

Journal of Public Policy & Governance



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ISSN: 2616-8413

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How to cite this article: M'Mugambi, D. (2024). Strategic Leadership and Good Governance in The Public Sector: A Case of County Governments in Kenya. *Journal of Public Policy and Governance*, 8(1), 127–146. <https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t7042>

Abstract

The study sought to examine the influence of strategic leadership on good governance in Kenya's county governments, focusing on how strategic leadership dimensions—visioning, strategy formulation, implementation, evaluation, and ethical leadership—drive compliance with governance principles. Persistent governance challenges, such as corruption and resource mismanagement, have undermined devolution's potential, necessitating a leadership approach to embed ethics and accountability. Guided by Authentic Leadership Theory and Strategic Leadership Theory, the study employed a positivist research philosophy and a cross-sectional research design. Data for this study were collected through structured questionnaires administered to a representative sample of employees from eight counties, selected using stratified random sampling. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between strategic leadership and good governance, with strategic leadership explaining 69.2% of the variation in governance outcomes. Among the key factors, leader character and strategic visioning demonstrated the strongest impact, underscoring the critical role of ethical leadership and visionary planning in fostering transparency and accountability. The study concluded that strategic leadership is essential for embedding ethical practices as routine behaviors and for building resilient and transparent governance systems. It recommended prioritizing the development of strategic leadership, aligning public sector reforms with leadership objectives, and instituting robust accountability structures to ensure sustainable governance and ethical compliance in county governments.

Keywords: *Strategic leadership, good governance, county governments, ethical practices, compliance with ethics, public sector reforms, transparency, accountability, leadership development, Kenya, strategic visioning, strategy formulation, strategy implementation, strategy evaluation, leader character.*

1.1 Introduction

Kenya has seen a surge in demand for ethical leaders not only in society but also in the public sector organizations. This demand is in response to the pervasive unethical behaviour manifesting largely in runaway corruption currently being experienced in the country. The scandals related to ethical lapses in the public sector, constitutes a major breakdown of professional behaviour that is characterized by widespread patronage, misuse of funds, corruption and outright stealing by public officials (UNDP, 2015).

Good governance, often seen as the cornerstone of effective public administration, entails compliance with principles such as transparency, responsibility, accountability, and observance of the rule of law. Similarly, strategic leadership observes principles like fostering integrity, and adherence to ethical standards within public sector. The principles ensure that public institutions conduct affairs and manage resources in a manner that prioritizes public interest and compliance with public service ethics (Rothstein & Sorak, 2017). According to Hijal-Moghrabi and Sabharwal (2018), good governance necessitates the rigorous application of moral principles in public service, a process that relies heavily on leaders' ability to balance personal discretion and public trust. Ethical leadership, therefore, serves as the bridge between organizational values and governance outcomes, promoting fairness, justice, and equitable treatment of all stakeholders (Copeland, 2015).

Codes of conduct, as a key enabler of good governance, offer structured guidance on acceptable behaviours and decision-making frameworks in public institutions. These codes establish broad ethical principles that public servants must observe, including impartiality, transparency, and professionalism (Engida & Bardill, 2013; Rothstein & Sorak, 2017). Compliance with such codes ensures that public officials uphold integrity in their roles, a critical aspect of governance aimed at fostering public trust and ensuring accountability (Plant, 2018). However, codes alone are insufficient if they are not integrated into organizational routines and championed by strategic leaders. As Gilman (2005) observed, voluntary adherence to ethical codes achieves longer-lasting compliance compared to forced enforcement, which may provoke resistance and undermine good governance objectives.

Integrity remains central to governance, as it embodies the moral and ethical conduct that sustains trust between public administrators and the citizens they serve. Leaders with integrity exemplify accountability and transparency by aligning their actions with ethical principles and organizational values (Baxter, Dempsey, Megone, & Lee, 2018). According to Menzel (2012), such individuals consistently uphold ethical standards, inspiring those around them to adhere to governance principles. In support of this contention Lewis & Gilman, (2005) observed that strategic leaders foster integrity by modeling ethical behavior, recognizing ethical performance, and instilling a culture of responsibility throughout public institutions. In doing so, they enhance ethical maturity of organizations by ensuring that ethical practices become routine obligations (Hijal-Moghrabi & Sabharwal, 2018).

Knowledge of ethics is another critical component of good governance, as it equips leaders and public servants with the tools to make informed and ethical decisions. Public officials must possess a deep understanding of ethical principles, societal values, and legal frameworks to navigate complex governance challenges effectively (Terry, 2015). According to Rothstein and Sorak (2017), ethical knowledge enables leaders to evaluate actions through the lens of impartiality, justice, and accountability, thus ensuring fairness in public service delivery. Strategic leaders play a pivotal role in cultivating this knowledge by providing continuous training, mentorship, and opportunities for ethical reflection among employees (Plant, 2018). By integrating knowledge of ethics into governance practices, leaders enhance organizational capacity to deliver services responsibly, fostering sustainable development and public confidence in government institutions.

