

ALIGNMENT OF THE 7 QUALITY MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES: A SINE QUA NON FOR TOURIST SATISFACTION IN RURAL TOURISM

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Abstract: *The paper aims to analyze the applicability of the seven fundamental principles of quality management, highlighting the importance of their operationalization to increase tourist satisfaction. Considering essential elements of rural tourism such as authenticity, hospitality or the environment and infrastructure, the study analyzes how principles such as customer orientation, leadership, staff involvement or continuous improvement act on the quality of services in rural tourism. The aspects that hinder the efficient application of these principles are also analyzed, as well as the existence of good practices. In a paradigm that aims at the mixture between quality and quantity, the paper aims to demonstrate, even though practical examples, the influence of the coherence of quality management principles on customer satisfaction, thus becoming a sine qua non condition for the sustainable development of rural tourism. The methodology and research are intended to be based on statistical analyses, questionnaires, reviews, comparisons, etc. which demonstrates that the main coordinates of quality, namely the requirements and expectations of customers, can be met by directly correlating and associating the 7 principles of quality management which, together, can ensure the success of any organization. At the same time, the importance of management functions for an efficient organization of services that contribute to satisfying the requirements and expectations of tourists, as well as to the sustainable development of the area, will also be analyzed.*

Key words: *rural tourism, quality management, fundamental principles, management functions, customer satisfaction, sustainable development.*

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism is an important sector in Europe [5], but not all forms of rural tourism are part of this sector. Rural tourism is based on agritourism and farm stays, characterized by nature-related activities and supported by small private enterprises [6]. Rural tourism can have the following aspects:

- it is important for the benefits brought to communities through diversified incomes [8], the creation of new jobs or the prevention of depopulation [3].
- it can have negative effects due to the pressure exerted on the ecosystem and infrastructure, or on the standard of living of local people by increasing the prices of current products and services.
- it can face problems related to transport, utilities or the lack of labor.

In the European Union, rural tourism is supported by the European Parliament as a factor of economic, social and environmental sustainability, through special allocations from the European Commission within the new common agricultural policy.

According to EUROSTAT in 2021, in the European Union, rural areas represented 43.8% of tourist accommodation units, recording 37% of the total nights spent in these units [11].

In Romania, in the rural area, although there is a deficient infrastructure, tourists are attracted by the authenticity of isolated villages, the natural environment and local traditions. Rural tourism is not affected by seasonality, offering activities specific to each

season and thus attracting the largest possible number of tourists, which contributes to the sustainable development of local communities. Another advantage of rural tourism is the minimal investments in traditional houses, with major impact and authentic gastronomy, specific to the area, with natural products [9]. An important role in attracting tourists in the rural environment is represented by the traditional character, the hospitality of the hosts and the quality of the products, aspects that contribute to the satisfaction of the visitors and make them return [2].

With Romania's accession to the Schengen Area, an increase in tourist arrivals is anticipated, driven by the relaxation of border controls.

Quality is mainly based on satisfying the client's requirements throughout the entire process, referring to all the services offered by an organization [1].

To attract and keep tourists coming back, it is necessary to have a continuous concern for diversifying and improving the services offered in rural tourism.

To ensure quality in rural tourism, it is essential to implement quality management, which is a system based on organization and strategy.

Quality management has 4 essential functions:

- Planning, which consists of establishing quality objectives and the necessary resources;
- Quality control, which consists of surveillance (continuous monitoring), inspection (examination and testing) and verification (confirmation through evidence);
- Quality improvement, which involves carrying out activities to exceed the planned quality level, through a set of corrective measures and continuous innovation.
- Quality assurance, which includes predetermined actions to restore confidence that the product will meet the required quality requirements.

The efficient coordination of all processes, through adequate communication between the levels of the organization and the active involvement of the staff, is a primary element of quality management. At the same time, the main condition for the successful implementation of quality policies is the motivation of the staff [1].

According to the ISO 9000 standard, quality management is defined as "the set of activities of the general management function that determines the quality policy, objectives and responsibilities that implement them within the quality system" [7].

