

The identification, analysis and comparison of different ways and approaches in measuring and evaluation of organizational excellence

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Abstract

Purpose: The basic purpose of the present paper is to provide readers with a comprehensive description and comparison of different techniques and models, aiming at evaluating levels of organizational excellence. In Europe, the EFQM Excellence Model is unquestionable the leading force, but the multidimensional subject of attaining excellence can not be solely captured. A variety of other approaches have been developed –some of them were inspired from the EFQM’s shortcomings- and are examined thoroughly.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This research is based on a majority of research and conceptual papers, public documents and our own experience.

Findings: The first part of the paper presents the core concepts of the EFQM Excellence Model and its suitability for measuring the levels of business excellence is being demonstrated. The second part is dedicated to the exploration and presentation of alternative ways for attaining the highest possible levels of excellence, while, in the third part a comprehensive comparison among them is being conducted. Finally, in the fourth part, the basic findings are summarized.

Originality/Value: An inclusive review of the major ways under which significant levels of excellence and sustainable success can be achieved.

Keywords: Business Excellence, European Foundation for Quality Management, diagnostic self-assessment, organizational structure.

Type of paper: Review paper.

Introduction

The European Foundation for Quality Management was officially established in Montreux, on the 19th October 1989. The emergent organization had to successfully accomplish a set of strategic goals, the most important of which was the development of a European Quality Award that would act as the European voice against the already established American one, the Malcolm Baldrige National Award. The members of the EFQM Award Committee were so confident about the final outcome of their efforts, that they were thinking of the upcoming award as the bridge, through which the philosophy and the principles of TQM would enter the European land.

The top priority for the EFQM members was the development of a model, which would have substantial differences in comparison to the American one and the reason was obvious; it was necessary for the embryonic model to become universally acceptable as a totally different approach for attaining business excellence compared to the existing standards and beyond dispute, this would lead the TQM initiative into a new era.

The decade of 80's was marked by the vertiginous development and flourishing of the Japanese economy, which managed to become the prevalent one. The international markets were highly affected by the predominance of the exported Japanese products and felt, that their long-run survival was jeopardized. The first market which experienced the severe consequences from the dynamic entrance in the global field of the Japanese products was the one of the North America and thus, was the first that reacted, by trying to realize the extent of the problem, through comparative analysis and benchmarking.

In the above framework, Europe was remaining aloof and it was clearly lagging. The need for a radical change was apparent and the initiative was taken by some of the 14 largest European companies having the bounteously support of the European Union. That was the starting point for the genesis and introduction of the EFQM and its child, the EQA, which was later renamed to the "EFQM Excellence Model".

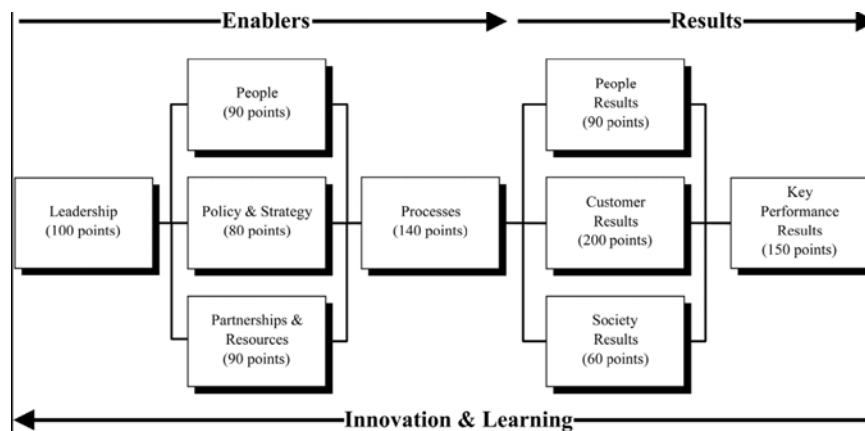


Figure 1 – The EFQM Excellence Model

According to Figure 1, the EFQM Excellence Model consists of 9 criteria which are divided in two main categories; the enablers and the results part. Enablers comprise the set of activities that a company develops and implements on a daily basis in order to produce results, which will satisfy the needs and expectations not only of its customers (customer results), but also of its stakeholders. Stakeholders form a wide category which includes the human resources (people results), the local community inside which the company operates and also –under a broader view- the global society (society results). Besides, results should also satisfy strategic business and image goals (Key Performance Results).

