

# From Self-Assessment to External Feedback

## *The CAF External Feedback – Labelling Effective CAF Users*



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The CAF model has proved its success over the past ten years, but it also has to take steps to prepare for the future. In this respect the CAF External Feedback procedure truly adds value to the CAF for its users. Public sector organisations want to see the results of all their efforts and therefore need feedback. This was the thinking behind the CAF External Feedback. This CAF external feedback by peers and experts will help organisations to take the next steps in their quest for quality management and make their efforts visible both internally and externally. The CAF External Feedback procedure is built on the CAF model to further support CAF users in reaching their quality targets.

### Introduction

Since the launch of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) in 2000 at the first European Quality Conference, nearly 2000 public sector organisations in Europe have applied the model. Over the past 10 years, the CAF model has established its position among the many quality management tools. Most of these quality management tools have recognition schemes to evaluate assessments that take place within an organisation. Until recently, the CAF did not have this kind of system, so the development of a CAF External Feedback procedure is an important step in that direction. This CAF External Feedback procedure is built on the CAF model to further support CAF users in their quality improvement process.

A pilot group within the European CAF expert group (in the EUPAN network) comprising Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Luxemburg, Slovenia and the European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA) and supported by EFQM, has set up a CAF External Feedback procedure, which was approved at the meeting of National CAF Correspondents<sup>1</sup>. The goal of the envisaged procedure will be not to validate the scores by looking for actual proven results or assessing the overall (f)actual quality of organisations. The main goals are to strengthen the confidence of an organisation, and to advise them on how to perform better next time using the CAF model or other quality models and to increase the national

and international visibility of the organisation. During the course of the CAF External Feedback procedure, the intention is that external experts will come to the organisation and gather evidence on how it has prepared, implemented and followed up the CAF self-assessment process. After going through this process, the organisation will or will not receive the ECU label "Effective CAF User". This ECU label will have a limited validity.

This article aims to describe the major lines, ambitions and functionalities of this new CAF External Feedback procedure. Following an introduction outlining the CAF background and core concepts in relation to the CAF External Feedback Procedure, the main lines and principles of the CAF External Feedback Procedure are described in part two. Part three of this article deals with the more concrete functionalities of the procedure and the roles to be played by the different actors involved.

### Self-assessment and improvement through the Common Assessment Framework

### Origin and growth of the Common Assessment Framework

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is a total quality management tool inspired by the Excellence Model of the

European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) and the model of the German University of Administrative Sciences in Speyer. The CAF is a result of cooperation between the EU Ministers responsible for public administration. It has been developed jointly, under the aegis of the Innovative Public Services Group (IPSG), a working group of national experts set up by the Directors-General to promote exchanges and cooperation relating to innovative ways of modernising government and public service delivery in EU Member States.

A pilot version of the CAF model was presented in May 2000, the first revised version was launched in 2002 and a second revision was carried out in 2006<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, the CAF Resource Centre (CAF RC) was created at the European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA) in Maastricht. Together with the network of national CAF correspondents, the CAF Resource Centre gives multi-faceted support for the implementation of the model and evaluates its use. Between 2000 and 2009 approximately 1800 European public administrations used the CAF to improve performance<sup>3</sup>.

### Main purpose

The CAF is in the public domain and free of charge and is offered as an easy-to-use tool to assist public-sector organisations across Europe in the use of quality management techniques to improve performance. The CAF has been designed for use in all parts of the public sector, and is applicable to public organisations at the national/federal, regional and local level. The CAF provides a self-assessment framework that is conceptually similar to major Total Quality Management (TQM) models, but is specially conceived for public-sector organisations, taking their differences into account. The CAF has four main purposes in this respect:

1. to introduce public administration to the principles of TQM and guide them, through the use and understanding of self-assessment, from the current 'Plan-Do' sequence of activities to a fully fledged 'Plan-Do-Check-Act' cycle;
2. to facilitate the self-assessment of a public organisation in order to obtain a diagnosis and definition of improvement actions;
3. to act as a bridge between the various models used in quality management, in both the public and the private sectors;
4. to facilitate bench learning between public sector organisations.