According to ISO 9000:2015, quality management is based on 7 principles:

1. Customer Orientation, which aims to meet and exceed customer expectations to achieve long-term success.
2. Leadership, the principle in which leaders at all levels establish the purpose and direction of the organization, as well as creating the conditions for the involvement of staff in achieving quality objectives.
3. Staff commitment, the principle in which the competence and involvement of staff is essential for creating and delivering value.
4. The process-based approach involves managing activities and resources as interrelated processes to achieve the desired results as efficiently as possible.
5. Improvement involves continuous orientation towards improvement to maintain performance, cope with change and capitalize on new opportunities.
6. Evidence-based decision-making aims to analyze real data and information to substantiate decisions that lead to efficient and accurate results.
7. Relationship management that relies on effective stakeholder management for sustainable success [7].

The context of digitalization of tourism service evaluation is part of a broader process of digital transformation in the tourism industry. This involves the use of technology to collect, analyze and disseminate information about the quality and

satisfaction related to the services offered in tourism. In the context of digitalization, customers can have easier access to data and information about the tourist accommodation unit and the possibility of searching and providing feedback, which is an important factor in the decision of potential customers. Implementing and maintaining the quality of services in rural tourism requires an integrated approach, which includes staff training, community involvement and the adoption of recognized quality standards. These measures contribute to the creation of memorable tourist experiences and the sustainable development of rural regions [10].

The purpose of a quality management system is to guide the organization in its effort to meet the requirements of its customers. In addition, it encourages the organization to take actions that exceed these expectations.

The 7 principles cannot function independently, and their order is not random.

Poor management leads to both internal and external imbalances, decisions cannot be made in the absence of real information, the activity cannot be improved, and the relationship with the participants may suffer.

Customer requirements and expectations are the main coordinates of quality, therefore the 7 principles, if correlated and directly associated, together can ensure the success of organization [12].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the development of this study, official reports, academic research, and bibliographic analysis of the specialized literature were utilized, enabling a relevant comparative analysis of the data. These resources contributed to the evaluation of the applicability of the seven quality management principles within rural tourism. Emphasis was placed on the necessity of implementing a quality management system in tourist accommodation establishments to support the development of this sector. Additionally, the study employed statistical analysis based on data provided by the Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, as well as information from industry-specific websites and scholarly articles. The dynamics were illustrated graphically to highlight both the types of tourist accommodation units operating in rural areas and the extent to which they implement quality management principles. The results were accompanied by appropriate explanations, leading to conclusions that underscore the key findings of this research.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Quality in tourism is not a static concept, but a dynamic process involving continuous improvement and adaptation to the needs and expectations of tourists [4].

In Romania, tourist accommodation units are classified according to Order no. 65 of 2013 of the National Authority, with subsequent amendments and completions. Each type of tourist accommodation unit receives a classification depending on the comfort and services offered. To receive the classification, a set of minimum conditions must be met, depending on the type of unit [14]. In rural (village) tourism, according to the classification on the website of the Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, there are the following types of tourist accommodation units:

- Apartment and room for rent
- Bungalow
- Tourist cabin
- Camping
- Camping house
- Hostel

- Hotel
- Motel
- Agrotourism guesthouse
- Tourist guesthouse
- Tourist stopover
- Holiday village
- Camping space
- Tourist villa
- River boat and pontoon

The diversity of these types of tourist accommodation units implies a tourist offer adapted to various demands, from maximum comfort to rural experience.

In turn, each type of tourist accommodation unit was ordered, according to the legislation in the field, into the following categories: unclassified or classified between 1 and 5 stars / daisies / flowers, depending on the type, facilities and corresponding services.

In Romania, in the exclusively rural area (village), according to the Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, on September 27, 2024, there were 10,363 tourist accommodation units in operation, which had 93,210 spaces with a total of 201,653 places [13].

Table 1.

Types of tourist accommodation units in rural areas

Type of Unit	Number of Units	Number of Spaces	Number of Places
Rental Apartments	638	1,390	4,545
Bungalow	105	997	2,469
Tourist Cabin	167	1,705	4,028
Rooms for Rent	3,677	27,873	57,391
Camping	117	1,913	6,849
Camping Space	272	1,854	4,383
Hostel	180	2,920	8,569
Hotel	308	17,349	34,832
Motel	105	1,782	3,717
Agritourism Guesthouse	1,618	8,034	16,845
Tourist Guesthouse	2,770	23,148	48,987
Tourist Stopover	27	416	879
Holiday Village	11	328	759
Camping Area	4	34	118
Tourist Villa	345	3,268	6,867
River Vessel and Pontoon	19	199	415
TOTAL	10,363	93,210	201,653

Source: Own chart and calculation based on data from the List of Tourist Accommodation Structures, Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, 2025

For a numerical highlighting and graphic representation of these units, an attempt was made to arrange them according to the following types:

- over 500 tourist accommodation units: room for rent, tourist guesthouse, agrotourism guesthouse and apartment for rent.