By taking a closer look to the model, we can assume that there is an internal structure between the set of the enabler criteria (Bou-Llugar, J.K., Escrig-Tena, A.B., Roca-Puig, V., Beltran-Martin, I., 2005). Its graphical illustration demonstrates that effective leadership is a prerequisite for efficient policy and strategy and drives human resources management as well as partnerships and resources. The appropriate combination of these factors will lead -through excellent processes- to the achievement of excellent results. The same rational is also identified in the set of the results criteria; specifically, excellent Customer, People and Society Results will lead to excellent Key Performance Results. Besides the implied logic of the existence of an internal structure in each of the model's domains, the basic idea behind the EFQM Excellence Model is that corporations can achieve excellent results, only through excellence in the enablers' domain.

Figure 1 also reveals that there is an analogical relationship between the total weights allocated to each domain. The total set of the Enablers is worth a maximum

of 500 points (in a scale from 0-1000) and the same stands for the Results. According to Tito Conti, the basic reason which forced the members of the EFQM Steering Committee to choose this weighted system, stems from a fundamental principle of the TQM's philosophy, the one which implies that the customer should be placed in the centre of a company's interest; saying it in a different way, the voice of those who experience on a daily basis the Results produced through the implementation of the Enablers' set, has to be rewarded with exactly the same weight as the set of Enablers, which are highly dependent to the assessors' judgment.

Benefits and shortcomings revealed by the use of the EFQM Excellence Model

The application of the EFQM Excellence Model for self-assessment purposes provides the company with a thorough evaluation of its current situation and enables it to identify the biggest performance gaps and prioritize its corrective plans towards improvement. Besides, the EFQM Excellence Model is considered to be the binding link between the company and the principles of the TQM's philosophy, since, the major principles and concepts of TQM's philosophy are appeared in clear and accessible language within the framework of the model (Ghobadian and Woo, 1996)

Since 1991, the EFQM Excellence Model has turned to be the most commonly used model among the companies conducting self-assessment and it has also been empirically verified that the application of its principles has a positive effect on corporate performance (Kristensen and Juhl, 1999; Singhal, 2002). Essentially, when its principles have been implemented effectively, performance improves in both short and long time periods (Boulter, Bendell, Abas, Dahlgaard, Singhal, 2005).

However, practice of the model has revealed some major shortcomings, the most important of which is that its global suitability is questionable and many quality experts have argued that the development of a universal business excellence model (UBEM) is required. A second problem arises when implementing the model, because there seems to be an imbalance between the human dimension and management based approaches (Dahlgaard, 2003a). This problem is also related to a tendency to focus on tangible and objective aspects while underestimating the more intangible and subjective aspects (Dahlgaard&Dahlgaard-Park, 2007; Dahlgaard-Park, 2008). Thus, the need for the development of a different approach focused more on the "soft" organizational aspects is increased.

Another problem stems from the unreasonable high importance that companies have placed upon the award dimension of the model, which has forced them to spend more money to enhance the quality of the application report than to improve the quality of their company. As a consequence, the self-assessment approach is often an award based approach and clearly, the two dimensions of the model should be distinguished. It becomes evident, that there is a need for developing a different model – probably based upon the structure and the principles of the EFQM model – focused solely on the self-assessment procedure and through which, on the attainment of organizational excellence.

Alternative approaches and methods for measuring organizational excellence

Today's business world is mainly characterized by fierce competition, need for high production levels, customers' demands for products and services of superior quality and fast delivery, but also, for increased pressures stemming from both the legislation and the local community, according to environmental protection issues and the firm's contribution to the development and well-being of the society. Consequently, the need for attaining superior levels of excellence has become more important than ever and thus, a variety of methods, frameworks and models have been developed. The basic aim of the present article is the presentation and comparative evaluation of the most important among them.

The Universal Business Excellence Model

The EFQM Excellence Model together with the Malcolm Baldrige and the Deming Prize are the most popular and widely accepted Business Excellence Models -BEM's-. The main differences between these prevailing BEM's are related to the fact, that each of them is based on unique characteristics that stem from the different beliefs and cultures arousing in different countries and continents in which each model is developed or mostly applicable. This characteristic combined with the individual needs that each company has, tends to transform the above mentioned BEM's to nationally applicable models with limited potential for a more universal usage.

Furthermore, the majority of BEM's are intent to the enhancement and maximization of the profits and the worth of the company. However important this goal might be, it shouldn't be regarded as the final target, but as one among many intermediate goals, as one more step in order to come closer to the truly final objective, which is the long-run satisfaction of the needs and desires of the global community (principles which are apparent in the Vedic philosophy). Through the short-termed point of view, a company will be able to achieve individual wellbeing while, through the long-termed one, a company will manage to attain universal wellbeing and sustainable success.