A number of components have been formulated to support these purposes: the main structure with nine criteria, 28 sub-criteria with examples, assessment panels for the enablers and the results, guidelines for self-assessment, improvement actions, bench learning projects and a glossary<sup>4</sup>.

### Ten steps to improve organisations with CAF

The CAF model is more than a simple tool; it is a catalyst for a full improvement process in an organisation. The process of applying the CAF can be described in ten general steps. These 10 steps are divided into 3 major phases. Phase 1: the start and launch of the CAF process,

#### Phase 1 – The start of the CAF process

Step 1: Decide how to organise and plan the self-assessment

Step 2: Communicate the self-assessment project

#### Phase 2 – Self-Assessment Process

Step 3: Set up one or more self-assessment groups

Step 4: Organise training

Step 5: Undertake the self-assessment

Step 6: Draw up a report describing the results of the self-assessment

#### Phase 3 – Improvement plan / prioritisation

Step 7: Draft an improvement plan, based on the accepted self-assessment report

Step 8: Communicate the improvement plan

Step 9: Implement the improvement Plan

Step 10: Plan the next self-assessment

Phase 2: the self-assessment process and Phase 3: using the results of the self-assessment to formulate an action plan and launch the improvement actions in the organisation. These ten steps can be seen as the principal guidelines for the correct application of CAF and will therefore be an important element in the CAF External Feedback Procedure.

### Principles of Excellence in the CAF

One of the aims of the CAF model is to help public sector organisations to get closer to the important values of Total Quality Management (TQM). By working with the CAF model these values should, over time, become part of the organisations' culture and make it focus on certain important elements of TQM. This in turn will make them aware of the need for efficient organisations to incorporate these values into everyday practice.

As a tool for Total Quality Management, CAF responds to the fundamental concepts of excellence: results orientation, citizen/customer focus, leadership and constancy of purpose, management by processes and facts, involvement of people, continuous improvement and innovation, mutually beneficial partnerships and corporate social responsibility. It aims to improve the performance of public organisations based on these concepts. Focusing these principles is an important aspect in the CAF External Feedback Procedure.



## The CAF External Feedback Procedure

The CAF model forms the basis of the CAF External Feedback Procedure. This CAF External Feedback Procedure has been developed to give added value to the CAF implementation in public sector organisations. The initial link to the CAF External Feedback Procedure was made when describing the main features of the CAF model in Section 1. Section 2 aims to describe the CAF External Feedback Procedure's background and main features, as well as its aims, objectives and underlying principles. Section 3 will describe how to use the CAF External Feedback Procedure and how it works in greater detail.

### The demand for External Feedback

Since the CAF was launched in 2000, its implementation and use has evolved considerably. In the early years, CAF was mainly seen as a tool to help managers and people in public organisations to carry out a self-assessment in the light of a blueprint of an excellent organisation. After a few years, the focus shifted from self-assessment to the improvement cycle and the implementation of modern management instruments in the different areas covered by the CAF model's nine criteria and 28 sub-criteria. By doing so, public sector organisations aimed to respond to the eight principles of excellence and to become more efficient and effective<sup>5</sup>.

But public sector organisations also wanted to see the results of all their efforts and were looking for feedback. This is how the idea grew to create a system of external feedback on the introduction of total quality management with the help of CAF; not only with regard to the self-assessment process, but also relating to the way forward chosen by organisations to reach for excellence. The aim of this external feedback by peers and experts in TQM was to help them to gain a better perception of what had been done and to open new opportunities for high-quality work in the future. Furthermore, a CAF label can be awarded those who use CAF effectively in order to make their successful efforts visible both internally and externally. A consensus based on these ideas was found among EU Member States to create a new procedure and a new label: the CAF External Feedback Procedure and the Effective CAF User Label.

### The objectives of the CAF External Feedback Procedure

In relation to the nature of the needs and the kind of demands expressed by many CAF users in different Member States, the CAF External Feedback targets several important objectives.