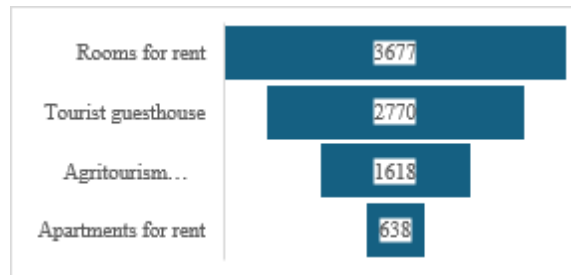


Figure 1. Types of tourist reception structures with over 500 units as of 27.09.2024

Source: Graph and own calculation based on data from the List of tourist reception structures with accommodation functions, Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, 2025

- between 100 and 500 tourist accommodation units: tourist villa, hotel, camping house, hostel, tourist cabin, campsite, motel, bungalow.

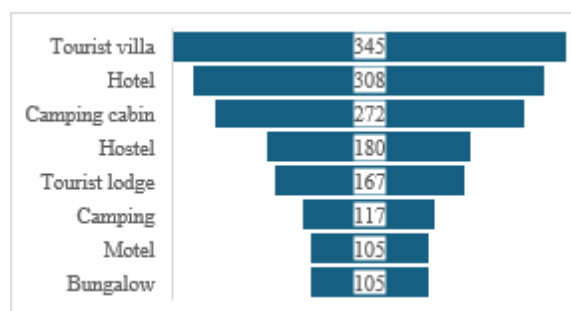


Figure 2. Types of tourist reception structures with fewer than 100 units, as of September 27, 2024

Source: Own chart and calculation based on data from the List of Tourist Accommodation Structures, Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, 2025

- under 100 units: tourist stopover, river ship and pontoon, holiday village, camping area.

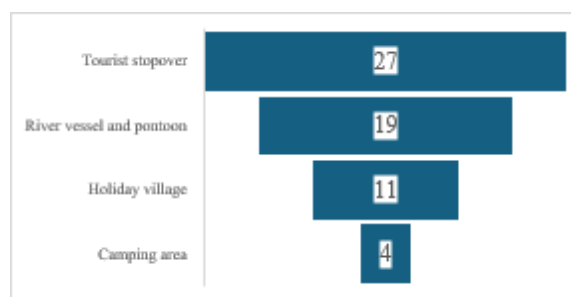


Figure 3. Types of tourist reception structures with fewer than 100 units, as of September 27, 2024

Source: Own chart and calculation based on data from the List of Tourist Accommodation Structures, Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, 2025

According to the table and graphs, the top positions in terms of the number of tourist reception units are held by the following structures:

- Rooms and apartments for rent, which are easy to set up, involve minimal bureaucracy, and offer high accessibility. Their growth is strongly influenced by platforms such as Booking and Airbnb.

- Tourist guesthouses and agrotourism guesthouses, which highlight the growing importance of rural tourism and reflect tourists' increasing preference for natural settings, local crafts, and traditions.

In the middle range—structures with between 100 and 500 units—are:

- Tourist villas, which likely owe their popularity to being in recreational or spa resort areas.
- Hotels, which are standardized and prevalent in urban settings, though they are fewer in total number.
- Camping cabins, preferred by tourists seeking closeness to nature.

At the lower end, with fewer than 100 units, are niche or seasonal structures such as:

- River vessels and pontoons, and tourist stopovers, which often serve temporary or specialized roles.
- Holiday villages, which typically require significant investment, potentially explain their limited presence.

When looking at the number of spaces and accommodation places, the ranking shifts—hotels lead due to their high capacity, overtaking agrotourism guesthouses and rental apartments. This dynamic is also illustrated graphically to provide a clearer understanding.

