



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

PUBLIC QUALITY MANAGEMENT

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Public quality management is characterized by a “micro” dimension related to public provision activities and a “macro” level related to public policy. Public quality management refers to the ability of these dimensions to satisfy legal, technical, political and service-related needs.

Historically, quality was first employed in Ancient Greece as an ideal of excellence (*aretê*) (Reeves and Bednar, 1994) and, as such, was the expression of a vision of absolute, inaccessible quality that is scarcely compatible with the limited resources allocated to public organizations. Quality subsequently came to be defined as “conformance to specifications.” Originally centred on industrial products (armaments, in particular), these “technical” specifications were the work of producers concerned with delivering wares of continually consistent quality. The notion of conformance to technical or legal standards fully reflects the very essence of public action and the ideal-type of bureaucracy conceived of by Weber – namely, respect for legal frameworks and the identical (i.e., egalitarian) treatment of beneficiaries, cornerstones of good administrative governance in numerous countries (OECD 1996; Hondegheem and Vandenabeele, 2005).

However, it is vital to supplement this technical conception of quality with the “perception” that beneficiaries hold of it, in keeping with one of the founding notions of quality management (Deming, 1986). Beneficiaries' satisfaction is not an absolute variable, for it implies a comparison between a level of expectation relating to a (public) service and the services actually delivered (Averous and Averous, 1998; France Qualité Publique, 2006). An outgrowth of marketing developments, the idea of satisfying the needs of customers can be found in quality pioneer Joseph Juran's famous dictum of “fitness for use” and, in greater detail, in the standard definition of (ISO 8402): “Quality is defined as the totality of characteristics of an entity that bear on its ability to satisfy stated and implied needs.”¹

But can one really speak of customer satisfaction in the public service sector, when in most cases customers have little choice regarding the supplier or desired level of service – and no choice as to the fee they must pay? The client focus (or customer orientation) is a trend that has been promoted strongly by New Public Management (Giauque and Emery, 2008), thus prompting public organizations to better identify their beneficiaries and to conduct satisfaction surveys using the methods validated among private firms. However, the customer-focused approach should be viewed solely as a metaphor, and indeed, considerable care should be taken to avoid reverting to a form of “neo-clientelism” that could detract from the neutrality and legality of public sector action

¹ ISO, International Standard, Quality Management and Quality Assurance – Vocabulary. Geneva, 1994.

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(Emery, 2009). This is not an easy task to accomplish, particularly for front-line workers (Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006); what is more, such an approach presupposes a thoroughgoing change in culture in order to integrate the figure of beneficiary into the administrative world without also lapsing into a consumerist logic specific to the commercial world (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991).

Whenever quality is defined in terms of the ability to satisfy needs, then political and administrative authorities should make themselves clear about the standards and service levels that beneficiaries are entitled to expect. In particular, expectations should be clarified in view of complying with “commitments” and similarly minded “service quality charters” (or “citizen's charters”) that have become commonplace in numerous countries (Falconer and Ross, 1999; France Qualité Publique, 2004). They should also be framed – upstream – when setting out public policy objectives, establishing normative foundations and, ultimately, developing politico-administrative programs – in short, when engaging in policy design (Knoepfel, 1996). While the expectations of citizens toward governments are often limitless, those of beneficiaries toward their administrations should, on the other hand, be clearly stated and regularly assessed so as to ensure that they are met as fully as possible. This need for clarification entails rethinking the two-fold regulation of public action – that of beneficiaries, which was just touched on, and that of citizens, which lies upstream of public action. This dual regulation – when indeed it can be said to obtain – often comes freighted with problems (Schedler and Kettiger, 2003).

All of which goes to show just how much the word “client” or “customer” – even after having been re-dubbed “beneficiary” – tends to oversimplify the polyfunctionality of the public actor in his or her dual capacity as citizen and recipient of public action. The needs expressed by client/users are often complex and hazy, and sometimes downright contradictory (Vigoda, 2002). Thus, some authors recommend moving beyond the “client focus” alone and embracing the notion of “stakeholders”; further, they explore how the different expectations of stakeholders join and combine – particularly from the perspective of the “new public governance” (Osborne, 2006). The proponents of this approach advocate combining the quality of policy designs, which covers outcomes,² with the quality referred to in service delivery commitments, which covers outputs (Knoepfel, Larrue and Varone, 2006).

In light of these considerations, I thus propose to redefine the notion of public quality by distinguishing between two levels of analysis – namely, one concerning outputs (i.e., provision activities) and another concerning the outcomes (i.e., impacts) of public action. In terms of public service provision (the micro-quality dimension), public quality is “the totality of characteristics of a provision of service that bear on its ability to meet the applicable legal and technical requirements and to satisfy the stated and implicit needs of direct beneficiaries.”³

This definition accounts for the managerial effectiveness of public action – that is, the capacity of an administrative system to provide services that not only comply with internal requirements but that also satisfy the needs of direct beneficiaries. It is important to note that needs are involved in both the “form” and the “content” of service delivery (according to the meaning pertaining to service quality charters), thus providing a reminder that the content is defined by the democratic process (i.e., an initially political and subsequently legislative process), at least in the broad outlines. Thus there is rather limited room for applying the notion of “need” to a provision activity

² This trend can, in particular, be seen in changes in public law, which has become increasingly “finalized” as opposed to “conditional” (or open-ended) and which includes evaluation clauses, as is the case in Switzerland, for example.

³ Otherwise referred to as “targets” in the language of public policy.

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itself, although such usage remains conceivable depending on the latitude for action accorded to the organization charged with implementation. In addition, every public provision of service is surrounded by “peripheral” or “auxiliary” activities (e.g., analyses or advice specifically requested by social benefit recipients or taxpayers; information/reception services of varying levels of completeness, etc.). Such activities, though not obligatory, nevertheless support service delivery at its very core and, as such, enhance the latter’s “value added” or operability. Here, the notion of “need” plays a decisive role, for any public organization seeking to operate according to a client focus must identify and optimize its peripheral activities. To this end, it should integrate beneficiaries into the evaluation of provision activities (as has been suggested by the criteria selected for the CAF,⁴ for example) or indeed into the development of services, in keeping with a logic of co-production (Brudney et England, 1983; Julien, 2005).

Concerning the outcomes of public action (the macro-quality dimension), public quality can be defined as “the totality of characteristics of a public policy that bear on its ability to meet the political objectives assigned to it and to satisfy the stated and implicit needs of indirect beneficiaries ⁵[5] as well as those of the other partners of the organization charged with implementation and, more broadly speaking, of the entire society.”

This definition accounts for the “political” effectiveness of public action on two main levels. First, it refers to the capacity of public actors and decision-makers to solve the society-wide problems that have made their way on to the political agenda. Secondly, in respect of the manner of acting, it refers to a form of ethics of public action, which in turn brings into play not only the fundamental principles of public service (De Quatre-Barbes, 1996), such as the continuity or universality of service, but also elements of good governance, which vary from one country to another according to their history and political culture (Hondeghem and Vandenabeele, 2005). As with the notion of micro-quality defined above, this definition of macro-quality is comprised of elements of content and form that convey the multi-dimensionality of public performance.

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⁴ Common Assessment Framework, a holistic approach to public quality used in the European Union; see: www.eipa.eu/caf

⁵ Otherwise referred to as “beneficiaries” in the language of public policy (Knoepfel, Larrue and Varone, 2006).

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