This is the basic premise upon which the idea behind the development of a Universal Business Excellence Model –UBEM- was based. The resulting model will – according to the writers, (Sharma & Talwar, 2007) -include all the advantages provided by the existing BEM's together with the principles of the Vedic philosophy, and thus, the integration of the West practices with the East culture will help companies to achieve a long-run prosperity and survive in the international and highly competitive market field. The graphical illustration of the UBEM is presented below:

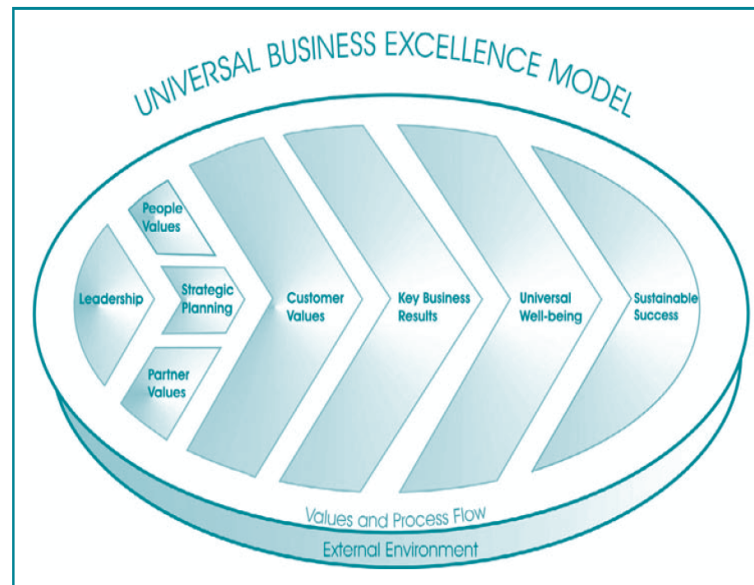


Figure 2 - The Universal Business Excellence Model

If we closely examine the above presented model, we can realize the pivotal role of the leadership, the fundamental block of which is values. Leaders should exhibit high levels of commitment towards a continuous improvement philosophy and should seek through their daily actions to become role models for the others. The development of a value-driven culture that will be communicated and accepted throughout the organization, will positively affect all the major stakeholders of the company, expressed by the fundamental elements of the UBEM (e.g. people values, partner values, customer values and key business results). This explains the catholic influence of values and process flow element, the application area of which extends to the whole model. Besides, it also drives the alignment of the company's vision with the universal well-being for ensuring attainment of sustainable success.

A key difference between the existing BEM's and the UBEM lies on the flexibility that characterizes the latter one. When talking about the major shortcomings that BEM's face, we highlighted the unsuitability of such models becoming universally applied because of their standard nature which can not capture the uniqueness of each individual company. What differentiates the UBEM is the existence of an extra layer which is being applied throughout the model. This extra layer ("External environment") enables the UBEM to integrate with the culture and business environment of the country where it is to be used (Sharma & Talwar, 2007). Besides, there is no standard weight assigned to the criteria of the model. Each company is allowed to adapt the principles and philosophy of the UBEM to its own internal system and determine the weight structure according to the magnitude that each criterion-element has, taking into consideration its individual characteristics and needs.

The basic outcome revealed during the evolution of the UBEM, is the extraction of four factors, namely "Universal well-being", "Building learning organization", "Values-based governance" and "Enhancing profits and growth" and each one of them represents a fundamental building block of the UBEM. The first three stem directly from the principles of the Vedic philosophy, while the fourth one is evident in the majority of current BEM's. Consequently, this is an indicator that the structure of

UBEM integrates the common features among BEM's together with the universal laws emphasized in the Vedic philosophy.

Methodology for assessing Quality of the Organization of the formal social unit (MUKOZ technique)

The concept of Quality Cost was first appeared in the 1950 and it was traditionally referred to the cost of inspections. Quality costs are all these costs derived from the fact that things rarely are done properly right the first time. Quality costs are subdivided into 4 main categories, namely prevention, appraisal, internal and external failure costs (Dahlgaard, Kristensen, Kanji, 2002; Feigenbaum, 1956). However, there are two additional quality costs categories, which are neither detectable nor quantifiable or recordable. These kinds of costs are invisible and responsible for about 70% of the total quality costs. The iceberg theory was developed in order to explain this phenomenon and it is also a reminder to managers that they should always look beneath the surface and beyond the visible parts.