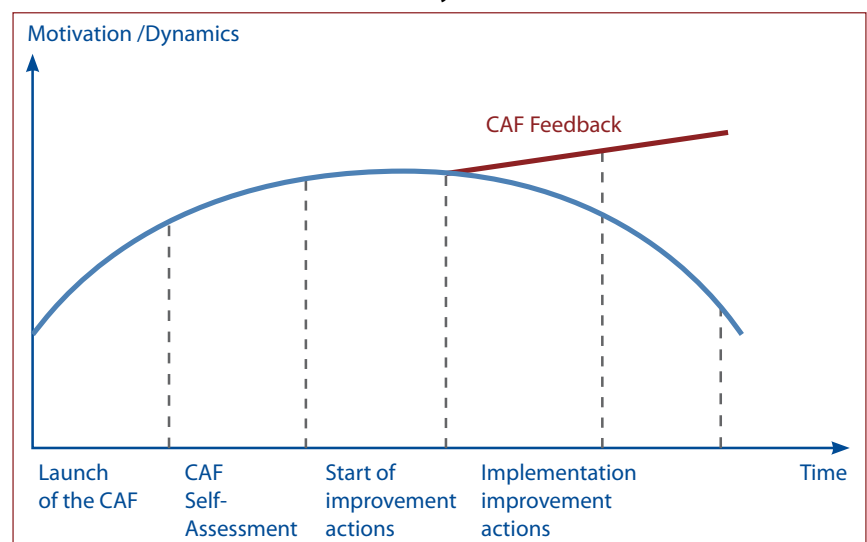
- *Support the quality of CAF implementation and its impact on the organisation.* The CAF model was launched as an instrument for self-assessment and organisational development. The use of CAF serves internal needs. To serve this purpose further, the CAF External Feedback gives organisations the opportunity to receive feedback on their CAF application and on the quality improvement process launched in the organisation.
- *Find out if the organisation is installing TQM values as the result of CAF application.* There are a number of TQM values based on the CAF, as described above. By working with the CAF model, these values should, over time, become

part of the organisation's culture. Working with the CAF makes organisations focus on certain important TQM elements. This in turn will make them aware of the need for efficient organisations to incorporate these values into everyday practice.

- *Support and renew enthusiasm for continuous improvement within the organisation.* One important element in a good CAF self-assessment is the creation and implementation of an improvement plan. It is tough for organisations to maintain the pace of change over an extended period. Many organisations lose focus and motivation after a while, as shown in the figure above. The external feedback process benefits the organisation at an ideal time by keeping attention focused on improvements and enabling the organisation to check whether it is still working on its improvements as planned. After all, the organisation cannot afford to allow its focus and motivation to drop.
- *Promote peer review and bench learning.* One of the primary aims of the CAF is to help organisations to learn from each other. CAF External Feedback provides a new opportunity to learn from other organisations and to receive useful feedback from experienced users, colleagues and peers who have been through the same process and have faced the same difficulties.
- *Reward organisations that started the process of continuous improvement towards excellence in an effective way, without judging the level of excellence obtained.* The CAF is a starting point for many organisations in terms of a structured approach to quality improvement. CAF External Feedback aims to stimulate organisations who have taken this route. The procedure recognises the efforts made by an organisation, the direction it has chosen and the way this is being put into practice.

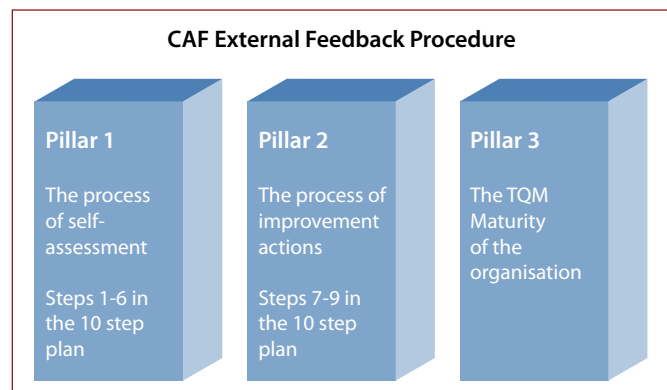
Does the implementation of the CAF model in an organisation always need external feedback? Not necessarily. Many organisations use the CAF in a very effective way and achieve excellent results in terms of quality management. This may continue to be the case. Organisations that do not need this kind of external feedback do not need to use the CAF External Feedback procedure. This external feedback is created simply to provide effective support to organisations using CAF and future quality management process by providing external feedback on carefully chosen issues, which together form the 3 pillars of the CAF External Feedback procedure<sup>6</sup>.

