Organization and leadership in crisis

What we can learn from the CAF – the European Common Assessment Framework.
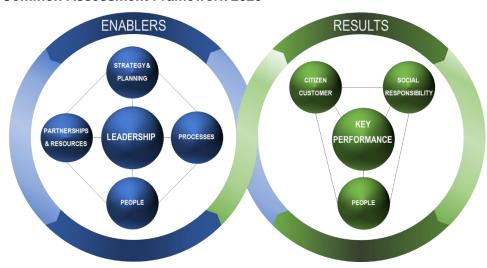
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The "corona crisis" affects everyone and also poses enormous challenges for public sector organizations. For years we have been talking about the resilient, smart, agile, flexible, innovative ... organization. Keywords such as "expect the unexpected" are circulating in the management circles and then the crisis hits everyone somewhat unprepared. The appropriate joke from social media sums up the situation aptly: "Who implemented the digital transformation in your organization? The leadership? No. The IT department? No, it was Corona! "

There are two insights in this humorous approach to reality: Firstly, despite all the reform programmes, most of them were not adequately prepared for the crisis. This applies equally to the private and the public sector. On the other hand, it is impressive how quickly municipalities, regional authorities, state government offices, ministries, as well as numerous public companies have changed their way of working from one day to the next and in many cases have also adapted their services to the new needs.

In international comparison, the interesting question arises: "What are the reasons for the better or worse handling of the crisis by public administration?" Have federal or centralized states acted better? Is it the political systems or even the number of hospital beds that are decisive for combating the pandemic? Or does the use of specific management systems have a significant impact on the performance of the public sector in the crisis?

First of all: This article does not have the final answers to these questions. But based on the experiences of the work of the CAF-Centre of KDZ[1] with many outstanding organizations and public officials, it offers an - not final - approach to the question: "Which organizational culture and systems are proving successful in the crisis?" The CAF2020 - the new European Common Assessment Framework – is used as a framework for the brief presentation.

Common Assessment Framework 2020

Source: KDZ (2019)

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[1] KDZ-Centre for Public Administration Research – www.kdz.eu

Understanding leadership and leadership culture

When applying the CAF, it quickly becomes clear which understanding of leadership prevails in an organization: The spectrum here ranges from a pronounced hierarchical thinking, as we know it from Josef Roth´s[2] Radetzky March[3], to a modern leadership culture that is based on role model, inspiration, involvement, responsibility and commonality.

At the beginning of the crisis it became clear that organizations with a modern leadership culture were quicker to support, protect and inform employees and customers. Corona-related guidelines for travel, meetings, hygiene, home office etc. were implemented faster. The focus was on the well-being of those affected. Other organizations outdid themselves with Corona-related regulations, newsletters, information letters and instructions, which extent, (in)comprehensibility, frequency and often delayed appearance are more likely to indicate a safeguarding of management than responsible leadership.

This approach is not new. We also know this, for example, from "Regulations for conflicts of interest" or "Code of Conducts": Are these understandable for employees and customers and written as instructions for action, or is it a simple sequence of legal texts and court decisions?

Social responsibility

What is social responsibility? What can our organization do? These issues are often discussed in the context of CAF implementations. For the more advanced organizations it is clear that they have a responsibility for the society, the citizens, customers, employees and partners, that goes beyond the core task of their organization. This includes the many joint activities with associations, educational institutions, social enterprises, health and security authorities and social partner organizations. Those who have built up an employment relationship based on mutual trust with their partners were able to quickly access these resources during the crisis. In addition, organizations with high corporate social responsibility responded more quickly to the new needs of different population groups and employees (e.g. purchasing aids, online services / new office hours, regulations for the use of public space, measures for employee protection).

Agility and "culture of error"

Today you can no longer talk about leadership, organization and human resources management without using the term "agility". But what does agility mean in the daily life of an organization and what are its foundations? A good indicator of an organization's agility is its ability to deal with errors. Do mistakes lead to "punitive measures" and admonitions or is there an organizational culture that enables learning from mistakes and maintains an open approach to mistakes? Of course, this is a delicate question of balance. But it is clear that innovation can only flourish in a culture of learning, openness and fault tolerance.

In CAF implementations, we always look at these aspects in detail and can see after the first months of the crisis: high innovative strength, fault tolerance, a culture of learning and openness as important pillars of agile organizations have helped them to adapt and develop services more quickly and flexibly.

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[3] Radetzkymarch. Novel from the Austrian Author Joseph Roth, 1894-1939

Employees count

The crisis shows once again that an organization is well placed that has highly qualified, motivated employees with personal responsibility. The CAF pays special attention to the employees. It directs the organizations to promote and challenge the valuable "resource employees" in all aspects, because after all, they should also be agile. It is therefore not surprising that in organizations with a high level of employee orientation, the transformation into crisis mode has taken place very quickly and without any major hurdles. Working from home was suddenly possible in all organizations. Even in those who had categorically rejected this until recently. The equipment with mobile devices has progressed rapidly. New digital communication has suddenly become the standard, without extensive training and introduction phases. Overall, the employees have converted traditional working methods for decades in a quick process and often with self- commitment for the benefit of the organization.

Sustainable impact

Since the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the topic of "sustainability" has become an integral part of the discourse in the public sector. The new CAF2020 builds on the SDGs and anchors sustainability in all areas of the organization. What does this mean in concrete terms for the current crisis? On the one hand, the SDGs lead to acting holistically and sustainably. This means that the economy, social affairs and the environment must always be considered together. This overcomes the often still prevailing "silo thinking" in organizations, which only sees the "own department" or the "own field of responsibility". In addition, the SDGs also provide concrete guidelines for action. In the SDG guidelines of the KDZ for municipalities, these are e.g. "Promoting regional consumption" and "Promoting movement and nature experience". Sustainability-oriented organizations certainly have a forerunner start in crisis management.

Together we succeed

"Together we succeed" has become the informal motto of crisis management in recent months. Translated into the language of public governance, this means "collaboration". The public administration integrates, enables participation, plans, designs and provides joint services with citizens, partners, civil society groups etc. This is not new as a concept, but the concrete implementation is still expandable in many places. Nevertheless, pronounced experiences with participation as well as the openness for collaboration and cooperation with external parties proved to be a strength in the crisis. There was probably no municipality in Europe that could not use the valuable resources from civil society.

Digitalization et al.

The CAF goes even further. The new CAF2020 puts the challenges of digital transformation first. The expansion of strategic management and the focus on diversity were also strengthened in the new CAF2020. Now the first translations of CAF2020 in the European languages are available and enable public administration to improve its leadership, organization and performance. More information:

www.caf-network.eu