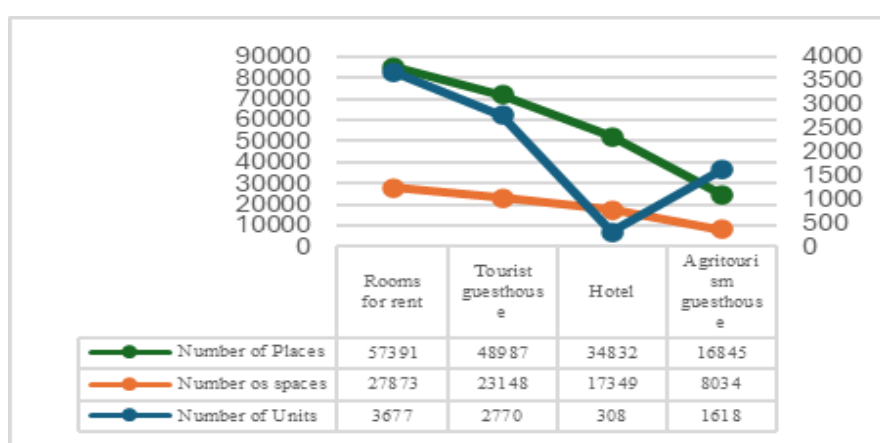


Figure 4. Types of tourist reception structures by number of accommodation places, as of September 27, 2024

Source: Own chart and calculation based on data from the List of Tourist Accommodation Structures, Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, 2025

This graphic representation highlights the high efficiency of hotels per unit, due to their large number of accommodation places.

According to current tourism legislation and classification criteria for tourist reception units in rural areas, the following characteristics apply to each type of structure:

1. Apartments or Rooms for Rent – These are small-scale tourist structures offering accommodation and the ability to prepare meals in a kitchen used exclusively by tourists. Specially arranged spaces for food preparation may also be provided. Classified from 1 to 3 stars.

2. Tourist Guesthouse – A tourist structure with up to 15 rooms and a maximum of 40 places, located in private homes or separate buildings. It offers accommodation and facilities for preparing and serving meals. Classified from 1 to 5 daisies.

3. Agrotourism Guesthouse – A structure with up to 8 rooms, typically part of a private residence or separate building, providing accommodation and meals made from predominantly natural products sourced from the host's own farm or local producers. Hosts are personally involved in guest care and may engage them in traditional activities such as farming or crafts. These guesthouses must have at least one active agricultural or craft-related component. Classified from 1 to 5 daisies.

4. Hotel – A tourist structure in one or more buildings offering fully equipped accommodation, dedicated services, a reception hall, and often public dining spaces. Classified from 1 to 5 stars.

5. Motel – A hotel-type unit typically located outside urban areas, near major roads, offering accommodation, food services, and safe parking for vehicles. Classified from 1 to 3 stars.

6. Hostel – A structure with at least 3 rooms, studios, or apartments, often located in repurposed buildings, offering basic accommodation services. Classified from 1 to 3 stars.

7. Tourist Villa – A small-capacity unit located in tourist resorts or areas of interest, providing accommodation and other specific services. These operate in architecturally distinct buildings. Classified from 1 to 5 stars.

8. Bungalow – A small-capacity unit located in campsites, holiday villages, or as part of other tourist structures, providing accommodation and sometimes seasonal services. Classified from 1 to 3 stars.

9. Tourist Cabin – A small-capacity structure with distinct architecture, offering lodging, meals, and services for hikers or visitors in mountain areas, nature parks, or near spa resorts. Classified from 1 to 3 stars.

10. Holiday Village – A cluster of villas or bungalows in a defined area, offering lodging, meals, and a variety of additional services (recreational, sports, cultural). Classified from 1 to 3 stars.

11. Camping – Designed to accommodate tourists in tents or caravans, these areas allow for parking, cooking, and access to specific facilities. Classified from 1 to 4 stars.

12. Tourist Stopover – A low-capacity unit made of cottages or bungalows, offering lodging, meals, and parking, usually located in a well-defined space. Classified from 1 to 4 stars.

13. Camping Cottage – A small lodging unit consisting of a room and entrance area or terrace, sometimes with a private bathroom. Classification ranges from 1 to 3 stars. [14]

Based on these characteristics, and in the absence of data collected through direct methods, a data simulation was used to assess the application of the seven quality management principles and the level of tourist satisfaction across different types of rural tourist accommodation units. The simulation followed a logical approach grounded in the general features of each unit type, aligned with the Romanian legal framework and relevant specialized literature.

