

## **CHARACTER DIMENSION OF LEADERSHIP ETHICS AND PERFORMANCE OF DEVOLVED GOVERNMENTS IN KENYA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose of the study:** The study examined the influence of the character dimension of leadership ethics on the performance of devolved governments in Kenya.

**Statement of the problem:** In Kenya, unethical practices in the public sector and the political arena have been widely reported. Just like other countries, there have been incidences of unethical conduct among leaders in the public or private sector. The country has witnessed rampant unethical practices, such as corruption, overpricing of goods and services and incomplete projects despite budget allocation, among others.

**Methodology:** The target population comprises county government officials across all 47 counties in Kenya, including governors, county assembly speakers, representatives from the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC), controllers of budget, public fora members, chairs of county boards, and auditors general. Through structured questionnaires and interview guides, data was collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression models.

**Findings:** The findings suggest that the character dimension of leadership ethics significantly influences the performance of devolved governments, with values such as honesty, kindness, and equality positively impacting organizational outcomes.

**Conclusion:** Leaders with strong moral character traits, including integrity, honesty, and ethical decision-making, significantly influence organizational effectiveness and governance outcomes.

**Recommendations:** It is recommended to implement comprehensive ethical leadership training programs for current and aspiring leaders. These programs should focus on cultivating moral integrity, ethical decision-making, and values-based leadership behaviors. Incorporating case studies, role-playing exercises, and real-world ethical dilemmas can provide leaders with practical skills and strategies for navigating complex ethical challenges.

**Keywords:** *Character dimension, ethical leadership, performance, devolved governments, Kenya.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

MacLeod (2020) opines that leadership ethics is defined as leadership demonstrating and promoting normative appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relations. Leadership ethics is defined as putting people into management and leadership positions to promote appropriate, ethical conduct in the actions and relationships in the workplace. Leadership ethics is leadership that is focused on ethical principles and values such as trust, honesty and fairness (Maina, Namusonge, & Kabare, 2016). Leadership ethics is the art of leading people and making good decisions based on a defined set of values, such as fairness, accountability, trust, honesty, equality, and respect. In fact, these values form the core foundation of leadership ethics (Setiawan et al., 2016; Setiawan et al., 2022).

Leadership ethics is crucial for the performance of organizations (Breene & Nunes, 2016). This is because leadership ethics implies that there is a focus on the triple bottom line which is profits, people and planet. By considering profits, leadership ethics ensures that the shareholders are taken care of as they can get a good return on investment. With regard to people, leadership ethics ensures that the stakeholders such as suppliers and customers are satisfied with the activities of the company which has not been practiced. Acting wholesomely, Leadership ethics ensures that there is environmental sustainability (Nel & Beudeker, 2019). As a result of this, devolved governments have had different policy instruments, which are meant to improve the efficiencies, effectiveness, and quality of public services (Texter, 2021).

Gallagher (2021) observed that leadership ethics are crucial in situations where changes within bureaucracy are essential. Scholars have highlighted that the core rationale behind leadership ethics is to enhance quality public service delivery in devolved governance. Shattock (2020) argued that improving service delivery in devolved units requires redistributing responsibilities from central to district-level governments (Manyala, Guyo, & Moronge, 2020). Amuhaya, Namusonge, and Nthigah (2018) provided a clear understanding that the level of ethics among public officials in managing public affairs has consistently declined since independence (Wainaina, 2017). Several observations relate to the governance state of the past and present. For instance, it is undeniable that patron-client relations have been major contributors to the

deterioration of public ethics in Kenya (Odhiambo-Mbai, 2018). Despite reforms and promises by successive regimes to ensure good governance, unethical practices seem to have worsened over the years (Boex & Smoke, 2020).

In Malaysia, Alam, Johari, and Said (2018) revealed that enhancing integrity within government institutions significantly improves service delivery performance. Another study in Malaysia by Abidin, Hashim, and Ariff (2017) indicated that commitment to ethical aspects such as honesty, social responsibility, and relationships in business operations is essential for maintaining corporate financial sustainability, which positively impacts performance. In the USA, Bowen, Moon, and Kim (2017) indicated that ethical practices by leaders are critical in determining performance. In the German public sector, leadership ethics include honesty, accountability, and transparency (Khudhair et al., 2019). The benefit of accountability is that leaders admit to their mistakes instead of blaming others. Integrity in leaders involves being straightforward, reliable, and trusted (Donkor & Kankam-Kwarteng, 2017).