The added value of feedback in the CAF dynamics



### The three pillars of the CAF External Feedback: ambitions and philosophy

The CAF External Feedback procedure is built upon 3 pillars, which are described in detail in the CAF External Feedback brochure and in various questionnaires and scoring guides, both for applicant organisations and the CAF Feedback Actors (the ones giving the feedback)<sup>7</sup>. We will describe the major lines of the pillars below.



#### Pillar 1: The process of self-assessment

The quality of the self-assessment forms the basis for how well future improvements succeed. The first pillar of the CAF External Feedback focuses on the quality of the self-assessment process. An in-depth examination of steps 1-6 of the 10-step process described above will be analysed to determine the quality of the process. A questionnaire has been formulated to assess these steps. The questionnaire covers the first six steps and does not aim to validate the scores given in the CAF self-assessment. All these steps are translated into particular actions and all of them are evaluated by the 'CAF Feedback actors'.

Steps in Pillar 1
Step 1 – Decide how to organise and plan the self-assessment
Step 2 – Communicate the self -assessment project
Step 3 – Create a self-assessment group(s)
Step 4 – Organise training
Step 5 – Undertake the self-assessment
Step 6 – Draw up a report describing the results of self-assessment

The scoring in this evaluation is based on clear and simple 5-level evaluation scale, from level 1 (limited) through to level 5 (outstanding). The scheme recognises the ability to make an effective and well-thought out self-assessment that increases the organisation's understanding of the fundamental concepts required to achieve excellence.

Self-assessment process (Pillar 1)
Step 1 - Decide how to organise and plan the self-assessment (SA)
1. Assure commitment and ownership of the management for launching the process.
2. Assure a clear management decision about carrying out SA in consultation with the organisation , the scope of SA (SA covers the whole organisation or only parts/units/departments....) the overall objective of SA
3. Define the framework for SA process and the following actions, planning the SA activities
4. Appoint a SA process leader with a high level of knowledge of the organisation or constitute a SA Committee headed by the SA process leader
5. Define the scoring panel to be used
6. Allocate resources for SA and define how to prioritise resources distribution

In an effort to support the organisation, this brief details each activity under the evaluation scale, defining the interpretation of the organisation's current situation with regard to the specific theme. An example of the first activity of step 1 is given below. The other activities and steps in this pillar are evaluated in the same way.

#### Pillar 2: The process of improvement actions

Following the self-assessment and a good diagnosis with the CAF, the next important element of an effective CAF implementation is to do something with the outcome. Conclusions have to be prioritised and translated into an improvement plan covering a (limited) list of considered actions to be carried out over a maximum of two years. This phase of the CAF implementation focuses on the second pillar of the CAF External Feedback Procedure and it covers steps 7-9 of the 10-step process. These steps all take a detailed look at the improvement plan: is the plan of good quality, how is it composed, communicated and monitored? The CAF External Feedback covers the planning and improvement process and is not meant to assess the results of the improvement actions. As in pillar 1, all these steps are translated into particular actions and are evaluated against the same 5-point evaluation scale.