Several factors are crucial in achieving good governance, and at the core is strategic leadership. In the public service, strategic leadership integrates unique skills and competencies to foster ethical practices, systemic change, and sustainable governance (Norzailan, Othman & Ishizaki, 2018). It

combines strategic thinking, organizational leadership, and moral integrity to guide public institutions in balancing short-term demands with long-term development goals. Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew (2018) emphasized the broader societal role of strategic leaders, linking visionary planning with ethical conduct to engage stakeholders and address governance challenges. Strategic leadership in the public service is pivotal for embedding accountability, promoting transparency, and ensuring the effective utilization of public resources.

Strategic visioning provides public institutions with a clear, realistic, and achievable direction that aligns with societal needs and governance priorities. Nanus (1992) defined vision as a credible future state that inspires organizational focus. In the public sector, visioning involves identifying citizen needs, analyzing resource constraints, and formulating attainable goals through participatory approaches (Hartley et al., 2013). In effect strategic leaders act as change agents who inspire teams to focus on long-term objectives while managing short-term challenges to deliver value to the public (Van Der Maas, 2016).

Strategy formulation in public service transforms vision into actionable policies and plans that address stakeholder priorities and community development goals. Jabbar and Hussein (2017) define strategy formulation as the process of analyzing stakeholder dynamics, establishing priorities, and balancing short-term and long-term needs. Strategic leaders in the public sector foster inclusivity, transparency, and align governance principles by engaging citizens, public servants, and stakeholders in participatory decision-making (Bryson, 2018). Effective strategy formulation reflects shared priorities and integrates ethical values, enabling county governments to address corruption, inefficiency, and resource mismanagement while fostering public trust (Hope, 2015).

Implementation in the public sector means proper alignment of resources, and the necessary strategy execution processes to achieve organizational objectives. Implementation requires strategic leaders to mobilize resources, remove resistance, and create systems that ensure progress and accountability (Parncutt & Sattman, 2017). Bryson (2018) highlighted the role of strategic leaders in ensuring policies are executed with integrity and adherence to ethical standards. In county governments, this is achieved while focusing on measurable goals, and conformance with accountability frameworks that promote transparency and efficiency while upholding public sector values (Davies & Barbara, 2014).

Evaluation is another critical strategic function for assessing performance, ensuring compliance, and driving continuous improvement in public service delivery. Evaluation measures the extent to which implemented policies achieve their intended outcomes while identifying areas for corrective action (Gene, 2013). Schoemaker, Krupp, and Howland (2013) underscored that effective evaluation ensures organizations remain responsive to citizen needs and aligned with governance priorities. In county governments, strategic leaders use performance audits and monitoring frameworks to assess resource utilization, ethical compliance, and service delivery effectiveness (Obeidat, Al-Hadidi & Tarhini, 2017). By institutionalizing regular evaluations, strategic leadership reinforces accountability, transparency, and public confidence in governance systems.

The literature consistently highlights the critical role of strategic leadership for achieving good governance in the public service. This is achieved through a focus on strategic visioning, strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Strategic leaders serve as architects of public values by promoting transparency, engaging stakeholders, and managing resources ethically. Through providing clear direction, fostering accountability, and driving continuous evaluation, strategic

leadership transforms public institutions into ethically mature organizations, equipped to address governance challenges and deliver public value (Jabbar & Hussein, 2017; Van Der Maas, 2016).

In the context of devolved governance, strategic leadership bridges the gap between policy objectives and effective service delivery by aligning vision, strategy, and implementation with the principles of transparency, integrity, and citizen participation (Jabbar & Hussein, 2017). County governments, as decentralized units, face governance challenges such as corruption, resource mismanagement, and inefficiencies, which require visionary leaders capable of driving systemic change and promoting ethical compliance (Hope, 2015). Strategic leaders in county governments set clear priorities, mobilize resources, and evaluate performance against established goals to ensure that public services are delivered equitably and efficiently (Bryson, 2018). By embedding ethical leadership and governance principles into county operations, strategic leadership transforms public institutions into transparent, accountable, and citizen-focused entities, fostering public trust and sustainable development.

Strategic leadership plays a pivotal role in promoting good governance globally, regionally, and locally. Northouse (2017) observed that strategic leaders are highly valued for their ability to uphold transparency, integrity, and accountability in governance structures, which is critical for maintaining legitimacy in the face of global financial scandals experienced at the beginning of the century. Regionally, in Africa, strategic leadership has been identified as a key driver for addressing systemic governance issues, including corruption and inefficiency. Transparency International (2018) noted that unethical practices such as misuse of public resources erode public trust and undermine governance. Strategic leaders, therefore, play a critical role in crafting and implementing long-term strategies when they employ ethical frameworks to align governance practices with societal needs. Rothstein and Sorak (2017) highlighted that strategic leadership in African contexts must also address cultural and historical nuances, integrating traditional ethical principles into modern governance strategies.

In Kenya, the principles of governance are enshrined in the Constitution of Kenya (2010). Articles 10 and 232 emphasize national values such as accountability, integrity, and equity, which align closely with the core functions of strategic leadership. According to the Public Service Commission of Kenya (2015), strategic leaders play a crucial role in translating these values into actionable policies and practices. By focusing on long-term vision and ethical governance, they enable county governments to address systemic inefficiencies and deliver public value effectively.