As mentioned before, management is based on seven core principles from the 2015 SR EN ISO 9000 standard: customer focus, leadership, people engagement, process approach, improvement, evidence-based decision making, and relationship management.[12]

Starting from the seven quality management principles, the following hypothesis was developed regarding their applicability to the types of rural tourist accommodation units with the highest number of places, based on their characteristics:

1. Rooms for rent comply with principles 1 (customer focus), 4 (process approach), 5 (improvement), and 6 (evidence-based decisions), through focus on guest comfort, basic utility-based processes, feedback-driven improvements, and decisions based on guest input.

However, principles 2 (leadership), 3 (people engagement), and 7 (relationship management) are less relevant due to the absence of formal leadership, staff, and external partnerships.

2. Tourist guesthouses fulfill all seven principles by adapting to guest needs, involving owners or managers directly, employing trained staff, offering varied services, continuously improving, making decisions based on feedback, and maintaining connections with agencies, guides, and local producers.

3. Hotels, the most standardized units, meet all principles through clear customer satisfaction policies, structured leadership, trained and involved personnel, well-defined processes, ongoing quality audits, data-driven decision-making, and formal partnerships and contracts.

4. Agrotourism guesthouses also meet all principles by offering authentic experiences, direct involvement of the owner and family, ongoing host-guest interaction, diverse household-based activities, continuous improvement from experience, feedback-based decisions, and strong ties with local producers and artisans.

Since three out of the four types fully apply all seven quality management principles, attention turns to understanding the gaps in the fourth. The absence of leadership is due to the lack of formal management; staff engagement is impossible without personnel; and relationship management requires established contracts and partnerships, which are often missing.

However, at the same time we can say that in this case too these principles are applied, even if they are not obvious. Leadership can be identified with the owner or an administrator, staff involvement is identified with the person who manages the location and relationship management takes place through the process of supplying raw materials, materials and services.

As a statistical representation of these situations, we have developed the following table. The columns have been marked with the following symbols ✓, where the relevance of the principle is certain and with X where the principle does not emerge from the characteristics of the unit.

Depending on criteria such as the classification of the unit, the type of services offered, the presence of procedures, and the degree of staff involvement, this approach was used to allow for a comparative and visual analysis, which can support future field research.

Depending on the complexity of each type of tourist accommodation unit, we can assume that in some structures, a quality management system is not perceived due to the lack of one or more principles.

Table 2.

Application of Quality Management Principles in Different Types of Tourist Accommodation Units

Type of Unit	Customer Focus	Leadership	Staff Engagement	Process Approach	Improvement	Evidence-Based Decisions	Relationship Management
Apartments / Rooms for Rent	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Tourist Guesthouse	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Agrotourism Guesthouse	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hotel	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Motel	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Hostel	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
Tourist Villa	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bungalow	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Tourist Cabin	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Holiday Village	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Camping	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Tourist Stopover	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Camping Cottage	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
River Vessel / Pontoon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: own processing

Note: ✓ indicates that the quality management principle is applied or can be confidently inferred from the characteristics of the analyzed type of unit; ✗ denotes the absence of clear evidence regarding the application of that principle

To develop rural tourism and increase the occupancy rate of tourist accommodation units in Romania, it would be advisable to focus on the following types of activities: tourist routes (e.g., Via Transilvanica), niche tourism (spa, gastronomic, cultural, etc.), thematic tours (e.g., Wine Route), thematic routes (e.g., bird watching, collecting medicinal plants, learning about flowers), and historical routes (e.g., Via Regis).

As an example, we investigated the application of quality management principles in the Via Transilvanica project [15]. The data and information for this study were taken from its official website and related online groups.

Via Transilvanica was initiated by the Tasuleasa Social Association in 2018. Also called "The Road that Unites," it is a project through which entire communities that were on the verge of extinction have found new meaning and a possibility for economic development through a peaceful type of tourism. In this form of tourism, the main actor—the hiker—does not need luxury, is content with necessities, appreciates the value of local products, respects the working schedule of local people, and is curious and benevolent.

