

Perspective, opinion, and commentary

EFQM Model and Quality Management: Leadership and Innovation

Barna TÓTH¹ (Hungary)

Edit SZÚCS¹ (Hungary)

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) model and other widely used quality management frameworks. The EFQM model offers a structured, holistic approach to continuous improvement that prioritizes management and organizational culture, which enables organizations to develop and increase performance. Together with systems such as ISO and Six Sigma, EFQM can play a framework role in increasing competitiveness between industries. The research analyzes how management styles and organizational culture can influence the acceptance and long-term sustainability of quality management practices. The results all point to the fact that management has a significant impact on the successful implementation or unsuccessful implementation of quality management systems. In addition, the study identifies the most important research gaps, especially concerning industry-specific applications, as well as the impact of leadership styles on quality improvement initiatives. It was concluded that future research should focus on the relationship between digital transformation and the EFQM model, considering its sustainability and potential to support innovation in different sectors.

Keywords: EFQM Model, Quality Management, Leadership, Organizing, Sustainability,

¹ Doctoral School of Management and Business, University of Debrecen
The country of origin of each author is specified in parentheses

INTRODUCTION

The EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) model provides a comprehensive framework for all organizations that wish to pay special attention to the development of their quality management processes. This model is not just a set of tools, but a holistic approach. It enables organizations to identify development opportunities and achieve more efficient operations. The application of the EFQM model helps organizations to use knowledge management tools and proven good practices, which thus contribute to the continuous development of their organization, thereby improving their performance (Bocoya-Maline et al., 2024). The application of the model is even more relevant in the turbulently changing economic environment of our time, the reason for which is not only that this quality management framework focuses on the current operating processes of the given organization but also maps future opportunities and strategies.

Quality management systems play a key role in management and organizational operations. In addition to increasing operational efficiency, these systems are also the fundamental elements of ensuring competitiveness and sustainability. The EFQM model provides senior managers with the opportunity to make data-based decisions, thereby facilitating the development of strategies that can improve organizational culture and optimize internal processes, such as resource management and customer relations (Santos & Abreu, 2019; Pimentel & Rogala, 2022). This approach ensures that organizations do not only focus on their day-to-day operations but also strive to achieve their long-term strategic goals, which include sustainability, social responsibility, and innovation.

The purpose of this publication is to examine the relationship between the EFQM model and other quality management systems, concerning how this specific model can change organizational performance and operation. One of the main questions that the study seeks to answer is what effect the implementation of the EFQM model has on organizational results. This issue is of high priority, as the creation of a balance between efficiency and sustainability has become a fundamental strategic goal of organizations. In addition to all this, the study also examines which strategies facilitate the successful implementation and implementation of the model, paying particular attention to management styles, organizational culture, and the involvement of stakeholders in the practical application of EFQM principles.

In the modern business environment, the effect of EFQM on sustainability and innovation can not only be a competitive advantage for organizations but also a fundamental condition for (organizational) success. According to the logic of the EFQM model, sustainability prioritizes economic and social responsibility dimensions in addition to environmental aspects. In addition, the support of innovation is also closely related to the model. Continuous development and the search for new approaches are key to maintaining organizational competitiveness. The study of the impact of the EFQM model on innovation and sustainability is crucial for its successful application and adaptation in different industries and organizational environments (Yousaf and Bris, 2021; Sütőová et al., 2022).

In addition, the EFQM model serves as an effective framework for organizations to maintain their resilience in a dynamic and uncertain market environment. By incorporating continuous improvement principles into strategic planning, organizations can create a culture of excellence that adapts to customer expectations and turbulently changes external influences. The use of feedback mechanisms and performance measurement tools ensures that organizations remain flexible and able to respond quickly to changes.

