Cultural Configurations and Quality Management Maturity in the Public Sector

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Abstract: Public sector organizations increasingly rely on standardized Total Quality Management (TQM) models, yet they reach different levels of quality management maturity. Even when organizations adopt the same models and follow identical guidelines, only some succeed in embedding quality principles into everyday practices and achieving externally recognized excellence. Prior research highlights the importance of organizational culture for the implementation of TQM, but little is known about how different cultural dimensions combine to shape quality management outcomes in public sector settings. Despite the widespread diffusion of public-sector excellence models such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), little is known about which cultural characteristics enable public organizations to move toward substantive excellence. Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions: (1) which configurations of organizational culture are associated with quality management maturity in public sector organizations, and (2) how administrative traditions relate to these configurations. The analysis draws on survey data collected from public sector organizations. Organizational culture is operationalized using the Competing Values Framework, while quality management maturity is measured through externally assessed CAF-based indicators. Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) is employed to capture configurational complexity. The findings show that no stable or generalizable configurational pathway can be identified for the presence of high-quality management maturity. Cultural configurations characterized by strong profiles across multiple dimensions are widespread but do not consistently distinguish between cases with higher and lower outcome levels. In contrast, the analysis of the negated outcome reveals a coherent and robust structure, with configurations centered on low rational culture consistently associated with lower levels of maturity. These patterns are stable across alternative model specifications and are not confined to specific administrative contexts.

Keywords: Quality management, Public sector excellence, Organizational culture, Administrative traditions, Fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis

1. Introduction

Although Total Quality Management (TQM) models have become widely adopted in the public sector, organizations vary considerably in their progress toward excellence. Even when organizations adopt the same models and follow identical guidelines, some achieve high levels of excellence while others do not. This variation is difficult to reconcile with the widespread view of quality management as a standardized, context-independent approach intended to function similarly across organizations (Lagrosen, 2002). Early studies showed that although the principles of TQM are broadly applicable, their implementation is highly sensitive to the environment in which they are applied, particularly in the public sector where measurement and coordination challenges are more pronounced (Ehrenberg & Stupak, 1994). Because TQM requires changes in how people interact and work, it is inherently context-dependent and its success is influenced by cultural and structural conditions (Tata & Prasad, 1998). Reflecting this, organizations have increasingly recognized the need to assess their cultural characteristics before implementing TQM, as certain cultural patterns can shape the way quality initiatives are interpreted and enacted (Jancikova & Brychta, 2009). These observations raise a central question: to what extent do cultural characteristics explain differences in how public organizations translate TQM practices into higher levels of maturity and excellence?

Culture has been repeatedly highlighted as a key factor shaping how quality management practices are interpreted and applied. Prior research shows that quality management is interpreted and implemented differently across cultural and administrative contexts, shaping both its application and its effects on organizational performance (Lagrosen, 2003; Mathews et al., 2001; Zu et al., 2010; Alofan et al., 2020). At the organizational level, culture is therefore considered a central contextual factor in explaining variation in quality management outcomes (Do Nascimento Gambi et al., 2014). Empirical research shows that misalignment between an organization's cultural patterns and quality management principles can hinder implementation, with many TQM initiatives failing as a result (Gimenez-Espin et al., 2012; 2023). The relationship is also reciprocal: a well-implemented quality management system can influence and reshape cultural norms, while the existing cultural environment simultaneously affects how the system is interpreted and how it functions (Jancikova & Brychta, 2009).

In the public sector, organizational culture is closely intertwined with broader institutional and administrative traditions that shape how management approaches are interpreted and applied. Public organizations operate

within established administrative systems that reflect long-standing national traditions, role conceptions, and behavioural expectations (Painter & Peters, 2010). These traditions are expressed through organizational routines, norms, and decision-making practices (Christensen & Lægreid, 2007). As a result, organizational culture emerges from the interaction between internal organizational dynamics and the wider institutional context (Jugl, 2025). Accordingly, existing studies highlight the importance of examining how organizational and administrative culture jointly influence the implementation of quality management practices (Prajogo et al., 2022).