The iceberg theory can also be applied in today's business world; there is no doubt, that financial results are one of the most important parameters with regard to the evaluation of the performance of a given company. The basic drawback associated with these results, is that they include information representative of the company's past. However, when the objective is the evaluation of the excellence levels, information in relation to both the present and the future condition of a company needs to be considered. Consequently, we can think an enterprise as an iceberg, which is comprised by its visible (financial results) and invisible parts which consist of many factors whose impact on the long-run viability of the firm is a multiple of the corresponding impact caused by the financial results.

At this point, the main question arise is, "which are these factors"? According to Lipovec (Pregeljc, 2004), the organizational structure is what shapes the invisible part of the iceberg and in this framework, the MUKOZ model was born. The fundamental blocks which compose and explicitly define the meaning of the word "organization", are according to Lipovec, the relationships. The term "relationships" is not solely referred to the interpersonal relationships developed between the employees of a company or, between employees and people outside of the company, but it includes as well the effectiveness of communication channels established throughout the company.

It also includes a detailed determination of the needs for all the positions emanated by the organizational chart (technical relationships). The knowledge of both the needs of a particular position and the capabilities of a particular employee, will lead to the delegation of tasks to the most suitable people (personnel relationships). Furthermore, an important aspect of the relationships and an indicator of the extent of the organizational consistency of a company, are the coordinative relationships. Finally, employees' empowerment and involvement through the development of a human-oriented culture is the key towards a sustainable success (motivational relationships).

The above mentioned relationships consist the fundamental blocks upon which the term "organizational structure" is based; however, the complicated nature of a company can not be solely captured by these 5 basic relationships and thus, the combination of them in pairs with all the others is also used, and this results to a model, composed by a total set of 15 relationships.

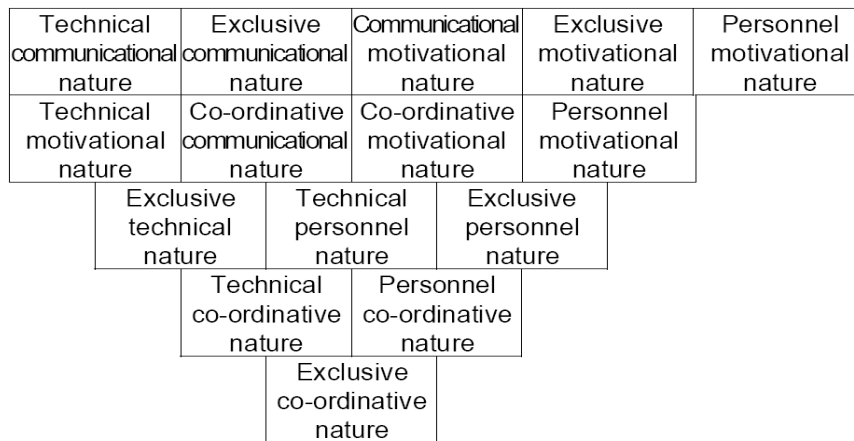


Figure 3 – Organization as a structure of relationships

The basic premise behind the MUKOZ model lies on the development of a methodology for evaluating organizational excellence, by examining the 15 basic relationships through an evaluation of aspects of relationships or contextual factors. Contextual factors are (Pregeljc, 2004) particular elements appearing within different organization arrangements, influencing and defining the type of relationship. Aspects of relationships are different pictures or snapshots of organizational life, converged with the particular type of relationship.

In the MUKOZ methodology, we examine thoroughly the 15 relationships which compose the organizational structure of a company. These relationships are evaluated through the use of the most appropriate among the 49 conceptual factors or through the use of at least 3 aspects of relationships for each of the 15 fundamental relationships. After estimating the total score for each of the 15 relationships, we can move on to the next step, where we will use these scores in order to reach some general conclusions about the organizational excellence levels achieved by a given company. In MUKOZ methodology there are 6 indicators which have to be estimated for that purpose; each of them considers the organizational performance from a different organizational perspective and thus, an overall estimation about the organizational excellence levels will be based on the appropriate combination of the set of the 6 indicators.

The indicator of organization's value is a way of expressing the performance of a company by a single number. Despite the obvious shortcomings stemming from oversimplification reasons, this indicator can provide useful information when used appropriately. The major shortcoming related to the extensive use of averages scores, is that they tend to "hide" information according to the consistency of a company's performance during a specific time interval and this was the main reason led to the development of a second indicator, the indicator of organization's reliability.