County governments, established under the devolved governance system of the 2010 Constitution, are pivotal in bringing governance closer to the people and promoting equitable development. With administrative, fiscal, and political autonomy, counties manage resources, implement policies, and deliver services efficiently at the local level (Yusoff, Sarjoon, Awang, & Efendi, 2016). Articles 174 and 175 of the Constitution outline the objectives of devolution, such as fostering national unity, promoting democracy, enhancing self-governance, and protecting marginalized communities (Juma, Korir & Mulongo, 2014). However, despite these constitutional provisions, counties face challenges including corruption, nepotism, inadequate funding, and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Khaunya, Wawire, & Chepng'eno, 2015). Nevertheless, counties remain critical centers for governance innovation, enhancing compliance with ethical standards and improving the quality of public service delivery.

Research on strategic leadership in county governments is critical, as these units are held accountable at the local level, directly impacting citizen trust and public service effectiveness

(Muigua, 2018). The current study leveraged on the insights of county officials across diverse regions to assess the role of strategic leadership in influencing compliance with ethical codes, thereby addressing key governance challenges and promoting sustainable development.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The persistent ethical lapses in Kenya's county governments present significant challenges to achieving good governance, despite the promises of devolution. Unethical practices such as corruption, patronage, resource mismanagement, and misuse of public funds continue to plague county administrations, undermining their ability to deliver services effectively (Mwenzwa & Misati, 2014; Transparency International, 2019). Reports by the *Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC, 2018)* and *KIPPRA (2015)* have documented a growing trend of ethical failures since the establishment of county governments in 2013, including procurement malpractices, abuse of office, and lack of fiscal accountability. While legal and administrative reforms have been introduced to promote transparency and accountability, enforcement has remained inadequate, leading to repeated governance breakdowns (Mbaya, Kariuki & Musumba, 2017).

Strategic leadership has been identified as a critical enabler of good governance, capable of addressing the ethical lapses afflicting county governments. Unlike punitive measures such as arrests and prosecutions, which Minja (2017) argues are reactive and often insufficient, strategic leadership fosters ethical governance by embedding accountability systems and aligning organizational practices with ethical standards. Strategic leaders influence decision-making by prioritizing transparency, stakeholder engagement, and integrity to prevent unethical behaviors before they occur (Rahmawati & Sarjito, 2020). Despite this, county governments have struggled to leverage strategic leadership effectively, resulting in persistent governance challenges that negate the objectives of devolution, such as equitable resource distribution and citizen-centered service delivery (Kimathi, 2017).

Studies on decentralized governance in Kenya show mixed results regarding its impact on ethical compliance. Bojanic (2018) and Balunywa et al. (2014) argue that devolution enhances transparency and accountability by bringing governance closer to the people. Conversely, researchers such as Amusa and Mabugu (2016) and Kimathi (2017) contend that decentralization creates opportunities for unethical practices due to weak oversight mechanisms, limited capacity, and political interference at the county level. Reports from *Parliamentary Public Accounts Committees* and *Transparency International (2019)* highlight that many counties despite having accountability systems, still experience widespread corruption. These ethical failures underscore the need for strategic leadership to instill ethical behavior, enhance oversight, and promote effective governance at the county level.

Existing literature highlights a connection between strategic leadership and compliance with ethical standards, but the findings are fragmented and context-specific. Studies by Downe, Cowell, and Morgan (2016) in the United Kingdom and Rahmawati and Sarjito (2020) in Indonesia demonstrate the importance of ethical leadership in fostering compliance, yet their contexts differ significantly from Kenya's devolved governance framework. Similarly, Olaka et al. (2018) and Yusuph et al. (2016) focus on compliance in the private sector, offering limited applicability to public institutions. Mukabi et al. (2015) recognize the successes of devolution in Kenya but highlight counties' failure to effectively integrate ethics into governance processes. These gaps underscore the need to explore how strategic leadership, through practices like visioning, strategy

formulation, implementation, and evaluation, can enhance ethical compliance and governance outcomes. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of strategic leadership in transforming Kenya's county governments into transparent, accountable, and citizen-focused institutions (Jabbar & Hussein, 2017; Kimathi, 2017).

1.3 Main Objective

The main objective of this study was to assess the influence of Strategic Leadership on Good Governance in County Governments in Kenya.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study provides valuable empirical evidence on the role of strategic leadership as a cornerstone of public sector governance and reform. By exploring the relationship between strategic leadership and good governance, the study addresses critical challenges related to ethical compliance in county governments. It integrates foundational theories such as authentic leadership theory, strategic leadership theory, transformational leadership theory, and social exchange theory to illuminate how strategic leadership influences ethical behavior and governance outcomes. The study makes a significant contribution to existing literature by linking strategic leadership to compliance with ethical standards and emphasizing organizational change and employee engagement as key antecedents to fostering good governance. Furthermore, the study identifies gaps in empirical research, offering a foundation for future studies in this domain.