However, despite the recognized relevance of culture, little is known about whether specific cultural characteristics or combinations systematically distinguish public organizations in the extent to which quality management is translated into more mature and embedded practices, particularly in relation to structured excellence models such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). While previous research often assumes that certain cultural profiles (e.g., flexible and externally oriented) support TQM, empirical evidence on how different cultural dimensions combine and whether such configurations are associated with variations in quality management maturity remains limited. To address this gap, this study examines the relationship between organizational culture, administrative traditions, and quality management maturity in public sector organizations. Specifically, it addresses two research questions:

RQ1: What combinations of cultural dimensions are associated with differences in quality management maturity?

RQ2: How do administrative traditions shape the relationship between organizational culture and quality management maturity?

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Background

Public sector organizations increasingly rely on quality management frameworks such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), yet their implementation does not automatically result in higher levels of quality management maturity or excellence. While CAF provides structured tools and principles, achieving sustained excellence requires embedding these practices into everyday organizational routines. In this sense, quality management maturity can be understood as a cumulative process reflecting the extent to which such practices are institutionalised over time (van Dooren et al., 2015; Zu et al., 2010). Empirical evidence suggests that the benefits of CAF increase with repeated implementation cycles (Moscon, 2025), and that quality management outcomes depend on the interaction of multiple CAF criteria rather than on isolated management practices (Moscon, 2026). External validation signals more advanced stages of maturity. However, only a subset of organizations succeeds in reaching this level, highlighting the need to better understand the conditions shaping different implementation trajectories.

A central factor shaping these trajectories is organizational culture, which influences how management practices are interpreted, enacted, and sustained (Alofan et al., 2020; Prajogo & McDermott, 2005). While culture operates at multiple levels, public sector organizational culture is particularly shaped by the interaction between internal organizational dynamics and broader administrative traditions (Painter & Peters, 2010; Peters, 2021). These institutional contexts embed assumptions about hierarchy, accountability, and managerial discretion, which in turn shape how quality management initiatives are understood and implemented (Painter & Peters, 2010; Ongaro, 2009). At the organizational level, culture can be understood as a set of shared assumptions and values that guide behaviour within an institution (Schein, 1992; Gimenez-Espin et al., 2012). Frameworks such as the Competing Values Framework provide a structured way of capturing these patterns, distinguishing between group, developmental, rational and hierarchical cultural orientations (Denison & Spreitzer, 1991). These conceptualizations highlight how organizational members interpret and enact managerial initiatives, including quality management practices.

Although quality initiatives may gradually influence organizational culture, prior research primarily treats culture as an antecedent due to its relative stability and resistance to short-term change (Hofstede et al., 1990; Baird et al., 2011; Prajogo & McDermott, 2005). In the context of CAF, culture is therefore understood as shaping rather than resulting from differences in quality management maturity.

Prior research further links specific cultural characteristics to the implementation of quality management. For example, formalized and stability-oriented cultures are associated with process control, while participatory and open cultures support continuous improvement (Lagrosen, 2002; 2003). At the same time, the relationship is complex and context-dependent, and misalignment between cultural patterns and quality management principles can hinder successful implementation (Gimenez-Espin et al., 2012; 2023; Zu et al., 2010). However,

existing studies have primarily focused on individual cultural dimensions or national patterns, offering limited insight into how these elements combine in shaping quality management maturity, particularly in the public sector. Addressing this gap requires a configurational perspective that captures the interaction between multiple cultural dimensions.

3. Research Design and Methods

3.1 Research Design and Analytical Approach

The study adopts a configurational approach using fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) to examine how combinations of organizational culture traits are associated with differences in quality management maturity in public sector organizations. fsQCA is particularly suited to this purpose because it captures causal complexity, including conjunctural causation, equifinality, and asymmetry (Ragin, 2000; 2008; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012), by identifying how conditions combine into configurations associated with an outcome rather than estimating the net effects of individual variables. The use of fuzzy sets further allows both the outcome and the conditions to be conceptualized as graded set memberships, reflecting the continuous nature of organizational culture and quality management maturity.