In Egypt, Nafei (2015) reveals a positive relationship between leadership ethics and service delivery of government institutions. In South Africa, Zamokuhle, Nirmala and Omololu (2020) indicate a positive effect between leadership ethics and the quality-of-service delivery and quality of life. Lack of leadership ethics among the leaders derails the completion of the projects, thus lowering the service delivery among the people. Moreover, in Congo, Mitonga-Monga and Cilliers (2016) note that aspects of leadership ethics such as perceived honesty, fairness and integrity explain the extent of performance within the government offices. Thus, the objective of this study was to establish how character dimension of leadership ethics on influences performance of devolved governments in Kenya.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

In Kenya, unethical practices in the public sector and the political arena have been widely reported (Masungu, Marangu, Obunga & Lilungu, 2015). Just like other countries, there have been incidences of unethical conduct among leaders in the public or private sector (Rigii, Ogutu, Awino & Kitiabi, 2019). The country has witnessed rampant unethical practices, such as corruption,

overpricing of goods and services and incompleting projects despite budget allocation, among others (Gaitho, Ogutu, Awino & Kitiabi, 2019). Failure to deal with unethical Leadership in Kenya has resulted in a series of major scandals in the public sector for decades. In the past, there have been numerous cases of individuals who have been accused of embezzling public funds, yet they have never been convicted (Kiarie, Maru & Cheruiyot, 2017). Nearly all government institutions suffer from unethical leadership resulting in embezzlement of public funds, nepotism and loss of public confidence in most government institutions (Murithi, Makokha and Otieno, 2017).

Kenya is one of the most highly ranked countries in terms of corruption. In the 2016 global economic crime survey by price house water coopers, Kenya was ranked number 3 most corrupt country out of the 115 countries that were studied (Barare, 2018). In 2010, Kenya launched a series of reforms to decentralize the state's administrative apparatus (Cheeseman, Lynch & Willis 2016). These statutes created 47 sub-national governments responsible for managing public services through partnerships with civil society; changes that aimed to streamline development, deepen democracy, and secure political stability (Munyoki, 2017). Devolved units under the framework of law of autonomies and decentralization exist to achieve the goal of "the effective participation of citizens in decision making, the deepening of democracy, the satisfaction of collective necessities, and the integral socioeconomic development of the Country. Thus, the objective of the current study was to establish how character dimension of leadership ethics influences performance of devolved governments in Kenya.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

The objective of the study was to establish the influence of character dimension of leadership ethics on performance of devolved governments in Kenya.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Review**

The study was guided by ethical leadership theory, a framework developed by Linda Trevino, Laura Hartman, and Michael Brown, and further expanded upon by Toma Gonzalez and Manuel

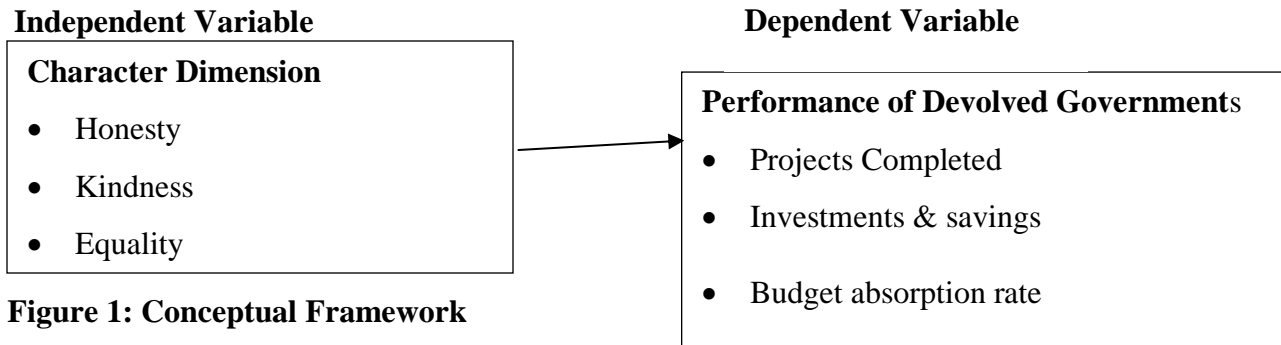
Guillen. This theory proposes that ethical leadership fosters a balance between the well-being of subordinates or the community and organizational profitability (Banks, Fischer, Gooty & Stock, 2021). Ethical leadership is delineated into four critical dimensions: character, which includes traits such as honesty, kindness, and equality (Madanchian, Hussein, Noordin & Taherdoost, 2018; Beekun, 2019; Zaim, Demir & Budur, 2021; Mbandlwa, Dorasamy & Fagbadebo, 2020); technical, emphasizing goal clarity and transparency (Ying & Mansori, 2017; Obicci, 2015; Shakeel, Kruyen & Van Thiel, 2020); empowerment behavior, which advocates for power-sharing and the encouragement of skill advancement (Zaim, Demir & Budur, 2021; Hawass, 2016; Irfan & Lodhi, 2019; Ahearne, Mathieu & Rapp, 2021); and moral, which stresses the leader's role as an ethical exemplar, demonstrating virtues like trustworthiness, fairness, honesty, and integrity, and upholding principles of distributive justice, diversity respect, and accountability (Kumar & Saha, 2017; Tekin & Ertürk, 2019; Obicci, 2015; Silva & Dias, 2016; Khuntia & Suar, 2018). Each of these dimensions contributes distinctively to the holistic development and ethical orientation of leadership within organizations, reinforcing the theory's applicability to studies of governance and performance in devolved settings.