This indicator shows for every aspect of relationship the dispersion of the given values in comparison to the ideal one. Consequently, it provides a framework for the evaluation of the stability of an organization but also an estimation of whether the company has decided to place an equal amount of effort in every factor that affects organizational excellence.

The indicator of organization's orientation is a way of identifying whether a company is a people or a product-oriented one. If we closely examine the excellent companies worldwide, then, we will understand that there is no such a perfect pattern of organizational structure. Many companies have managed to be successful in the long-run, by concentrating their primary focus on people, while others, by

concentrating on products and processes. Thus, there is no universal law that governs the most suitable organizational orientation for a company.

The fourth indicator is that of organizational commitment. A very important factor for reaching excellent organizational levels is the investment of both time and money on human resources. According to modern organizational views, human resources are considered to be as important as customers and actually, they are renamed to “internal customers”. Employees need to feel important for the company and if so, this will lead to higher levels of self-confidence and a sense of pride for working for this particular company. There are many ways in order to get employees involved and probably the best is through motivation and what this indicator measures, is the effectiveness of the company’s efforts focused on motivating its people.

The indicator of organizational consistency is the most appropriate one, to reveal the effectiveness of (top) management. The EFQM Excellence Model – as well as other BEM’s - highlights the central role of Leadership in today’s business environment. Leaders are responsible for communicating the values and establishing a solid foundation based on a culture of respect, collaboration and teamwork. The resulting value for this indicator is more than a numerical number; it is actually the perceived level of management commitment to excellence and the evaluation of management’s work and efforts.

The last indicator of the MUKOZ methodology, is that of informational supply. The need for developing appropriate communication channels throughout the organization and carefully removing the obstacles preventing information from reaching the receiver is undisputable. Communication is an essential part of almost every aspect of organizational life and an integral substance for organizational excellence.

To sum up, MUKOZ methodology provides a framework for measuring and evaluating organizational excellence through the assessment of relationships, which represent the fundamental blocks of every organizational structure. The theoretical background of the model is confirmed through the linkage between the MUKOZ methodology’s findings and global, theoretical rules and this is an indicator of its internal stability.

The “4P” Quality Strategy

In today’s business world, more and more organizations decide to devote much of their time and money for attaining “Organizational Excellence” and the new “4P ” Quality Strategy was introduced as an alternative methodology for assisting companies’ efforts towards this direction. According to the “4P” methodology, organizational excellence is the outcome of building excellence in 4P’s in the following order: 1. People, 2. Partnership/ Teams, 3. Processes of work, 4. Products/ service products.

The journey towards building organizational excellence in a given organization will begin with the embarkation on the ship of the Leaders, who, as the captain on a cruise ship, will assume the responsibility to safely navigate the passengers to their destination. Leaders are accountable for the development of the mission, vision, values and ethics that will govern the organization during its life-cycle and besides, it’s their responsibility to establish and continuously communicate and foster a culture of continuous improvement and organizational well-being. Leaders need to act on a daily basis as role-models, by practicing what they preach and thus, inspiring other employees to follow their paradigm.

The second step is devoted to building excellence to People. Having highly skilled and experienced employees is definitely an important factor for almost every company willing to survive in today's competitive market place but is not enough; the combination of the required skills together with possessing the right values and attitudes which are in line with those of the given organization is what really matters.

Partnerships represent the second of the 4 P's and building excellence to them is another necessary step for achieving organizational excellence. Collaboration and coordination are essential "tools" for a company and team-based rather than individual projects are normally the case in today's business environment. Each team consists of a small or large number of employees and thus, the excellence built in these people will inevitably be mirrored in its daily operation. Negotiation and communication skills together with respect for the differentiation between the members of the team, in terms of culture, religious and political views are essential elements for a team in order to realize its full potential and successfully accomplish its objectives.

With respect to the TQM philosophy, Processes are given a pivotal role in the daily operation of almost every kind of organization. Building Excellence in Processes, means building Excellence in almost every kind of aspect directly or indirectly related to the production of the products (services). Processes are influenced by the systemic factors (according to the diagnostic self-assessment model) or the rest of the Enablers forces (according to the EFQM Excellence Model) and thus, the excellent levels built in these factors (People, Partnerships) will affect the excellent levels achieved by the Processes.