3.2 Data and Case Selection

The empirical analysis is based on survey data collected from public sector organizations through a structured questionnaire administered via SurveyMonkey between 23 March and 30 April 2025. The questionnaire gathered information on organizational culture, administrative context, and organizations' experience with CAF. Case selection followed a purposive strategy designed to ensure variation in both quality management maturity and administrative traditions, in line with QCA's emphasis on diversity and meaningful heterogeneity (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). The final dataset includes organizations displaying different levels of CAF use, external validation, and implementation experience across multiple institutional contexts.

3.3 Measurement and Calibration

The outcome, **quality management maturity**, is conceptualized as membership in the set of organizations exhibiting sustained and externally validated quality management practices. Following the staged logic of CAF, maturity is operationalized based on three indicators: CAF use, frequency of implementation, and external validation through the CAF External Feedback / CAF Excellence Recognition. These elements are combined into a four-value fuzzy-set calibration capturing distinct stages of maturity, ranging from no use (0.00) to repeated externally validated implementation (1.00) (Table 1). Rather than assuming a continuous linear progression, the calibration captures qualitatively different stages of embeddedness, with external recognition signalling a particularly strong level of institutionalization.

Table 1: Calibration of the outcome: Quality management maturity

Level	Definition	Calibration
No maturity	No CAF use	0.00
Low maturity	Initial CAF use (1-2 cycles), no label	0.33
Moderate maturity	Repeated CAF use (≥3 cycles) or one label	0.67
High maturity	CAF label obtained more than once	1.00

Organizational culture is operationalized using the Competing Values Framework (Denison & Spreitzer, 1991), covering four cultural orientations: group, developmental, rational, and hierarchical culture. Each dimension is measured through Likert-scale items (1 = "not valued at all" to 7 = "highly valued"), adapted from established instruments in organizational performance studies (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1991; Zu et al., 2010; Kalliath et al., 1999) (Table 2) and calibrated into fuzzy sets using the direct method (Ragin, 2008) with thresholds at 2 (full non-membership), 4 (crossover), and 6 (full membership).

Table 2: Organizational culture items (Competing Values Framework)

Culture type	Items
Group culture	GC1 Participation, open discussion GC2 Empowerment of employees to act GC3 Assessing employee concerns and ideas GC4 Human relations, teamwork, cohesion
Developmental culture	DC1 Flexibility, decentralization DC2 Expansion, growth and development DC3 Innovation and change DC4 Creative problem-solving processes
Rational culture	RC1 Task focus, accomplishment, goal achievement RC2 Direction, objective setting, goal clarity RC3 Efficiency, productivity, profitability RC4 Outcome excellence, quality
Hierarchical culture	HC1 Control, centralization HC2 Routinization, formalization and structure HC3 Stability, continuity, order HC4 Predictable performance outcomes

Administrative traditions are treated as a contextual dimension rather than as causal conditions in the QCA model. Organizations are assigned to traditions based on their national context, following established European typologies (Kuhlmann et al., 2025), complemented by four perception-based indicators capturing key features of the administrative environment. Each indicator is measured using two or three items on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree", 7 = "strongly agree") and, after computing the mean, calibrated into fuzzy sets using the direct method with thresholds set at 2 (full non-membership), 4 (crossover point), and 6 (full membership). These elements are used to support the interpretation of configurational patterns. To complement the outcome, the analysis includes a measure of perceived quality management maturity, derived from core dimensions of the CAF Excellence Recognition framework. The measure captures the organizations' internal assessment across key areas such as results orientation, citizen focus, leadership, process management, people engagement, innovation, partnerships, and social responsibility. Responses are collected on a seven-point Likert scale and aggregated into a composite score, which is calibrated as a fuzzy set using the direct method (2 / 4 / 6 thresholds). This allows for a comparison between externally validated maturity and internal organizational perceptions.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

All analyses were conducted in R using the *QCA* package. The procedure follows standard fsQCA steps (Ragin, 2008; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). First, calibrated data were used to construct truth tables representing all logically possible configurations of the cultural conditions. Second, necessity and sufficiency analyses were conducted. A consistency threshold of 0.80 and a minimum frequency threshold of one case were used for the main sufficiency analysis. In line with the principle of causal asymmetry, the analysis was conducted separately for the presence and absence of the outcome. Robustness checks included alternative consistency thresholds, reduced model specifications, and alternative calibration anchors.