The theory was relevant to the current study. Ethical leadership theory, particularly the character dimension highlighted by various scholars, underscores the crucial role that traits such as honesty, kindness, and equality play in effective governance. In the context of devolved governments in Kenya, these traits are pivotal in fostering trust and ethical behavior, which in turn enhance administrative performance and public satisfaction. By adopting ethical leadership, leaders can significantly influence the organizational culture and ethical climate, thereby promoting a higher standard of service delivery and accountability. This alignment between the character traits of leaders and their impact on performance validates the focus of the study, linking ethical leadership directly to the effectiveness of devolved governance systems.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Conceptual framework can be defined as a set of broad ideas and principles taken from relevant fields of inquiry and used to structure a subsequent presentation (Myers, 2013). Figure 1 shows

the conceptual framework which will be used in this study and depicts the interrelationship between the study variables.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

### **Empirical Review**

A study conducted by Ouma (2017) study sought to determine the effect of ethical leadership on employee commitment among managers in the transport sector parastatals in Kenya. It indicated character dimension of ethical leadership, technical dimension of ethical leadership, empowerment behavior dimension of ethical leadership and moral dimension of ethical leadership positively and significantly affect employee commitment. Another research was undertaken by Singo (2018) to assess the impact of character dimension of ethical leadership in the promotion of good governance in the Limpopo Province in South Africa. The results of the study showed that character dimension of ethical leadership is key in the promotion of good governance in the Limpopo Province in South Africa. Moreover, another study was conducted by Madanchian, Hussein, Noordin and Taherdoost (2018) to examine the impact of character dimension of ethical leadership on leadership effectiveness among SMEs in Malaysia. The study was conducted among the SMEs in Putrajaya. The study adopted the descriptive research design. Questionnaires were used to collect the data. The analysis of the data was done using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The results of the study showed that character dimension of ethical leadership has a direct and positive effect on leadership effectiveness.

In addition, Tanui (2016) looked at the relationship between character dimension of ethical leadership and employee performance at Kenya Ports Authority. The study adopted a descriptive design. The population for the study was 4800 which was 75% of the total population. The data

collected was analyzed by use of descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. The results found that character dimension of ethical leadership influence the performance of the employees in the workplace. Fairness, justice and equal opportunities motivated employees and encouraged them to work harder contributing to improved performance. Likewise, Gichira (2016) showed that distributive, procedural, interpersonal and informational justice perceptions had a significant relationship with all three constructs of employee commitment among health sector NGOs. A study was similarly conducted by Obicci (2015) to investigate the effect of character dimension of ethical leadership on employee performance in the public sector in Uganda. A target population of 160 employees was surveyed. Results of the study revealed that employee performance is greatly influenced by ethical leadership.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a positivist research philosophy. The research design was descriptive and correlational. The target population consisted of 329 county government officials across Kenya's 47 counties. A sample size of 180 respondents was determined using Slovin's formula. The study selected 25 counties from the 6 regional Economic Blocks in Kenya based on the ranking of their performance and ethical issues reports based on the EACC reports bottom twenty-five (25) according to the National Ethics and Corruption survey report in 2022 in a report released in March 2023. Therefore, following twenty six counties were selected; Nairobi (Nairobi County); Muranga, Nyeri (Mt. Kenya and Aberdares Region Economic Bloc);Jumuia Ya Kaunti Za Pwani (Kwale, Tana River and Taita Taveta); South Eastern Kenya Economic Bloc (Kiyui, Machakos and Makueni); Frontier Counties Development Council( Lamu, Isiolo, Samburu, West Pokot and Mandera), North Rift Economic Bloc (Baringo, Elgeyo Marakwet and Uasin Gishu), Lake Region Economic Bloc (Nyamira, Migori, Nandi, Busia and Transzoia) and South Eastern Kenya Economic Bloc (Kitui, Machakos and Makueni). Stratified random sampling was employed, with questionnaires administered to governors, speakers, EACC representatives, and other officials. The study collected both primary data through self-administered questionnaires and secondary data from government reports.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Response Rate

The study distributed 180 questionnaires to 25 county governments in Kenya. Out of the 180 questionnaires, 160 were returned. However, of the 160 returned, a total of 113 were reasonably and adequately completed representing approximately 70.65% response rate (Table 1). This response rate falls within the confines of a large sample ( $n \geq 30$ ). Additionally, the response rate was deemed satisfactory as suggested by Portney (2020) who recommends 60% as a rule of the thumb for minimum responses. Further, regarding the works of Jaworski and Kohli, (1993) and Prasad *et al.* (2021), this response rate is considered satisfactory and is comparable to research on similar topics in devolution. The table shows the study response rate.

