading tools in total quality management, two clear factors which distinguish the model become apparent. The first is its role as a public sector-specific model, as opposed to one which has been adapted and expanded from the private sector. This advantage is self-evident, and whilst not specific to the factor of strengthening participation, it does allow the tool to take a more specialised view of all aspects of quality management in the public sector. The second factor is the bottom-up approach, with special focus on the cross-departmental element in the composition of the self-assessment groups. This means that SAG members cannot be blinkered concerning policy, and will inevitably gain insight into other areas of the organisation, as they will be mixing with employees from all departments, whose expertise does not necessarily correspond with theirs.

5. Conclusions

5.1. How does CAF strengthen participation?

By creating an atmosphere of openness and involvement, the CAF model is uniquely able to achieve excellence. Empowerment and ownership are the key concepts here, as employees, whatever their role, must feel empowered to participate, as well as feeling that their contributions are considered worthwhile, thus creating a feeling of

⁴ Niven, P. (2003). *Balanced Scorecard – Step-by-Step for Government and Non-Profit Agencies*. P. 11.

ownership. This is vital throughout the process of implementing CAF in any organisation, but it has its roots in the self-assessment process, which allows for cross-hierarchical and cross-departmental participation. The cube discussed in section 1(III) can be used to compare the forms of participation employed. Therefore we can establish that in the CAF process decision-making is done by co-decision. It could not be called 'decision by employees' as management must also play a key role in the final decisions to be taken. These definitions seem to apply more to reform applied by public sector organisations as opposed to within TQM models themselves; however, CAF can be defined as category d), where employees' expertise input is taken into account.

In terms of the content of decisions, once again the aim of CAF is to create a culture of excellence in the organisation which ensures that all policies are examined, placing the tool within the 'general policy' category. This also embodies the two other forms of content of decisions; the personnel policy and the work itself. As employees with specific knowledge of the work itself and employees from HR are all encouraged to participate in the CAF process, through the self-assessment groups, the improvement decisions can apply to all areas of the organisation.

The final element included in the participation cube is the dimension of formal-informal and direct-indirect. As much of the literature on public sector reform establishes, a move has taken place in the past 20 or so years to move towards more direct participation in the public sector. This is certainly the case with CAF, where immediate personal involvement of members of the organisation is imperative, placing the model firmly within the direct dimension of the cube. The question of formality in terms of CAF is a little more complicated, and varies from one organisation to another. The instigation of the process may well be a management decision; however the tool itself is firmly based in consensus-forming.

In most cases CAF uses direct, informal participation, in a consultative and temporary group, thus in a formal context. The most interesting element here is the 'temporary' part. It is hoped that whilst the composition and meeting of the self-assessment groups is temporary, the culture that they – and the consequent improvements that they create – will lead to a permanent culture of participation.

5.2. What can be done in the future to further this element of the CAF model?

The 2011 survey was generally quite positive concerning staff participation, particularly when the composition of self-assessment groups is examined, and the fact that a lack of participation was not seen as a very important obstacle by the majority of respondents. However, much remains to be improved. In the organisations using CAF, 45% of employees are affected by the TQM culture (of which participation is a key part) to a large or very large extent. Furthermore, in the measurements of the shifts in the principles of excellence, the principle ‘people development and improvement’ including the statement: ‘Employees are involved in the decision-making process and in the development of the organisation’, was felt to a large extent by 48.6% of respondents. This is evidently too low, but in the section ‘Lessons for future CAF application’, lessons learned concerning participation and involvement were clearly at the forefront of many organisations’ minds: 37% would have greater involvement of employees; 29.7% would have a stronger involvement of key persons; and 22.5% would have stronger management involvement. This demonstrates a definite willingness to progress in the future, and given that 86% of users plan to use the CAF again sometime, we can be optimistic about the continuous strengthening of participation using the CAF model.

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