4. 4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Overview

The final analytical sample consists of 19 public organizations drawn from 13 countries and five administrative traditions. The cases cover different policy areas, levels of government, and organizational sizes. Most organizations are located at the federal/national (47.4%) or state/regional/provincial level (42.1%), and the largest organizational group consists of cases with 1,000–4,999 employees (47.4%). In terms of administrative traditions, Continental European Napoleonic cases account for 42.1% of the sample, followed by Central and Eastern European and South Eastern European organizations (21.1% each). The sample also shows substantial variation in CAF experience. CAF users represent 89.5% of the cases, while 10.5% are non-users. External

recognition also varies: 42.1% of organizations report no CAF label, 47.4% have obtained the label once, and 10.5% more than once. This variation covers all stages of the calibrated maturity measure, from no use to repeated external validation (Table 3).

Table 3: Outcome-related characteristics of the sample

	Categories	
CAF use	*Yes* 17 (89.5%)	*No* 2 (10.5%)
CAF label	*No* 8 (42.1%) *Yes, once* 9 (47.4%)	*Yes, more than once* 2 (10.5%)
CAF use frequency	*None* 2 (10.5%) *Once* 8 (42.1%) *Twice* 4 (21.1%)	*Three times* 3 (15.8%) *More than three times* 2 (10.5%)

The calibrated outcome spans all four qualitatively defined stages of quality management maturity (Table 4). Most cases are located in the intermediate range, with 31.6% classified as low maturity and 47.4% as moderate maturity, while only 10.5% of the sample fall into each of the two extremes (no maturity and high maturity). The cultural conditions also show substantial variation, although median values are relatively high, especially for rational and hierarchical culture, indicating that many organizations exhibit comparatively strong cultural profiles across multiple dimensions.

Table 4: Distribution of calibrated outcome

Quality management maturity	Fuzzy score	n	%
No maturity	0.00	2	10.5
Low maturity	0.33	6	31.6
Moderate maturity	0.67	9	47.4
High maturity	1.00	2	10.5

A moderate positive association is observed between CAF-based maturity and perceived maturity (r = 0.60), indicating partial, but not complete, alignment between maturity derived from CAF implementation and recognition and organizations' internal assessments of quality management development.

4.2 Analysis of Necessary Conditions

The necessity analysis provides only limited evidence for substantively meaningful necessary conditions (Table 5). Three cultural dimensions – group culture (0.926), rational culture (0.913), and hierarchical culture (0.939) – exceed the conventional consistency threshold of 0.90 (Ragin, 2008; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). However, their relevance of necessity values remain comparatively limited, suggesting that these conditions have weak discriminating power. In other words, these cultural dimensions are broadly present across cases rather than uniquely associated with higher levels of quality management maturity. No negated condition reaches the threshold for necessity.

Table 5: Analysis of necessary conditions for quality management maturity

	Consistency (inclN)	Coverage (covN)	Relevance of necessity (RoN)
GC_fs	0.926	0.558	0.683
DC_fs	0.837	0.600	0.664
RC_fs	0.913	0.473	0.637
HC_fs	0.939	0.434	0.633
~GC_fs	0.375	0.890	0.692
~DC_fs	0.442	0.866	0.694
~RC_fs	0.332	0.914	0.712
~HC_fs	0.277	0.915	0.667

Notes: ~ = negation

4.3 Analysis of Sufficient Conditions for the Presence of the Outcome

The truth table for the presence of quality management maturity does not provide evidence of a robust sufficient pathway. The dominant configuration, characterized by the simultaneous presence of all four cultural dimensions, is by far the most frequently observed empirical pattern (n = 13), but reaches a consistency of only 0.727 (PRI = 0.536). This indicates that strong cultural profiles are widespread, yet do not systematically distinguish between higher and lower levels of maturity.