Practically, the findings equip policymakers with insights on leveraging strategic leadership to address governance issues like corruption and inefficiency, not only in Kenya but in other regions facing similar challenges. This information can guide the development of strategies to improve public sector performance by aligning reforms with strategic leadership principles and enhancing employee engagement. Moreover, the study benefits leadership practitioners by illustrating how strategic decision-making roles can drive ethical imperatives, reinforcing the importance of strategic leadership in achieving governance reforms and delivering ethical public services.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study examined the relationship between strategic leadership and good governance, focusing on compliance with ethical standards in Kenya's county governments. Key variables included strategic leadership, organizational change, and employee engagement, and their collective influence on adherence to codes of ethics. A cross-sectional research design underpinned by the positivist philosophy was employed, utilizing stratified random sampling to select eight counties—Bungoma, Garissa, Kilifi, Kisumu, Meru, Nyeri, Nakuru, and Nairobi—representing Kenya's socio-economic and ecological diversity. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were used to assess the relationship between strategic leadership and ethical compliance, providing generalizable insights applicable to all 47 counties. The methodology ensured robust findings, offering actionable recommendations to enhance governance and ethical standards in Kenya's devolved units.

2.0 Literature Review

The literature review provides a comprehensive analysis of existing studies and theoretical frameworks that inform the relationship between strategic leadership and good governance in the public sector. This section is structured into two parts: the theoretical literature review, which examines the theories underpinning the study, and the empirical literature review, which highlights

key findings and knowledge gaps from previous research. The review establishes the foundation for the current study and situates it within the broader discourse on leadership and governance.

2.1 Theoretical Literature Review

The theoretical literature review explores the foundational theories that underpin the study of strategic leadership and its influence on good governance. It delves into authentic leadership theory, strategic leadership theory, and related frameworks that emphasize the role of leadership in fostering ethical practices, accountability, and effective governance. These theories provide the conceptual lens through which the study evaluates the relationship between strategic leadership and governance outcomes in Kenya's county governments. By grounding the research in established theoretical perspectives, this section underscores the significance of leadership as a determinant of ethical and sustainable public administration.

2.1.1 Authentic Leadership Theory

Authentic Leadership Theory emphasizes the importance of a leader's character, ethical behavior, and transparent decision-making in fostering trust and inspiring followers. Initially described by George (2003) as purposeful, value-centered, relational, self-disciplined, and compassionate, the theory was later refined by Walumbwa et al. (2008), who defined it as a leadership style that promotes positive psychological capacities and an ethical climate through self-awareness, relational transparency, and balanced processing of information. Authentic leaders are ethical, genuine, and consistent, which enables them to build trust and support among followers, improving outcomes such as organizational change and compliance with organizational values (Fusco, O'Riordan & Palmer, 2016). Ciulla (2014) noted that authentic leaders inspire and empower followers through honest interactions, creating an environment conducive to achieving mutual goals.

Authentic leadership has been shown to foster positive organizational outcomes, including employee commitment, performance (Ribeiro, Gomes, & Kurian, 2018), trust during change (Agote, Aramburu, & Lines, 2015), and workplace empowerment and job satisfaction (Wong, 2013). Despite criticisms for its broad conceptualization and overlap with other ethical leadership theories (Banks et al., 2016), it remains a key framework for promoting ethical behavior and compliance. In this study, authentic leadership underpins the analysis of how strategic leadership drives good governance and adherence to ethical standards in Kenya's county governments.

2.1.2 Strategic Leadership Theory

Strategic Leadership Theory, proposed by Finkelstein and Hambrick (1996) and based on Hambrick and Mason's (1984) Upper Echelons Theory, links leaders' psychological traits to decision-making and organizational outcomes. It emphasizes vision creation, communication, and implementation to enhance efficiency and aligns with New Public Management reforms focusing on decentralization and performance management. Bendahan et al. (2015) highlighted the role of leaders' traits in ethical decision-making, while studies like Hijal-Moghrabi and Sabharwal (2018) and Engida and Bardill (2012) demonstrated its relevance in maintaining ethical standards and addressing public administration challenges. In Kenya, Kilelo (2015) emphasized its role in fostering accountability and sustainable governance reforms, making it crucial for addressing inefficiencies and ethical lapses in county governments.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

Strategic leadership plays a critical role in fostering good governance, particularly in addressing the complex challenges of unethical practices and inefficiencies in public administration. As Moghalu (2017) asserts, Africa's development challenges are often linked to leadership quality, specifically the inability of leaders to set clear visions, prioritize actions, and mobilize society toward achieving shared goals. Strategic leadership, as Davies and Davies (2020) highlight, involves translating an organization's vision and moral purpose into actionable strategies. By doing so, strategic leaders not only inspire trust but also create systems that are accountable, transparent, and geared toward achieving long-term goals aligned with public interest.

Good governance requires leaders who are not only visionary but also possess the ability to diagnose organizational weaknesses and implement effective interventions. Sarfraz (2017) observes that strategic leaders constantly analyze organizational challenges and opportunities, using strategic thinking to develop solutions that address both immediate and systemic issues. Studies such as Nanthagopan (2016) and Mutole (2017) reinforce this by showing that leadership and management capabilities significantly influence organizational performance and sustainability. In Kenya's county governments, where governance challenges like corruption, resource mismanagement, and inefficiency are prevalent, strategic leadership can provide the direction needed to align public service delivery with ethical standards and governance principles.

Strategic leadership involves not just visioning but also the formulation and implementation of strategies that align organizational objectives with governance priorities. Hitt, Sirmon, and Xu (2020) emphasize that strategic leaders are instrumental in setting a clear mission and vision, which are critical for fostering organizational focus and accountability. This process ensures that competing stakeholder interests are balanced, and resources are optimized for maximum impact. Studies such as Muthaa (2019) and Waithira, Waiganjo, and Neru (2017) demonstrate that strategic direction significantly influences organizational performance, making it a critical component of governance. In Kenya, county governments must embrace strategic leadership practices to improve service delivery and instill public trust through transparency and accountability.