The practical application of the EFQM model goes beyond internal organizational developments. It promotes cooperation between different sectors, encourages benchmarking between industries, and the sharing of proven (good) practices. The model's structured approach to leadership and quality management provides the user with a standardized methodology that organizations can then adapt to their own needs while maintaining consistent operational excellence. This adaptability makes the EFQM model extremely versatile, allowing it to be used effectively in different sectors, whether industrial or non-industrial.

THE EFQM MODEL AND QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

The EFQM model, as an internationally recognized framework, provides comprehensive structured help for organizations to manage changes and achieve operational and strategic excellence. The model consists of nine interrelated criteria. We divide them into two main categories: Enablers and Results. The Enablers category includes those elements that facilitate the efficient achievement of the organization's goals:

- Leadership that provides a clear vision and direction,
- Strategy, which defines the way to achieve the goals,
- People, which emphasizes employee engagement and development,
- Partnerships and resources that focus on collaboration and efficient use of resources,
- Processes, products, and services that represent the operative mechanisms of value creation.

In contrast, the Results category already serves to evaluate organizational performance:

- Customer outcomes that reflect customer satisfaction and loyalty,
- Human resources result that show employee well-being and performance,
- Social results, which measure the social contribution of the organization,
- Key results that indicate overall organizational performance and financial success (Escrig-Tena et al., 2019).

This dual structure provides the organization with a comprehensive picture and enables them to align their strategic goals with operational execution.

The logic of the EFQM model is determined by three basic questions: Why? How? What? These guiding questions help organizations clarify their goals, develop strategies, and determine the steps necessary to achieve those goals.

- The "Why?" question encourages organizations to articulate their mission, vision, and long-term aspirations, creating the basis for strategic direction.
- The "How?" question focuses on the processes, resources, and methods used to implement strategies, ensuring alignment with organizational goals.
- The "What?" question examines the results already achieved and future development opportunities.

This cyclical framework - which is practically a PDCA cycle - enables a thorough evaluation of activities and results, ensuring that organizations remain adaptable and capable of continuous development. By answering these questions, organizations can become more resilient and achieve long-term sustainable development (Pimentel & Rogala, 2022).

The most important goal of the EFQM model is to help organizations achieve long-term sustainability while providing clear guidance for achieving adaptability and excellence. With the help of this transparent structure, organizations will be able to focus on their current performance and future opportunities at the same time, helping to achieve outstanding results.

A Gallup survey provides convincing evidence that the use of quality management systems, such as the

EFQM model, significantly increases organizational productivity and performance, and thus indirectly - KPIs resulting from the organization's operation as well. A 2022 global survey showed that all organizations that successfully applied these principles achieved significant changes. For example:

- the efficiency of the processes improved by 30-40%,
- operations are simplified, and resource use is optimized,
- employee satisfaction increased by 20%, reflecting improved workplace morale and engagement.

These changes directly increased the satisfaction and loyalty of their customers, thus contributing to greater profitability and competitiveness. The results confirm that the EFQM model not only plays a key role in operational improvements but also creates strategic advantages.

The unique strength of the EFQM model lies in its integration of organizational culture and management styles with quality management processes. While some systems focus solely on technical efficiency or compliance, the EFQM model takes a complete, comprehensive approach. The Enablers criteria contribute to the identification of growth opportunities, management efficiency, workforce development and the optimization of resources, while the Results criteria provide measurable indicators for evaluating the satisfaction of stakeholders and organizational performance, highlighting the areas to be improved.

The principles of the EFQM model support the improvement of organizational efficiency and effectiveness, emphasizing the importance of conscious, strategic management, which are the cornerstones of successful application. The model framework can also complement recognized quality management systems such as ISO (9001) and Six Sigma, as it bridges the gap between standardization and excellence. While ISO mainly emphasizes the standardization and conformity of processes, and Six Sigma focuses on reducing errors and increasing efficiency using advanced statistical methods, the EFQM model complements all this with a focus on stakeholder satisfaction and long-term value creation. (Pimentel & Rogala, 2022).