Two additional configurations approach or exceed the conventional consistency threshold. One configuration exceeds the threshold (incl = 0.844), but is supported by only a single case, while another comes close (incl = 0.798) but remains below the 0.80 benchmark and is supported by two cases. In both instances, empirical coverage is very limited.

Taken together, these results indicate that no substantively meaningful minimized solution can be retained for the presence of the outcome. Although some configurations reach relatively high consistency, their limited empirical representation does not provide sufficient support for retaining a stable and substantively meaningful solution.

4.4 Robustness Checks

Robustness checks confirm this finding. Alternative consistency thresholds, reduced model specifications, and alternative calibration anchors do not alter the overall pattern.

Lowering the consistency threshold to 0.75 does not alter the substantive conclusion. The dominant configuration remains below the revised threshold (incl ≈ 0.73), while configurations approaching it are supported by only one or two cases. Reduced model specifications and alternative calibration anchors produce comparable results, indicating that the absence of a stable sufficient pathway is not driven by a specific modelling choice

Alternative calibration anchors (2.5 / 4 / 5.5) confirm these results. Across all specifications, configurations with higher consistency are empirically sparse, while the most prevalent patterns continue to fall below the conventional sufficiency threshold.

4.5 Analysis of the Absence of the Outcome

In contrast to the absence of a sufficient pathway for the presence of the outcome, the analysis of the negated outcome reveals a clear and robust configurational structure (Table 6). Focusing on the reduced specification including group, rational, and hierarchical culture, logical minimization yields two solution paths:

1. low group culture combined with low rational culture, and
2. low rational culture combined with low hierarchical culture.

Both paths display high consistency (0.868 and 0.865) and acceptable PRI values, and the overall solution reaches a consistency of 0.820 with a coverage of 0.399, indicating an empirically meaningful configurational solution.

Table 6: Configurations associated with the absence of quality management maturity

	Solutions		
Conditions	**Path 1**	**Path 2**	**Core (parsimonious)**
Group culture	○		
Rational culture	○	○	○
Hierarchical culture		○	
Number of cases	3 (16, 19; 7)	3 (16, 19; 18)	-
Consistency	0.868	0.865	-
PRI	0.702	0.698	-
Raw coverage	0.391	0.329	-
Unique coverage	0.070	0.008	-
Overall solution consistency	**0.820**		

	Solutions		
Conditions	**Path 1**	**Path 2**	**Core (parsimonious)**
Overall solution coverage	**0.399**		

Note: ○ indicates the presence of low levels of a condition.

A key feature of the solution is the recurring presence of low rational culture, which appears in both paths and is also identified as the core condition in the parsimonious solution. This suggests that low rational culture is a recurring feature of the configurations associated with lower quality management maturity, reflecting weaker emphasis on performance orientation, goal clarity and results. More generally, the results point to a structured but parsimonious pattern, in which low rational culture combines with either low group or low hierarchical culture.

The identified configurational structure proves robust across alternative analytical specifications. Increasing the consistency threshold (to 0.85) does not alter the solution, and reduced model specifications yield comparable results, confirming the stability of the identified patterns. Across all specifications, low rational culture consistently remains a central component of configurations associated with the absence of the outcome.

4.6 Complementary Insights

The comparison between externally assessed and internally perceived maturity offers an additional perspective on the results. The two measures show a moderate positive association (r = 0.60), indicating that organizations with higher externally validated maturity also tend to report higher perceived maturity. At the same time, the relationship is not fully aligned, as several cases report relatively high perceived maturity despite comparatively low externally validated maturity. This suggests that internal development and external recognition do not always coincide.