The implementation of strategies is another area where strategic leadership significantly contributes to good governance. Effective implementation requires aligning organizational dynamics such as culture, stakeholder engagement, and resources with the vision and mission. Studies by Goromonzi (2016) and Wanjiru (2015) highlight the importance of organizational culture and strategic alignment in ensuring successful strategy execution. In Kenya's devolved units, leaders must navigate the complexities of decentralization, such as limited resources and diverse stakeholder interests, by fostering a culture of ethical compliance and robust strategy implementation frameworks. Strategic leaders act as role models, inspiring employees to adhere to ethical standards and embrace accountability in their roles.

Evaluation and monitoring are integral components of strategic leadership that enhance good governance. By assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of implemented strategies, strategic leaders ensure that organizational objectives are met and that any deviations are addressed promptly. Forseth, Clegg, and Røyrvik (2019) emphasize that strategic evaluation systems improve performance by providing actionable insights. In the Kenyan context, evaluation mechanisms like performance contracting and results-based management have shown potential in enhancing accountability, though challenges such as resistance and immature policy environments

persist (Korir, Rotich & Bengat, 2015). Strategic leadership ensures these systems are used effectively to reinforce ethical compliance and governance objectives.

Ethics and integrity form the foundation of good governance, and strategic leadership is pivotal in embedding these principles within organizational frameworks. As Van Der Maas (2016) notes, strategic leaders must practice moral virtues, take fair decisions, and align organizational values with societal expectations. Research shows that strategic leaders who prioritize ethical behavior influence employees' adherence to codes of ethics, fostering a culture of accountability and trust (Downe et al., 2016; Rahmawati & Sarjito, 2020). In Kenya's counties, where governance challenges often stem from ethical lapses, strategic leadership can act as a catalyst for change by modeling integrity and promoting ethical practices at all levels of public service.

Strategic leadership is a cornerstone of good governance, particularly in contexts such as Kenya's county governments, where governance structures face significant ethical and operational challenges. By setting clear visions, fostering ethical practices, and ensuring the effective implementation and evaluation of strategies, strategic leaders create systems that are transparent, accountable, and responsive to public needs. This approach not only addresses immediate governance challenges but also lays the foundation for sustainable development and public trust in government institutions.

3.0 Research Methodology

The study adopted a positivist research philosophy, emphasizing objective reality and the use of quantitative methods to examine the relationship between strategic leadership and good governance, conceptualized as compliance with ethics, in Kenya's county governments. A cross-sectional research design facilitated the collection of quantitative data at a specific point in time to analyze patterns and test relationships between variables. The study targeted all 47 county governments, with a representative sample of eight counties selected using stratified random sampling based on Kenya's regional administrative zones. The sampled counties—Nairobi, Nakuru, Nyeri, Meru, Kilifi, Kisumu, Bungoma, and Garissa—were chosen to reflect Kenya's socio-economic, cultural, and ecological diversity. The unit of analysis was the county governments, while the unit of observation consisted of employees at strategic leadership, middle management, and operational levels. Data were collected using structured questionnaires designed to capture dimensions of strategic leadership and their influence on good governance. The instrument employed a Likert-scale to measure the extent of adherence to ethical standards, accountability, transparency, and other elements critical to good governance. Pilot testing in Embu County ensured reliability and validity, with Cronbach's alpha exceeding the 0.7 threshold for internal consistency. Data analysis involved a linear regression analysis. Ethical considerations were observed throughout, including confidentiality, anonymity, and securing necessary permissions.

4.0 Findings

This section details the findings of the study.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Strategic leadership as espoused in literature is leadership with a vision who communicates the vision to people and implements the vision and stretches employees' capabilities for high performance, an agent of change and is a person of integrity and keeps the organization focused on the objectives and focus to achieve assigned mandates in case of public organizations.

<https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t7042>

Respondents were asked to state the extent to which they considered strategic leadership of county governments important. The 5-scale Likert was used to rate responses as: 1-Not Important, 2-Slightly Important, 3- Moderately Important, 4- Very Important and 5- Extremely Important. The following is a discussion of the results as presented and summarized in tables. The responses are for each sub-variable or indicators that include strategic vision, strategy formulation, strategy implementation, strategy evaluation and leader character.

4.1.1 Importance of Strategic Vision

Strategic vision in the pioneering work on the concept by Nanus (1992) is described as a clear, realistic, credible, attractive and attainable futuristic state of an organization. Setting the strategic vision involves establishing County needs using internal and external advice. A baseline research is carried out to generate the necessary evidence before an inspiring, realistic and compelling vision can be generated. The results of strategic vision are presented in Table 18.

