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*Theme: Governance and Administration in the Twenty-first century: new trends and new techniques*

*New information and management technologies for the 21st century public administration*

## QUALITY METHODS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: A CLASH OF APPROACHES?

Coming into the 21st century we see increased attention for the quality of the public sector. Both the need for better service-delivery and the need for basic process control are driving public organisations towards formal quality approaches. More general trends like public management and privatisation have helped to make leading figures more aware of modern techniques for quality improvement. Many countries are even writing them into law, as an insurance against slipping quality standards in public administration.

Looking towards the 21st century we see that both the needs of the public sector when it comes to quality approaches and the approaches themselves are changing in a very profound way. When it comes to the needs of the public sector, one can see a tendency to go beyond service delivery and basic process control. Quality techniques are needed for systems of performance management and structural comparison (benchmarking). Quality approaches are also looked upon as a method for integrating different management perspectives. This is not just about integrating front- and back-office functions or of improving environmental and workplace conditions. It is just as much about integrating all of the different aspects of management in the public sector, including essential questions of leadership in a political setting.

The changing needs of society are also reflected in the different quality approaches. There are two approaches that dominate the discussion about quality in Europe. The first concerns the standards for quality systems as formulated by the International Standards Organisation (ISO). The second approach is a view towards integral or total quality as formulated by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). Both approaches have recently gone through a fundamental review. It seems like they are growing towards each other, but many contend that there are still many and, in some ways, fundamental differences between the two.

In all European countries these two approaches are widely applied, including many adaptations and translations of standards and models for the different parts of the public sector. However, at the same time they are made more specific to the different public sectors, there is also a demand to integrate all approaches of quality for the whole of the public sector. Furthermore, government officials are new to the subject and get confused. They do not know which approach is best. It

also must be said that many within the public sector view quality systems as being very bureaucratic, the very thing they wish to avoid!

Very interesting is that within the European community a decision has been made to develop a so-called 'Common Assessment Framework' (CAF). This CAF should be the basis for the benchmarking of public sector organisations within the EC and an impulse for further quality efforts. The CAF is in fact an adaptation of the EFQM-model, combined with a number of criteria as developed by the so-called Speyer-Group, an award scheme for public sector organisations. Considering the fact that the CAF is dominantly based on the EFQM, this suggests that this quality approach will come out strongest. Nevertheless, it still remains to be seen whether the CAF is the impulse European Governments need to improve their quality. Why not stick to one concept for quality that is both applicable to business and government alike?

**Contribution by Drs. Peter Noordhoek, Northedge, the Netherlands**
> Mr. Noordhoek is director of Northedge Ltd., a consulting firm. He has played a major role in introducing quality concepts for the public sector in the Netherlands. He introduced Citizen's charters to the Netherlands and adapted the EFQM model to the public sector. He is partner of The Dutch Quality Institute, chairman of the government section of the Dutch Quality Association and member of the board of the Dutch Association for Inspection, Oversight and Evaluation

The contribution of Peter Noordhoek was aimed at setting out the main themes of the panel.

He started by describing the working of a prison as an example. Whenever a prisoner enters a prison for the first time, he or she has to go through a number of steps. The prisoner is received, gets a shower, is written into the administrative system, receives a medical check-up, etc, etc.. Each warden or functionary within the system does as he has been instructed to do and then passes the prisoner on to the next functionary. Normally nothing goes wrong with this from the perspective of the prison management. No prisoner escapes, no administrative faults are made that cannot be corrected later. This is the minimum level at which a prison should operate.
Nevertheless, this 'functional orientation' is not satisfactory when you want a truly good working prison system. Every prison officer knows that it is vital to start a prison sentence with a good indication of the kind of prisoner that is coming in. Within a purely functional organisation there is no logical moment for a form of 'measurement' of the way the prisoner gets introduced in the prison system. A measurement may help for instance in getting an indication of how well the prisoner adopts to life in prison or the chances of a successful return to society. To do so, it would be helpful to describe the process through which the prisoner is going and perhaps to ask him or her questions about the introduction; in other words, to treat the prisoner as a 'customer'. In other words: to go from a purely functional orientation to a more process-oriented organisation. This usually is the moment the management starts to talk about the need for quality

management. It is also a moment of choice: what approach to quality should be made?

The first point that should be made is that when the fundamentals of the functional organisation are not there, a public organisation should take care to start with expectations that are too high. Executing a quality approach requires a sustained effort by both managers and employees of the organisation. Is that attainable? Considering the complexity and political dimension of many government activities it requires a lot of leadership to implement a quality system.

The second point that has to be made concerns the choice of approach. Considering the example of the prison, the easiest way to improve the working of the system is simply to describe the desired process and adapt the organisation accordingly. An ISO 9001 approach could help the management with this. The external audit, leading to certification of the quality system, could give an external impulse to work according to the new processes. However, especially within the public sector we have discovered the interdependence of many aspects of a working organisation. Certainly, the management of personal and problems of (political) leadership always get mixed up with the simple improvement or processes. In that case the EFQM-approach is more suited to the organisation, since it is better tuned to the complexity of public organisations. Another consideration is that the EFQM-approach (and the connected CAF, see above) stresses the responsibility of the organisation for its own quality, a much-needed element in the public sector, and does not depend on external impulses from specialised auditors.
All in all, ISO seems to be the method of choice of the organisation wants nothing but an improvement on existing processes. EFQM is the best method if a change in the organisation is needed towards a more truly customer – better: citizen – oriented public organisation.

Many questions still need to be addressed. Among them the question how to relate quality approaches with existing forms of planning and control and / or oversight activities. Another question is how to further adapt quality methods to the specific requirements of public organisations.
The important thing is that public organisations now have a choice and that the approaches are there to support the organisations and their leaders.