Via Transilvanica is a rural tourism and ecotourism project that stretches over 1,400 km through mountainous, rural, and culturally diverse areas in Romania. The project involves local communities, tourist infrastructure, promotion efforts, and collaboration among multiple stakeholders. From this description alone, it is evident that Via Transilvanica adheres to several quality management principles. For a clearer illustration, we will explain each principle below:

Customer Orientation

The route is designed based on tourists' needs for hiking, authenticity, and rural discovery. To meet these needs, maps, terminals, a mobile application, and an interactive online platform have been well developed. These facilities aim to enhance tourist satisfaction, resulting in increased interest, repeat visits, and loyalty.

Leadership

According to its official website, Tasuleasa Social provides vision, values, and coordination at the national level. The ongoing involvement of the founders, supported by coherent communication, ensures a clear strategic direction and builds trust and motivation among volunteers and partners.

Staff Involvement—In This Case, the Community

Thousands of volunteers, rural hosts, local artists, and tourist guides are involved in the project. Locals provide accommodation, volunteers mark trails, and guides deliver tourist services. These contributions result in high-quality experiences, authenticity, and strong loyalty to the project.

Process-Based Approach

The project is executed through coordinated planning that emphasizes research, implementation, maintenance, and promotion. Clear project stages ensure coherent infrastructure development and effective collaboration with local authorities.

Improvement

Continuous improvement is reflected in app updates, trail reviews, and the addition of new terminals or the signaling of problem areas. These efforts help sustain the project's relevance and motivate tourists to return.

Evidence-Based Decision Making

Feedback is gathered online (e.g., Facebook group) from tourists, guides, and locals. This input is used to optimize route sections based on difficulty, accessibility, and environmental impact, enhancing overall experience and efficient use of resources.

Relationship Management

Strong partnerships with sponsors, media, NGOs, guesthouses, local authorities, and volunteers help maintain the route, promote rural accommodations, and support Romanian cultural values. The result is an integrated rural network that contributes to economic development.

To validate the hypotheses formulated on the basis of the simulation, future research could include direct surveys with tourists aimed at measuring the actual level of satisfaction and the perception of service quality, as well as qualitative interviews with managers or owners of rural accommodation units to provide detailed data on the concrete application of the seven quality management principles.

CONCLUSIONS

The quality of services in rural tourism is essential for the level of tourist satisfaction and for the sustainable development of rural areas, influencing the intention of visitors to return.

A high quality of services implies:

- the probability that tourists will return and recommend the destination to others;
- tourist loyalty through personalized packages, freebies, etc.
- increasing the number of tourists and the length of stays that will contribute to community income;
- promoting respect for traditions and the environment;
- generating new jobs for locals.

Therefore, implementing a quality management system in rural tourism means that each quality principle helps the unit to be clearer, more efficient and more appreciated by tourists. By applying the 7 principles of quality management, added value can be brought to rural tourism.

The lack of one of the principles can damage the quality system. To highlight this hypothesis, we exemplify:

- Lack of leadership → quality becomes chaotic, without direction.
- Without staff commitment → processes remain only on paper.
- Without data-based decisions → improvements are random or wrong.
- Without customer orientation → all the others become irrelevant.

Starting from the definition of the quality management system, according to ISO 9000, we can substantiate the idea that the 7 principles cannot function independently, and their order has a coherent systemic logic in the following paradigm:

1. The principles function as an interdependent system, each principle supports and determines the other principles. The lack or faulty application of one of them can damage the entire quality management system.

Argument: Very good leadership (principle 2), but which does not consider customer feedback (principle 1), risks making its decisions irrelevant for the market.

2. The order of the principles is not random and represents a flow that results in quality.

Argument: Principle 1 starts from the customer's expectations, if there is no customer, there is no reason for quality → Principle 2 defines the trajectory towards satisfying these needs/expectations → Principle 3 helps implement this trajectory → Principle 4 plans a process based on clear activities that lead/generate consistent results → Principle 5 evaluates the process and constantly optimizes → Principle 6 improvement cannot be made in the absence of clear, accurate data → Principle 7 the quality of the services provided also depends on the quality of the raw materials and services provided by the partners.

Each principle is logically linked to the next, and together they form a complete quality cycle. The final arrow that returns to the first principle (“Customer Orientation”) symbolizes that the quality process is continuous and always customer centered.

The case study on the “Via Transilvanica” project can confirm that the systematic application of quality management principles generates a sustainable network of rural collaboration, economic development and international recognition. The project can be considered a conclusive example of the positive application of the 7 mentioned principles.

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