Table 1: Strategic Vision

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Coefficient of Variation
Establishing County needs	3.88	0.82	0.21
Using internal and external advice	3.81	0.81	0.21
Conducting baseline research	3.71	0.88	0.24
Setting realistic and inspiring Vision	3.74	0.9	0.24
Setting compelling County mission	3.78	0.95	0.25
Average	3.76	0.87	0.23

The results reveal an average mean of 3.76 for strategic visioning, a standard deviation of 0.87 and coefficient of variation of 0.23. This indicates that respondents consider vision as very important at the County Government and are in agreement about that position. The strategic intent and more specifically when setting the strategic vision is a critical component of any organization. In order to establish the current state and predict a desired future information is gathered from different but relevant sources. Under strategic vision, establishing County needs (mean 3.88) and using both external and internal experts (mean 3.81) were rated as the most important aspects while conducting a baseline research (mean 3.71) before setting the vision was considered the least important. The importance attached to vision in the County Government is consistent with previous studies. These include one conducted by Rajan and Ganesan (2017) where CEOs of small and medium enterprises were interviewed on validity of the Korter’s 8-Step model it was confirmed that visioning is the most important level. While applying strategic leadership theory Kitonga, Bichanga and Muema (2017) examined the link between strategic leaders practice of determining strategic direction and organizational performance. Data was collected from managers representing Not-for-Profit Organizations where findings showed that determining strategic direction is key for determining performance of Not-or-Profit organizations in Nairobi, Kenya. In a study to identify the role of strategic leadership on execution of development plans by county governments in Kenya, Waribu (2019) analyzed the role of envisioning using a target population of 123 and a sample size of 92. Envisioning was found to positively influence execution of County Integrated Development Plans.

4.1.2 Importance of Strategic Formulation

Strategic formulation is a step in County strategic leadership that involves ensuring public participation and stakeholder involvement to seek unanimity in priority setting and ensuring balance between short and long-term needs and incorporating County core values. Participation by the beneficiaries of strategic leadership and stakeholders enriches the process ensuring balanced strategic plans that are more acceptable reducing challenges in implementation. It also reinforces communication about the vision and mission and core values of the County. Inclusion of values in the plans is a necessary first step in inculcating ethical behaviour in the County Governments.

Table 2: Strategy Formulation

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Coefficient of variation
Public participation in formulating strategy plans such as CIDPs	482	4.12	0.98	0.24
Staff and stakeholder involvement	482	4.09	0.96	0.23
Unanimity in priority setting	482	4.08	0.97	0.24
Maintaining balance between short and long-term needs	482	4.14	0.82	0.20
Incorporating County Core Values	482	4.38	0.64	0.15
Average		4.16	0.87	0.21

Respondents were asked to state the extent to which they considered strategy formulation in county governments important. The following is a discussion of the findings. The results reveal an average mean of 4.16 for strategy formulation and a standard deviation of 0.87. This indicates that respondents consider strategy formulation as very important at the County Government level and the low coefficient of variation of 0.21 denotes agreement. Strategy formulation aspect of incorporating core values (Mean 4.38) was considered most important while unanimity in strategy formulation (mean 4.08) was considered least important.

The results show that strategy formulation and strategic planning is important to the County governments in Kenya. This agrees with Bryson, Edwards and Van Slyke (2018) who analyzed strategic planning in the public sector and observed that increasingly it has been institutionalized as a fairly common practice at all levels of government in the United States and several other countries.

4.1.3 Importance of Strategy Implementation

Strategy implementation is setting actions into motion ensuring strategies and plans are implemented to achieve organization goals including its values. The aspects of strategy implementation include controlling and providing direction and committing employees to performance contracts and ensuring that individual projects are planned. The role of strategic leadership is indicated in leadership and management literature as that of providing corporate direction, control and ethics. This role has evolved as public service changed from command using laws and rules to a facilitative system where leaders through influence inspire achievement of organizational goals. In effect, strategic leaders act authentically to ensure inclusion of all

employees and giving them genuine guidance while ensuring all projects and strategic activities are properly planned. Implementation is fairly common to most employees going by the high scoring of the importance of implementation as shown in Table 20.

Table 3: Strategy Implementation

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev	Coefficient of Variation
Providing effective guidance	4.3	0.65	0.15
Controlling to involve all staff	4.28	0.65	0.15
Ensuring County strategy is followed	4.24	0.78	0.18
Signing performance contracts with clear performance indicators	4.34	0.66	0.15
Ensuring all projects are planned	4.3	0.64	0.15
Average	4.29	0.68	0.16

Respondents rated strategy implementation as highly important in county governments, with an average mean of 4.29, a standard deviation of 0.68, and a coefficient of variation of 0.16, indicating general agreement. The highest-rated aspect was signing performance contracts (Mean 4.34), while the lowest was following county strategies (Mean 4.24), reflecting employee awareness of measures to enhance implementation. Kagumu (2018) similarly identified organizational culture, leadership style, resources, and organizational structure as key determinants of strategy implementation in a study of 215 senior employees from five counties in Central Kenya.

4.1.4 Importance of Strategy Evaluation

Strategy evaluation is setting actions to assess the extent to which strategies and plans are implemented to achieve organization goals including its values. The aspects of evaluation include planning for evaluation, involving others, reporting. The importance attached to performance measurement or performance contracts means desirability of evaluation processes. This is a good starting point since evaluations need to take into account all aspects of the County Government and go beyond accounting for resources to checking for government accountability to the people. Table 4 shows the results about the importance County employees attach to evaluation.