Exploratory comparisons suggest that higher-maturity and lower-maturity cases occur across different administrative traditions. Perceived administrative characteristics also overlap across traditions, indicating that formal classifications may not fully capture how administrative contexts are experienced. Given the limited number of cases, these observations remain descriptive.

5. Discussion

This study examined whether specific configurations of organizational culture are associated with quality management maturity in public sector organizations, adopting a configurational perspective on culture within the quality management literature. Consistent with prior research, the findings provide only limited evidence of substantively meaningful necessary conditions. Although group, rational, and hierarchical culture approach or exceed the conventional consistency threshold for necessity, their comparatively limited relevance of necessity indicates weak discriminating power. These cultural characteristics appear to be widespread across the cases rather than uniquely associated with higher levels of quality management maturity. This finding aligns with configurational approaches (Ronen & Shenkar, 2013; Sousa & Voss, 2001; Prajogo & McDermott, 2005), which emphasize that organizational outcomes emerge from combinations of conditions rather than from individual factors considered in isolation.

Contrary to theoretical expectations, the analysis does not identify a stable sufficient configuration for the presence of quality management maturity. Prior research suggests that people-oriented and innovation-supportive cultures, particularly combinations of group and developmental culture, may facilitate the sustained adoption of quality management practices (Prajogo & McDermott, 2005; Baird et al., 2011). In the present analysis, however, these cultural orientations do not consistently distinguish organizations with higher CAF-based maturity from those with lower maturity. The widespread presence of comparatively strong cultural profiles across cases may partly explain their limited discriminating capacity. Thus, although supportive cultural characteristics may facilitate quality management implementation, they do not appear to be sufficient, either individually or in the configurations observed, for achieving higher levels of maturity.

By contrast, the analysis of the absence of the outcome reveals a clearer configurational pattern. Low rational culture appears in both pathways associated with lower quality management maturity, in combination with either low group culture or low hierarchical culture. This recurring pattern points to the relevance of performance orientation, goal clarity, and results focus for the consolidation of CAF-based quality management. Low rational culture becomes configurationally relevant when combined with weaknesses in

participation, collaboration, structure, or coordination. This finding complements prior research highlighting the importance of performance-oriented and coordination-related cultural characteristics for the effective implementation of quality management practices.

At the contextual level, the findings provide only limited evidence concerning the role of administrative traditions. Although institutional environments may shape how quality management practices are interpreted and implemented (Lagrosen, 2003; Mathews et al., 2001), cases combining relatively strong cultural profiles with low maturity are not concentrated within a single administrative tradition. Instead, they are observed across different institutional contexts. On the basis of the present cases, the absence of a sufficient cultural configuration for higher quality management maturity therefore cannot be attributed to one particular administrative tradition. However, this result should not be interpreted as evidence that administrative context is irrelevant, as the available empirical coverage does not permit a systematic comparison across traditions or countries.

The findings should be interpreted in light of the sample characteristics. Although the study covers 19 organizations from 13 countries and five administrative traditions, most countries and some traditions are represented by only a few cases. This limits the distinction between country-specific and administrative-tradition effects and reduces the empirical coverage of some configurations. The findings should therefore be viewed as configurational insights rather than generalizable country- or tradition-level relationships. Future research could further assess these patterns.

Overall, the findings indicate that quality management maturity cannot be adequately explained by individual cultural dimensions or by administrative context alone. Strong cultural profiles do not consistently distinguish organizations with higher maturity, whereas lower maturity is associated with specific combinations involving low rational culture. The moderate association between CAF-based maturity and perceived maturity further indicates that externally observable implementation and recognition do not fully coincide with organizations' internal assessments of their quality management development. Taken together, the results highlight the configurational and multidimensional nature of quality management maturity and the need to consider cultural conditions, implementation experience, and administrative context jointly.

Ethics Declaration: No ethical approval was required.

AI Declaration: AI-based tools were used solely as an assistive resource throughout the research process, supporting the author's work.

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