The integration of ISO standards into the EFQM model enables the combination of compliance-based and excellence-oriented methodologies. This integration enhances sustainability and the organization's social responsibility role (Gómez-López et al., 2019).

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

Management styles play a fundamental role in the introduction and effective operation of quality management systems, as well as their long-term maintenance. The management approaches used by managers significantly influence the quality management results of organizations - whether in a positive or negative direction - this is especially true in terms of employee commitment and organizational performance. For example, transformational and transactional leadership styles contribute differently to these outcomes.

Portela Maquieira et al. Based on his 2020 research, transformational leadership – which is based on inspiring and motivating leadership behavior – is particularly effective in promoting creative thinking and supporting open communication. This management style has a positive effect on quality management processes, as it creates an opportunity for employees to share their ideas and participate in innovative problem-solving. Transformational leaders create an environment that encourages employees to go beyond traditional frameworks and adopt new approaches to improve quality (Mitsiou & Zafiropoulos, 2024)

The transformational leadership style is particularly important in organizations that aim for continuous development and innovation. Through this management style, organizations can not only increase the efficiency of their current processes but also ensure their long-term competitiveness by prioritizing creative ideas and adaptability. This type of manager often emphasizes collaboration and stakeholder involvement, which are key to quality management, as committed and motivated employees make a significant contribution to the successful implementation of systems. Transformational leadership also plays a key role in knowledge management. Leaders who support innovation and creativity are best able to encourage the sharing of knowledge within the organization, which further strengthens the foundations of continuous improvement, enabling them to remain more resilient in a rapidly changing environment.

Compared to transformational leadership, transactional leadership represents a different approach. According to Nenadál, this management style usually relies on hierarchical structures and formal procedures that frame the activities of employees along strict rules. Although this approach can be beneficial in certain situations, such as when clear rules and quick results are required, it is less flexible and thus can hinder the application of innovative solutions both in quality management

and in other operational areas of the organization. Transactional leadership - because of the need to comply with rules and achieve short-term goals - can inhibit creativity and in the long term also hinder the development of systems (Pimentel & Rogala, 2022). This approach is reactive rather than proactive, making it difficult for organizations to quickly adapt to a changing environment and to implement new technologies and methods. Managers with a transactional approach prioritize efficiency and productivity. Predictability is ensured through predetermined rules and structured work processes, but at the same time, they limit employees' opportunities for innovative developments.

The relationship between management styles and organizational culture is also of outstanding importance from the point of view of the application of a successful quality management system. Managers play a key role in the strategy of creating organizational culture, which directly affects the implementation of quality management goals and employee engagement. In their 2024 research, Bris and Urbanek point out that the organizational culture created by managers determines the successful implementation of quality management systems. A supportive and collaborative culture not only increases employee satisfaction but also strengthens commitment to quality at all organizational levels, which is crucial for the sustainability of these systems (Rivera et al., 2021). When management is in line with the principles of quality management, employees are more likely to take part in development initiatives, thereby fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation in the organization.

The influence of organizational culture also extends to the application of the EFQM model and other quality management systems. Criado-García et al. (2020), an open and supportive culture that facilitates and supports continuous learning and development is the most suitable for the implementation of quality management principles. Encouraging innovation and teamwork - which form the basis of these cultures - is essential for the long-term sustainability and efficiency of the systems. Organizations that prioritize innovation and collaboration are significantly more successful in applying quality management systems.

The leadership role in quality management goes beyond operational processes and directly influences the strategic direction of the organization. Leaders who incorporate the principles of quality management into their strategic planning provide guidance for long-term success. Quality does not just appear as a separate initiative but becomes an integral part of the organizational strategy. This

harmony enables the development of more effective performance measurement systems, better customer relationship management, and continuous optimization of processes.

Finally, the intersection of leadership and digital transformation plays an increasingly important role in shaping modern quality management systems. As organizations increasingly adopt automation, artificial intelligence, and data analytics, leaders must focus their strategy on these technologies. Integrating digital tools into quality management not only increases accuracy and efficiency but also provides valuable insight into data-driven decision-making.