Table 4: Strategy Evaluation

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Coefficient of Variation
Developing evaluation plans	482	4.19	0.84	0.20
Using internal experts	482	4.06	0.95	0.23
Engaging external experts	482	4.38	0.64	0.15
Stakeholders involvement	482	4.09	0.96	0.23
Timely reporting even when critical	482	4.34	0.67	0.15
Average		4.21	0.81	0.19

Respondents were asked to state the extent to which they considered strategy evaluation important in county governments. The following is a discussion of the findings. The results in the Table 21 revealed an average mean of 4.21 for strategy evaluation and a standard deviation of 0.81. This indicates that respondents consider evaluation as very important and the low coefficient of variation of 0.19 shows general agreement about importance of evaluation. The high rating for using external experts (4.38) is indicative of desire for openness while low scoring for internal experts confirms the preference for external experts to conduct evaluation.

4.1.5 Importance of Leader Character

The strategic leadership theory postulates that psychological disposition and organization decisions strategic leadership make are related which means leader character is of importance to the organization. Leader character aspects of understanding their job role, optimism, modelling positive values and recognizing ethical performance and attending to personal needs of employees are indicative of strategic leaders of acceptable character. Table 5 shows results about the importance of leader character in relation to ethics compliance at the County governments in Kenya.

Table 5: Leader Character

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Coefficient of Variation
Competent and fully understanding role	482	4.14	0.88	0.21
Being self-aware and showing optimism	482	4.22	0.84	0.20
Role modelling strong ethical values	482	3.94	1.08	0.27
Recognizing staff ethical performance	482	4.31	0.61	0.14
Attending to personalized staff concerns.	482	4.05	0.92	0.23
Building consensus by allowing all views	482	4.3	0.67	0.16
Coaching, mentoring and developing staff	482	3.96	1.07	0.27
Average		4.11	0.87	0.21

Respondents rated leader character as highly important for compliance with the code of ethics in county governments, with an average mean of 4.11, a standard deviation of 0.87, and a low coefficient of variation (0.21), indicating consensus. Key aspects of leader character, such as competency, ethical modeling, recognizing ethical performance, and attending to staff concerns, were rated positively. Building consensus by incorporating diverse views was rated highest (4.30), while modeling strong ethical values scored lowest (3.94). This aligns with Kimutai (2016), who emphasized that effective leaders listen, motivate, and involve team members, ensuring decisions reflect collective aspirations, particularly in community development projects for sustainable outcomes.

4.2 Inferential Analysis

This section examines the relationship between strategic leadership and good governance in Kenya's county governments, focusing on compliance with ethical principles. Using correlation and regression analyses, the study evaluates how strategic leadership practices influence

governance outcomes such as transparency, accountability, and integrity. Key variables include strategic visioning, formulation, implementation, evaluation, and leader character.

4.2.1 Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the association between strategic leadership and good governance, conceptualized as compliance with ethical principles. Using Pearson’s correlation coefficient, the study measured the direction and strength of the relationship between these variables at a 0.05 significance level. A positive coefficient indicated a direct relationship, while a negative one denoted an inverse relationship. The analysis confirmed statistically significant correlations where the p-value was ≤ 0.05 , highlighting the role of strategic leadership in fostering accountability, transparency, and ethical practices essential for good governance in county governments.

Table 6: Correlation Matrix

		Good Governance
Strategic Leadership	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	Pearson Correlation	.712**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000

The correlation analysis reveals a strong and significant positive relationship between strategic leadership and good governance in Kenya’s county governments, with a correlation coefficient of $r=0.712$, $p=0.000$. This indicates that as strategic leadership practices improve, there is a corresponding enhancement in good governance outcomes. Strategic leadership’s emphasis on vision, ethical decision-making, and accountability fosters adherence to governance principles, such as transparency, fairness, and integrity, which are vital for effective public administration. These results underscore the pivotal role of strategic leadership in driving good governance and ensuring ethical public service delivery at the county level.

4.2.2 Strategic Leadership and Good Governance

A simple regression model was used to test the statistical significance of the independent variable (Strategic Leadership) on the dependent variable (good governance) in the county governments in Kenya. The first hypothesis stated in the null form is as follows:

H_{01} : Strategic Leadership has no significant relationship with Compliance with Code of Ethics at the County governments in Kenya

The hypothesis sought to establish the relationship between strategic leadership (SL) and good governance at the County governments in Kenya. This hypothesis was tested by regressing composite index of SL and GG guided by the equation:

$$GG = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SL + \epsilon$$

Where SL represented strategic leadership and CCE denoted Compliance with Code of Ethics.

Table 7: Regression Summary Model

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.832a	0.692	0.689	0.1702

The coefficient of determination R^2 is 0.692. The model indicates that Strategic Leadership explains 69.2% of the variation in good governance at the County Governments. This implies that there exists a relationship between strategic leadership and Compliance with Code of Ethics at the County Governments.

Table 8: ANOVA for Strategic Leadership and Good Governance

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	30.999	5	6.2	214.09	.000 ^b
Residual	13.784	476	0.029		
Total	44.783	481			

As shown in Table 8, F-Calculated (5, 481) = 214.09 which is greater than F-Critical (1, 481) = 3.96 at 95% confidence level. Results also show that p-value = 0.000 < 0.05. This confirms that Strategic Leadership positively and significantly influences good governance at the County Governments. The low residual of 13.784 means in comparison, Strategic Leadership has higher influence than other factors.