The final P refers to the Products (or services) produced by a given organization. Production and delivery of products to customers, is the main reason for the existence of a firm. Customers are the final judge of the quality levels of a specific product/service and the basic aim of every firm should be to identify, meet and exceed their needs and expectations. Therefore, building excellence in Products yields to superior levels of customer satisfaction, which in turn may lead to superior levels of customer loyalty, which in turn is the primary key for the long-run survival of a company.

Given the direct influence that Processes have on Products (or services), building excellence to products is highly correlated to the excellent levels built in Processes, which in turn are highly correlated to the excellent levels built in Partnerships and People. Therefore, we can reach the conclusion that the relationship between the 4 P's is a pyramid-like one and figure 4 exhibits all the interrelationships and dependencies among them.



Figure 4 – A structure for Building Organizational Excellence through Leadership and “the 4P’s”

Organizational Self-Assessment

When the members of the Award Steering Committee presented the European award model, the competitive position of Western Europe was enhanced through the formal introduction of Total Quality Management as the basic infrastructure in order to develop, sustain and continuously revitalize a competitive advantage.

There is no doubt, that one of the most valuable “assets” possessed by a company is its customers and definitely, customer satisfaction has to be one of the highest priorities. Nevertheless, the distance between trying to satisfy the customer through the adoption of a customer oriented philosophy, by developing a systematic approach for identifying, understanding, meeting and exceeding customer desires and trying to “deceive” the customer by preparing “image documents” describing a perfect company and aiming at simply winning the award or be certified against the series of ISO-9000 standards, is quite long.

The underlying philosophy of today’s Business Excellence Models is that they represent an ongoing journey to the world of quality by the ship named continuous improvement and the award-dimension is just a harbor. Unfortunately, more and more companies tend to misunderstand this basic principle and regard the award dimension as the journey and the self-improving process as the harbor.

Apart from focusing on the award dimension, companies also tend to blindly follow the model’s suggestions (Conti, 2007). And if this sounds logical for award participation, it doesn’t make sense when coming to the self-assessment dimension. The basic premise of self-assessment is that each company is a unique one; it differs from the others in terms of size, operating branch, management’s maturity level, and

socio-political conditions surrounding the organization. Consequently, the reality of a company can not be solely captured by a single model, undependably of how generally applicable that might be and thus, in order for a company to realize the full potential of the self-assessment process, adaptation of the model is needed. Saying it in a different way, diagnostic self-assessment requires a customized model.

On this ground, Tito Conti proposed a (diagnostic) self-assessment model which is based on the principles of the EFQM Excellence Model but also has some substantial differences, the most apparent of which, is the clear separation of the processes from the rest enablers criteria. Processes are being positioned exactly in the middle of the self-assessment model, as the intermediate part between the set of the systemic factors and the mission/goals area and act as the bridge that connects the two sides of the model.

One of the major shortcomings connected with the evaluation of the levels of excellence, is the intangible nature of some assessment criteria and thus, the increased degree of subjectivity. For example, leadership and people aspects are difficult to be evaluated based on international standards and different assessors coming from different cultures, will express very different opinions according to these aspects. Contrary to the set of systemic factors, processes are characterized by a tangible and measurable nature. Furthermore, processes have a direct influence to the company's results and the reason is that the primary output of a company (its products or services) is generated by processes. Systemic factors on the other hand, have a more indirect influence upon results. The graphical illustration of the diagnostic self-assessment model is presented below:

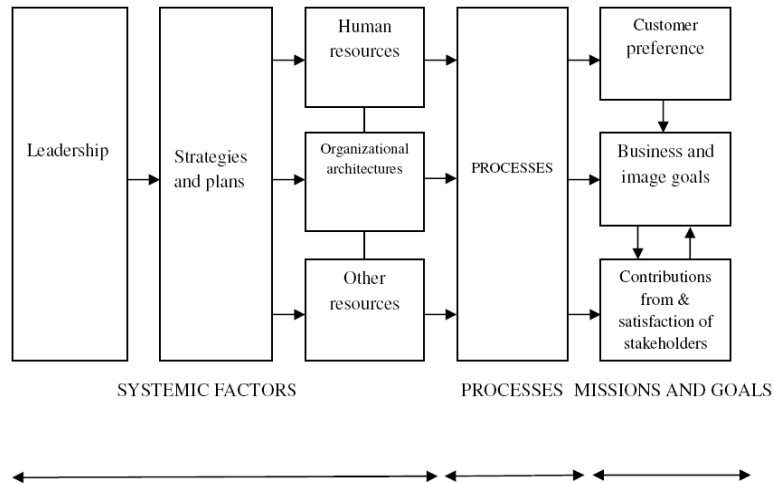


Figure 5 – The self assessment model proposed by Tito Conti

A second aspect that becomes clear from the schematic view of the model (except from the central role of processes) is the absence of any weighted structure and this constitutes the second basic difference between BEM's and the self-assessment model (after the division of the model in three autonomous but highly integrated categories) and for anyone familiar with Excellence Models this non-weighted version is at least surprising. Weights are part of a competitive system which is based on comparisons, aiming at the identification of the best among a group of participants. It is a necessary part of almost every kind of prize/award- oriented

process for the simple reason, that only one can be selected as the competition vanquisher and therefore be nominated as the award winner.

But the basic premise of a (diagnostic) self-assessment process stands far away from the above philosophy. It is focused on self-improvement through the identification of the weaknesses, the prioritization of them at a decreasing order in terms of the severity of the consequences they cause, the identification of the underlying reasons that led to these poor results and finally, the selection and implementation of the most appropriate corrective actions.

So far, while speaking about self-assessment we have made an extensive use of the term “diagnostic”. But what does diagnostic means and why is it so important? The word diagnostic derives from the Greek word “διάγνωση – (diagnosis)” which is a medical term and refers to the systematic procedure focused on the identification of the clinical symptoms of a patient and the root causes responsible for his/her unhealthy condition. The usage of the term can be expanded to many other fields and a diagnostic approach can also be applied to an “unhealthy” company. Therefore, the diagnostic self-assessment can be described as an on-going process for the identification of the causes responsible for “unhealthy” results or, using a more business-like terminology, for the performance gaps between expected and actual performance.

The need for a right to left approach is the third separating factor between the traditional award-oriented models and self-improving models. The starting point of a self-assessment process is the mission/goals area, the right side of the model where the identification of the major performance gaps takes place. Then, we move left, towards the middle part of the model – the processes – and finally, to the systemic factors. The root causes responsible for the poor organizational performance are identified and improved and new targets are set for the “right” area. After a specified period of time, the whole set of results is re-evaluated and the actual performance is compared to the expected. Performance gaps are identified and the effectiveness of the corrective actions implemented during the first right-to-left cycle is evaluated. The right-to-left approach is repeated, further corrective action is taken and new targets are set.

To sum up, the diagnostic self-assessment process is an organizational tool that can be used to verify the feasibility of the strategic macro-goals set by top management. However, as Tito Conti comments “if diagnostic self-assessment is to function correctly, a high degree of horizontal integration is needed, since the processes that play a critical role as far as results are concerned are usually cross functional.” (Conti, 1997)

Comparative evaluation of the different approaches

In today’s business environment, the need for products and services of superior quality is more intense than ever and thus, firms are on the horns of dilemma; they will strive to become excellent, or they will not manage to survive. Many frameworks have been developed providing alternative ways for achieving excellence and most of them embrace TQM concepts, such as the development of a customer-oriented philosophy or giving processes a pivotal role. Five primary “techniques” were presented above and in the following paragraphs, we will try to compare them and reach some general conclusions about their application area.

The Universal Business Excellence Model (UBEM) and the self-assessment model which was conceived in the brain of Tito Conti, do not prescribe a specific

weighted structure. The basic advantage for the companies, is that they are able to adapt the model to their individual needs and decide which criteria are the most important ones and accordingly to weight them. On the contrary, both the EFQM Excellence Model and the MUKOZ technique have a pre-defined weighted structure which has to be followed as is.

The evaluation process is more or less the same for all the above presented techniques. A team of internal or external assessors site-visits the company and evaluates its performance against a pre-defined set of criteria and a final score is computed (or the biggest performance gaps are identified for the self-assessment case) Nevertheless, MUKOZ methodology differentiates itself in the sense, that descriptive levels instead of the traditional numerical scales are used. Consequently, assessors aren't left to their own judgment (even if it is the outcome of 20-years experience) as to what a particular grade or excellent level means and thus, differences between assessors' opinions are decreased and so does the subjectivity of the evaluation process. The use of descriptive evaluation levels ensures that the final scores calculated for each company are based on the same underlying pattern and thus, are comparable between each other.