Steps in Pillar 2
Step 7 – Draft an improvement plan, based on the accepted self-assessment report
Step 8 – Communicate the improvement plan
Step 9 – Implement the improvement Plan

Step 1 - Decide how to organise and plan the self-assessment (SA)					
Activities	1	2	3	4	5
1. Assure commitment and ownership of the management for launching the process.	There is no evidence of commitment and ownership of the management	There is some evidence of commitment of the management for launching the process, but limited to a part of the involved managers	There is evidence of commitment and ownership of the management for launching the process	There is clear evidence of commitment and ownership of the management for launching the process, as guide and sponsor, communicating the targets and advantages	There is strong evidence of commitment and ownership of all the involved management for launching the process, as guide and sponsor, communicating the objectives and advantages and participating to the project definition

### Pillar 3: The TQM maturity of the organisation (the broader scope of excellence)

One of the aims of the CAF model is to guide public-sector organisations closer to the important values of Total Quality Management. By working with the CAF model these values should, over time, become part of the organisation's culture. Working with the CAF should also make organisations focus on certain important elements of TQM and make them aware of the need for efficient organisations to incorporate these values into everyday practice. The third pillar of the CAF External Feedback focuses on these TQM values and the shifted focus after applying the CAF model to these values.

The questionnaire for TQM Assessment Maturity is based on these eight Fundamental Concepts of Excellence. The evaluation concerns the maturity level achieved by the organisation as a result of the self-assessment and the action plan. The evaluation of the TQM Maturity determines the extent to which the institution has succeeded in

other circumstances. Despite their different approaches, Member States will have to consider and follow some general common guidelines for the CAF External Feedback. By following this minimal quantity of guidelines, Member States will guarantee that all CAF External Feedback processes organised in their respective countries assure the same quality as in the other EU Member States and that, as a consequence, the 'Effective CAF User' label means the same thing all over the European Union.

A National Organiser is appointed at national level to take charge of implementing the CAF External Feedback in the country. The National Organiser selects a core group of CAF Feedback Actors (the evaluators), organises training for them at national and/or European level, distributes the workload amongst them and evaluates how they are functioning at regular intervals. The underlying principle of the CAF External Feedback is that organisations can make use of it at minimum cost.

General characteristics	0	Initiation	Realisation	Maturity
<b>1. Leadership and constancy of purpose</b> - Definition	The Initiation level has not been reached	Leaders establish a clear mission statement.	Leaders establish vision and values. They drive and inspire people towards excellence.	Leaders demonstrate the capability to keep the constancy of purpose in a changing environment.
<b>1. Leadership and constancy of purpose</b> - Examples	The Initiation level has not been reached	Leaders provide the organisation with a well defined mission according to legislation and regulation requirements, as well as taking into account the stakeholders' expectations.	Leaders provide the organisation with the definition of mission, vision and values and share it with the people in the organisation.  Managers at all levels are focused on bringing the mission, vision and values into practice.	Stakeholders are confident about the constancy of purpose and steadiness of management.  Managers are perceived as role models.  The quality of management has been measured e.g. through management assessment or job satisfaction measurements.

implementing holistic quality development values through the self-assessment and improvement process. The aim is therefore not to evaluate the real results of the improvement activities and their quality, but to evaluate whether the self-assessment has stimulated the introduction and development of a culture of excellence within the organisation. The evaluation scale has four levels: a level where there is nothing found, an initiation level, a realisation level and a maturity level.

These different maturity levels are illustrated by concrete statements for all eight fundamental concepts. We present here as an example criteria 1 on '*leadership and constancy of purpose*'.

#### How the CAF External Feedback functions

##### The implementation of CAF External Feedback at national level

The guiding principles in elaborating the CAF External Feedback were simplicity, transparency and subsidiarity. By following these principles, it places the implementation of the CAF External Feedback in the hands of the different EU Member States – it will differ in accordance with the centralised/decentralised nature of the public administration organisation, the role of CAF National Correspondents, the number of CAF users, the resources available and several

##### The Role of the European CAF Resource Centre

Besides managing the CAF database, the European CAF Resource Centre at the European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA) in Maastricht supports the Member States in implementing the CAF External Feedback Procedure using a number of initiatives: promoting the CAF External Feedback at the European level, introducing the National CAF correspondents to this procedure, offering a common European training scheme for CAF Feedback Actors, and coordinating support for Member States that do not use a National Organiser.