IDENTIFIED RESEARCH GAPS

In current research, several significant gaps can be identified regarding the relationship between the EFQM model and quality management systems. These gaps are particularly prominent in the areas of leadership and organizational practices, highlighting the importance of further research. According to the findings of Daniel et al. (2019), examining these areas is crucial to gaining a deeper understanding of how the principles of the EFQM model can be integrated at different organizational levels. Researchers argue that the insufficient knowledge of the relationship between leadership practices and organizational structures may hinder the effective application of the model, especially in organizations that do not yet have a comprehensive quality management system (Vykydal et al., 2020). This research gap suggests that organizations require guidelines that assist them in aligning leadership strategies with quality management principles.

Although the EFQM model is widely applied, its effects on different industries have not yet been explored in sufficient detail. For instance, while a considerable amount of research has been conducted on its application in the industrial sector, studies on the service sector and nonprofit organizations remain relatively scarce. This presents a significant challenge, as one of the greatest advantages of the EFQM model is its flexibility in adapting to different organizational environments. According to Rivera et al. (2021), a deeper exploration of industry-specific differences could significantly enhance the model's effectiveness and more targeted application. In the industrial sector, the EFQM model has often been proven to contribute to optimizing production processes and improving organizational performance. However, the service sector and nonprofit organizations face unique challenges, such as managing customer relationships, limited access

to resources, and emphasizing social responsibility, all of which require special attention when implementing the model (Yousaf & Bris, 2021).

Another critical research area with significant development potential is the relationship between leadership styles and quality management systems. Leadership styles directly influence the effectiveness and successful implementation of quality management systems. However, the impact of different leadership approaches—such as transformational, transactional, or servant leadership—on these systems has not received sufficient attention in the literature. Yousaf & Bris (2021) and Sütöová et al. (2022) emphasize that a deeper understanding of the effects of leadership styles could enable organizations to better align their leadership practices when implementing quality management systems (Daniel et al., 2019). For example, the transformational leadership style can be particularly beneficial for organizations prioritizing innovation and continuous improvement, while transactional leadership may be more effective in standardizing processes and achieving short-term goals. These interconnections not only influence leaders' decisions but also shape organizational culture and employee commitment.

The examination of the effectiveness of quality management systems in improving organizational performance also requires further research. Most studies focus on the benefits of quality management systems, such as process optimization, increased customer satisfaction, or cost reduction. However, fewer studies provide a detailed analysis of the extent to which these systems contribute to improving organizational performance, including financial results and innovation capabilities. Turisová et al. (2021) highlight that these research gaps offer significant opportunities for future studies. Questions such as how quality management systems help organizations achieve strategic goals or their impact on employee productivity and satisfaction remain underrepresented in the literature.

Moreover, organizations must consider how they can adapt and customize the EFQM model to better fit their specific needs. While the model provides a structured framework, its application often requires modifications depending on the industry and organizational context. For instance, in the healthcare sector, quality management efforts may focus primarily on patient safety and care efficiency, while in manufacturing, the emphasis may be on reducing defects and improving supply chain integration. Understanding these industry-specific variations is essential for enhancing the practical applicability of the model.

Furthermore, another gap in research relates to the long-term sustainability of quality management systems and their alignment with corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors. In recent years, there has been increasing pressure on organizations to integrate sustainability considerations into their operational models. While some studies have examined the role of CSR within EFQM-based organizations, there is limited empirical evidence on how sustainability efforts influence the effectiveness and longevity of quality management systems. Future research should explore the extent to which organizations incorporating sustainability into their EFQM practices experience greater long-term success and stakeholder engagement.

These research gaps indicate that future studies should focus more on exploring the relationship between the EFQM model and quality management systems in more detail. In addition to industry-specific research, a better understanding of the relationships between management practices and organizational performance can contribute to a wider and more effective application of the model, both in industrial and non-industrial organizations. This deeper understanding can fundamentally support quality management systems' strategic development and long-term sustainability.