All the five models have something in common; they all follow a pyramid-like approach, meaning that their first level (the lower level), consists of a number of sub-elements or sub-criteria (the 32 sub-criteria of the EFQM model or the set of the 15 relationships according to the MUKOZ methodology) which lead to a second level, less detailed in comparison to the first one (e.g. the 9 criteria of the EFQM Excellence Model, the 6 indicators of the MUKOZ methodology, or the 9 criteria of the UBEM) which in turn leads to a latent variable, to a third hierarchical level called "Excellence", which is positioned on the top of the pyramid. Consequently, the excellence levels achieved by a company have a direct relationship with the second hierarchical level of each model which in turn has a direct relationship with the third hierarchical level. These dependencies resemble the direct and the indirect relationships between results and processes and results and systemic factors respectively, according to the self-assessment model. In a quite similar way, the basic premise of the 4P Model is represented in a pyramid, in the bottom part of which is "Leadership" and on the top is "Organization Excellence", attained through the combination of the 4P's.

It has already been mentioned that self assessment is one of the most powerful tools that every company should have in its toolkit. Self-assessment is designed in order to help top management to embed a culture of continuous improvement throughout the company. What is really interesting however is that most of the 5 techniques can also be used as self-assessment frameworks.

The self-assessment dimension is inherent in the MUKOZ methodology. Low-performing indicators or relationships can be defined as areas for improvement and those indicators having the lowest score will be given the highest priority and will be the first to improve. Besides, each relationship consists of a number of aspects (or contextual factors) which are known to the top management and thus, improving the score of a given relationship, means going back to those elements and improve them. The major drawback associated with MUKOZ methodology is that it is structured on the basis that an organization is defined solely as a set of relationships. Consequently, the model itself is applicable only if you accept this definition.

The UBEM can also be used as a self-assessment instrument. When used for self-assessment purposes, it offers a significant advantage; it doesn't prescribe weights per criterion and thus, each company can take advantage of its flexibility. The

procedures followed will be more or less identical to those when the EFQM is used as a reference model. After the major weaknesses have been identified, corrective actions will be defined and implemented according to the cause – effect relationships of the model. The UBEM is a universally applicable model and because of its focus on value-based leadership and wealth for the society, it may be more useful for value-driven and society-oriented organizations, composed by many subsidiaries all over the world and which have a consistent presence in the international markets.

The MUKOZ methodology is applicable in almost every firm which accepts the basic premise behind this model, that a company is properly defined as a set of relationships. Because of that, we believe that MUKOZ methodology may be more applicable in such companies, where the human factor is the most prevailing one and where all the transactions are more or less people-involving (services).

The self-assessment model proposed by Tito Conti is generally applicable and it is the best way for every company to realize its current situation and to think about its future and its long-run survival. The EFQM Excellence Model is one of the most used frameworks for measuring levels of excellence. However, companies fail to realize the full potential of the self-assessment process based on it, because they believe that it's only a prerequisite, an obligatory but unimportant step prior to the participation to the award competition.

Finally, the 4P methodology differs from the majority of the current BEM's, since it considers the human dimension as important and essential for the attainment of high levels of organizational excellence. The application area of this model is quite extensive and especially in those companies that are human rather than product oriented.

Conclusion

Our basic aim in the present paper was the presentation of 5 models, which all try to capture the complicated issue of evaluating business excellence from a different optical viewpoint. There are no general rules according to which of the above mentioned models is the most appropriate to be used in each case. Their suitability depends mainly on the purpose for which they are going to be used. For example, for companies seeking to realize their current situation, identify their major weaknesses and improve their performance, the use of the self-assessment model is the most suitable one. Contrarily, for a company aiming to be rewarded for its superior levels of business excellence, the application of the EFQM Model or of the UBEM sounds a more appropriate choice.

A second major finding was that almost all the proposed techniques can be used as self-assessment models; what has to be improved, is the way that companies perceive the process of self-assessment and the importance that tend to allocate on it. Self-assessment is not a contingent goal, but rather a permanent one and it's also highly correlated with the long-run survival of a company.

One major shortcoming related to the majority of the current BEM's is that even though they can be used by almost every company, in practice, however, their universal applicability is at least questionable.

To sum up, we believe that the journey towards excellence is an ongoing one and what is really important, is not how a company decides to reach the destination (e.g. which particular BEM will be used as a guideline), but the commitment – expressed mainly by top management- to reach this destination. Besides, the decision to embark on this journey shouldn't be customer-driven, but based on a continuous improvement culture, cultivated throughout the organization and in line with the

company's vision and mission. Companies need to achieve high levels of business excellence because they believe in these, and not because they have to.

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