The network of National CAF Correspondents reports at regular times to the Director-Generals of the European Public Administration Network (EUPAN), through the Innovative Public Services Group. In order to play its coordinating role, the CAF Resource centre receives information from the Member States on the National Organiser in the different Member States.

##### Roles, Tasks and Profile of the CAF Feedback Actors

The main task of the CAF Feedback Actors in the procedure is to:

1. analyse CAF implementation through the process of self-assessment and improvement actions and to check whether the organisation is installing TQM values;

2. give feedback and suggestions on strengths and areas of improvement in the process of implementing the CAF;
3. support and renew enthusiasm within the organisation to work with holistic quality development and self-assessment according to the CAF Model.

One of the goals of the CAF External Feedback is to promote peer review and bench learning within European public administration. It is therefore recommended that the CAF Feedback Actors should be peers from the public sector.

Being a CAF Feedback Actor requires a balance of personal and professional skills coupled with a commitment to timely and appropriate conduct. In order to be able to conduct the CAF External Feedback process competently, the CAF Feedback Actor typically needs to have a broad knowledge base and experience with management processes and development and change processes in public sector organisations. The CAF Feedback Actors can gain the necessary competencies from a variety of sources including work experience, past assessment experience (e.g. EFQM assessor), education and training.

The CAF Feedback Actor does not need to have been a manager and trained as an EFQM assessor or validator, but the competencies achieved by such training are highly useful in the feedback process. However, it is essential that the CAF Feedback Actor has participated in and passed the European or national training course required to become CAF Feedback Actor (acknowledged by the National CAF Correspondent).

## Conclusion

Since the CAF was launched in 2000 its implementation and use has evolved considerably. In the early years, CAF was seen mainly as a tool to help managers and people in public organisations make a self-assessment in the light of the blueprint of an excellent organisation. After a few years, the focus shifted from self-assessment to the improvement cycle and the implementation of modern management instruments in the different areas covered by the various CAF model criteria. This helped organisations become more efficient and effective.

The CAF model has proved successful in the past ten years, but it also has to take steps to prepare for the future. In this respect the CAF External Feedback system truly adds value to the CAF for its users. Public sector organisations want to see the results of all their efforts and therefore need feedback. This was the thinking behind the CAF External Feedback system. This CAF external feedback performed by peers and experts will help organisations take their next steps in their quest for quality management and will make their efforts visible both internally and externally. The CAF External Feedback procedure is built upon the CAF model to further help CAF users to reach their quality targets.

The CAF External Feedback is a further step in the process of improving European public sector quality management. It will add a lot of value to the CAF model for organisations looking for external feedback and allows these organisations to make accelerated progress on the path towards excellence.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Meeting of National CAF Correspondents, Oslo 28 September 2009.

<sup>2</sup> EIPA, *Survey regarding quality activities in the public administrations of the European Union member states*, Maastricht, p. 95, 2002

EIPA, Study for the Italian Presidency on the use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) in European Public Administrations. Maastricht, p. 92, 2003

EIPA, Study on the use of the Common Assessment Framework in European public services, Maastricht, p. 89, 2005

<sup>3</sup> Thijs, N. and Staes, P., *The Common Assessment Framework in European Public Administrations: a state of affairs after five years*. Eipascope 3, p.p. 41-49, 2005

<sup>4</sup> For detailed information concerning the CAF model consult [www.eipa.eu/caf](http://www.eipa.eu/caf).

<sup>5</sup> Thijs, N. and Staes, P., *Applying the Common Assessment Framework in Europe*. In: Julnes, P., Berry, F., Aristiguetta, M. and Yang, K. (eds.), *International handbook of practice-based performance management*, Sage, California, p.p. 455-485, 2008

<sup>6</sup> The general principles of the procedure were approved by the meeting of the Director-Generals in the EUPAN network during the Slovenian Presidency of the EU in June 2008 and further discussed in the IPSP during the French Presidency in the second half of 2008 and the Czech and Swedish Presidencies in 2009.

<sup>7</sup> EUPAN, *Effective CAF User Recognition brochure*, p. 90, 2009