FUTURE RESEARCH GOALS

A deeper understanding of the relationship between the EFQM model and quality management systems should be at the center of future research. To map the identified shortcomings, it would be necessary to examine topics that contribute to the customization and development of the model and the achievement of organizational excellence. The industry-specific introduction of the EFQM model should become a particularly important area of research. While the model is a widely applicable tool in the field of quality management systems, different industries face different challenges and needs in their operations. Through the case studies, researchers could explore how the model can be applied effectively (or more effectively) in each sector. Industry-specific research would shed light on the strengths and limitations of the model, helping to develop customized strategies that are tailored to the unique needs of a given industry. These analyses could facilitate the wider dissemination of best practices and contribute to the further development of the EFQM model.

In addition to examining industry-specific effects, it would be extremely important for future research to

focus on the relationship between management styles and quality management systems. Different approaches to management styles affect the operation and effectiveness of quality management systems differently, especially in a dynamically changing business environment. Although there have already been studies on the topic, due to constantly changing organizational structures and technological development, this area remains a relevant research priority. Portela Maquieira et al. (2020) highlight that different management approaches can have different effects on the implementation and operation of quality management systems. This research provides insight into how leadership styles can influence organizational culture, employee engagement, and organizational performance. This type of study could help managers develop and implement strategies that more effectively integrate quality management principles into day-to-day operations.

Furthermore, the impact of digital transformation on the EFQM model and other quality management systems will also be a key area of research in the future. The rise of digital technologies fundamentally changes organizational operations, affecting the efficiency and applicability of quality management systems. Technological developments and innovations present organizations with new challenges. Tools such as artificial intelligence, big data, or IoT (Internet of Things) offer new opportunities for optimizing quality management processes. Future research should aim to learn how these tools can be integrated within the framework of the EFQM model. This could include supporting data-driven decision-making, taking advantage of automation, and using digital platforms to strengthen sustainability and social responsibility.

In addition to examining the impact of digital tools and strategies, it would be important to conduct research that also explores the cultural aspects of digital transformation. The introduction of digital technologies not only poses technical challenges but also has a significant impact on organizational culture and employee behavior. Future research should cover how digital transformation can influence leadership styles, employee motivation, and collaboration mechanisms needed to achieve organizational goals.

It can be said that future research should deepen the existing body of knowledge in several directions. Examining industry-specific effects, analyzing the relationships between management styles and quality management systems, and exploring the effects of digital transformation can all contribute to a more effective application and further development of the EFQM model. The importance

of this research would not be limited to expanding academic knowledge but would also provide practical guidance for organizations to better adapt to the changing business environment and achieve their long-term goals.

SUMMARY

The EFQM model offers a comprehensive and well-structured framework for all organizations that want to improve their quality management processes and achieve business excellence. It is not just that the companies will be able to assess their current performance, but also that they will be able to identify development directions and create a long-term strategy to create sustainability. The EFQM model helps organizations better understand and align their applicable strategy, operational processes, and resources with stakeholders' expectations, in addition to ensuring full measurement of results. Thanks to this, organizations can stimulate innovation more effectively and respond more flexibly to the challenges of the constantly changing business environment.

The special feature of the model, in addition to focusing on the fine-tuning of internal operations, is that it also places great emphasis on organizational culture, management styles, and stakeholder satisfaction. When used in conjunction with quality management systems such as ISO or Six Sigma, an organization can implement a comprehensive approach that goes beyond mere compliance with standards. While ISO is primarily based on standardized processes and ensuring compliance, Six Sigma aims to reduce errors and increase operational efficiency. "Built" on top of these, the EFQM model can combine these elements and offer a quality management approach that prioritizes excellence and the satisfaction of stakeholders. As a result, it strengthens market competitiveness and contributes to the long-term success and sustainability of organizations.