Table 9: Regression of Strategic Leadership Sub-variables and Good Governance

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.131	0.119		1.097	0.273
Strategic Visioning	0.265	0.046	0.253	5.727	0.000
Strategy Formulation	0.181	0.045	0.172	4.008	0.000
Strategy Implementation	0.167	0.047	0.160	3.573	0.000
Strategy Evaluation	0.156	0.047	0.147	3.278	0.001
Leader Character	0.214	0.046	0.206	4.635	0.000

This can be summarized by the following model:

$$GG = 0.131 + 0.265SV + 0.181SF + 0.167SI + 0.156SE + 0.214LC$$

Where;

GG= Good Governance

SV= Strategic Visioning

SF= Strategy Formulation

SI= Strategy Implementation

SE= Strategy Evaluation

LC= Leader Character

The results in Table 9 illustrate the significant impact of various dimensions of strategic leadership on good governance in Kenya's county governments. The findings indicate that when key strategic leadership dimensions—strategic visioning, strategy formulation, strategy implementation, strategy evaluation, and leader character—are held constant, good governance would remain at 0.131. An increase in strategic visioning by one unit enhances good governance by 0.265 units ($p=0.000<0.05$), highlighting the importance of forward-looking leadership in promoting transparency and accountability. Similarly, strategy formulation improves good governance by

0.181 units ($p=0.000<0.05$), reflecting the role of sound planning in ensuring effective public service delivery. Strategy implementation contributes to a 0.167-unit improvement ($p=0.001<0.05$), emphasizing the importance of turning plans into actionable outcomes to uphold ethical standards. Strategy evaluation adds 0.156 units ($p=0.000<0.05$), showcasing how consistent review and adaptation enhance governance processes. Lastly, leader character increases good governance by 0.214 units ($p=0.000<0.05$), underscoring the critical role of ethical and integrity-driven leadership in fostering trust and adherence to governance principles. These findings reject the null hypothesis, affirming that strategic leadership significantly influences good governance in Kenya's county governments. The results align with Kagumu (2018), who highlighted the role of leadership characteristics in implementing strategic plans, and Mathenge (2014), who demonstrated the relationship between ethics and corruption, further supporting the centrality of leadership in promoting ethical governance

5.0 Discussion

The study examined the relationship between strategic leadership and good governance in Kenya's county governments, revealing a significant positive association, with strategic leadership explaining 69.2% of the variance in governance outcomes through compliance with ethical practices. Strategic visioning ($\beta = 0.265$, $p<0.05$) and leader character ($\beta = 0.214$, $p<0.05$) had the greatest impact, emphasizing the importance of forward-looking leadership and ethical integrity. Other dimensions, including strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation, also contributed significantly, demonstrating the comprehensive role of strategic leadership in fostering good governance.

The findings highlight that strategic leadership enhances transparency, accountability, and service delivery by embedding ethical principles into governance structures. This aligns with studies such as Goldman, Scott, and Follman (2015), which emphasized the role of strategic thinking in public governance, and Jabbar and Hussein (2017), who identified strategic leaders as ethical innovators. Locally, Gaitho (2019) confirmed the critical role of strategic leadership in improving service delivery in decentralized systems. While the study supports theories like authentic leadership and social exchange theory, it challenges views such as Bendahan et al. (2015), who argued that discretionary power risks corruption. By addressing gaps in prior research, the study underscores the centrality of strategic leadership in advancing ethical practices and strengthening governance in Kenya's counties.

6.0 Conclusion

The study concludes that strategic leadership is pivotal in driving good governance within Kenya's county governments by addressing systemic challenges such as corruption, resource mismanagement, and weak accountability structures. Effective strategic leadership fosters transparency, accountability, and ethical resource management by aligning organizational vision, strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation with governance principles. While county government employees demonstrate awareness of governance expectations, the persistent governance failures reflect superficial compliance rather than substantive progress, as highlighted by reports from the *Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC, 2018)*. Public sector reforms must prioritize leadership development, empowering strategic leaders to oversee resource allocation, performance monitoring, and service delivery while differentiating organizational accountability from citizen accountability. By institutionalizing leadership-driven governance frameworks and embedding ethical practices into organizational routines, county governments can

transform into resilient, transparent, and citizen-focused institutions capable of delivering sustainable development and restoring public trust.

7.0 Recommendation

The study recommends that the Government of Kenya prioritize the development of strategic leaders to enhance good governance in county governments to be trusted to embedding ethical values, accountability, and performance-driven cultures. County governments should align fully with national public service standards and be evaluated annually on their compliance with governance principles outlined in Articles 10 and 232 of the Constitution. Public sector reforms must focus on empowering strategic leadership to oversee visioning, strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation while addressing critical issues such as employee engagement, harmonization of rewards, and human resource management. Additionally, decentralization policies should integrate mechanisms for continuous evaluation and performance monitoring to ensure alignment of county plans with national goals. Strategic leadership development should be institutionalized, with leaders held accountable for fostering ethical behavior and delivering measurable governance outcomes. Further, reforms should include inputs from key stakeholders, such as professional associations, to support comprehensive and inclusive strategic planning processes. Finally, future policies must emphasize systemic approaches to combating corruption by addressing underlying governance weaknesses rather than relying on punitive measures alone.

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