The research aimed to reveal the relationship between the EFQM model and different quality management systems. The results show that the management approach and the organizational culture determine how successful (or unsuccessful) the introduction and maintenance of a quality management system will be. Transformational leadership promotes innovation, creative thinking, and employee engagement, while a transactional leadership approach focuses more on stability and control, but its rigidity can limit opportunities for innovation. This clearly shows that managers must

develop a strategy that is consistent with the organization's goals and culture to effectively implement and operate quality management systems.

During the research, it became clear that there are still gaps in the examination of the industry-specific application of the EFQM model. If we want to better understand how this model can be effectively applied in different industries and the non-profit sector, it could greatly contribute to the further development of the methodology. Industry-specific research would create an opportunity to adapt the EFQM model to different sectors so that they can take maximum advantage of its benefits. This could be particularly important in the service sector or education, where the application of the EFQM model has been less widespread so far.

Another key research direction is the investigation of the impact of digital transformation and innovative technologies on quality management systems. New and now unavoidable technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, or automated decision-making are radically transforming the operation of organizations and fundamentally determining how effective a quality management system will be. Future research should explore how these new technologies can be incorporated into the EFQM model and how they can more effectively support sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Such research could help companies take better advantage of digital tools while strengthening their competitiveness and improving customer satisfaction.

Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to examine in more detail how digital transformation affects organizational culture and management styles. It is not only about technical challenges but also about how digital transformation affects employee motivation, teamwork, and collaboration processes. Research that analyzes these factors can provide significant help to companies in managing the challenges of the digital age more effectively.

Future research should deepen the existing (mainly academic) knowledge in several directions. Examining industry-specific applications, exploring the relationships between management styles and quality management systems, and analyzing the impact of digital technologies can all contribute to a more effective application and further development of the EFQM model. Thus, this research could not only enrich academic knowledge but also provide specific practical guidelines for organizations so that they can better prepare for the dynamically changing business environment and remain competitive in the long term.

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LIST OF FIGURES



Figure 1.
Presentation of the EFQM Model
Source: <https://efqm.org/the-efqm-model/>

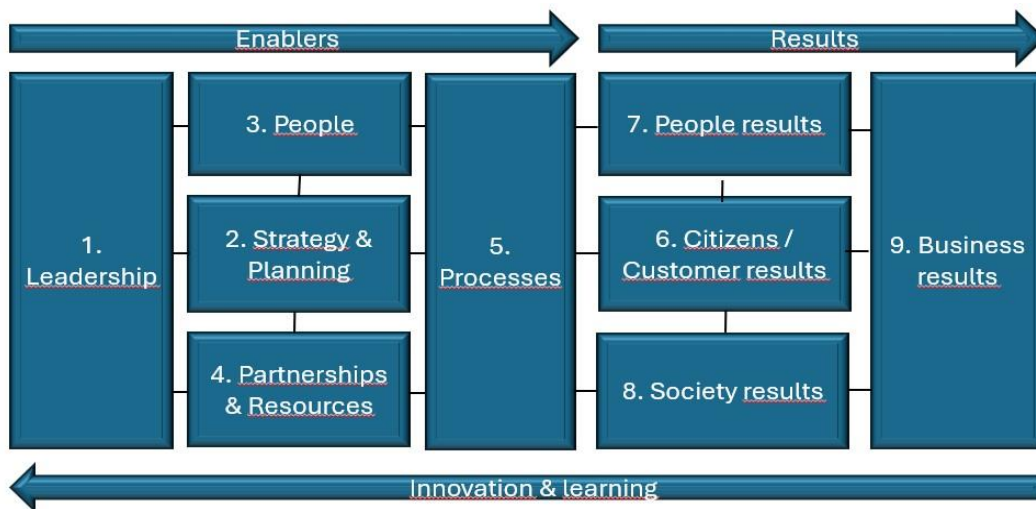


Figure 2.
CAF Model
Source: generated by the author