**Table 1: Response Rate**

Responses	No.	Percentages
Administered questionnaires	180	100%
Returned	160	88.89%
Unusable questionnaires	47	29.35%
Usable questionnaires	113	70.65%

Regression analysis is a set of statistical methods used to estimate relationships between variables. The regression analysis includes the presentation of model fitness, variance analysis (ANOVA) and regression coefficients.

### Descriptive Statistics

Respondents were requested to indicate their level of agreement with various statements on aspects of character dimension of leadership ethics. It was posited as a one-dimensional construct measured by the six items. These include; County leadership demonstrates high levels of honesty when handling customer matters (CD1); The county management exhibit kindness to employees and customers (CD2); There is fair and equal treatment to all of the employees working in the county(CD3); The leaders in the county encourage employees to show kindness to the customers(AL4); The county leadership encourages equality of the employees and customers(AL5); The county leadership promotes employees based on their kindness, honesty and equality they exhibit to the customers (CD6). This objective was measured using opinion statements on the Likert scale of 1 to 5. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which



they agreed with character dimension opinion statements that are executed in the county governments. This was on a Likert scale of (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree). The result of the analysis is presented in Table 2.

According to the findings, the respondents agreed that counties leadership demonstrated high levels of honesty when handling customer matters ( $M=3.874$ ,  $SD=0.902$ ). The study established that the respondents agreed that counties' management exhibited kindness to employees and customers ( $M=3.728$ ,  $SD=0.682$ ). The respondents agreed that there was fair and equal treatment to all of the employees working in the county ( $M=3.862$ ,  $SD=0.319$ ). The respondents also agreed that leaders in the county encouraged employees to show kindness to the customers ( $M=3.678$ ,  $SD=0.217$ ). It was also established that counties' leadership encouraged equality of the employees and customers ( $M=3.723$ ,  $SD=0.429$ ). The respondents agreed that counties' leadership promoted employees based on their kindness, honesty and equality they exhibit to the customers ( $M=3.728$ ,  $SD=0.682$ ). The finding revealed that the respondents took a positive position (above 3.5). All items had a mean of above 3.0. The standard deviation of less than one indicates that the responses were closely varied. This shows that the general position was that the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the items. The scores of responses for this section agreed at 55% indicating that most respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that character dimension of ethical leadership was a key driver of performance of devolved governments in Kenya. Overall, character dimension summed up to a mean of 3.765, standard deviation of 0.538, skewness of 0.69 and kurtosis of 0.04. The implication is that the devolved governments in Kenya have made minimal efforts towards the adoption of ethical leadership specifically the character dimension to enhance performance in terms of project completed, budget absorption rate, investment and savings.

The results of the descriptive analysis are in line with the findings by Yu, Xiao, and Bo (2018) study on the dimensions of organizational character and its impacts on organizational performance in Chinese context. The current study findings indicated that showed that the character dimension of ethical leadership enhance formation and cultivation of organizational character would directly improve an organizations' business performance as well as their growth potential. It is worth noting that a special part of organizational character, which may depend more on national culture or institutional background than organizational individuals, also has an impact on organizational

performance. The study is in tandem with the findings by Madachian et al.(2018) on the importance of character is reflected and indeed embedded in organizational systems and processes. Hence senior leaders must recognize behaviors that exemplify good character.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for the Construct Character Dimension**

Code	Statements n = 113	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev
CD1	County leadership demonstrates high levels of honesty when handling customer matters	5.0	5.0	7.0	28.1	54.9	3.874	.902
CD2	The county management exhibit kindness to employees and customers	7.0	8.1	9.8	56.8	17.3	3.728	.682
CD3	There is fair and equal treatment to all of the employees working in the county	3.3	7.0	1.0	43.9	51.8	3.862	.319
CD4	The leaders in the county encourage employees to show kindness to the customers t	5.8	36.3	7.6	54.8	32.8	3.678	.217
CD5	The county leadership encourages equality of the employees and customers	16.8	9.3	4.3	68.8	5.4	3.723	.429
CD6	The county leadership promotes employees based on their kindness, honesty and equality they exhibit to the customers	7.0	8.1	9.8	56.8	17.3	3.728	.682
Average							3.765	.538

The respondents were asked to give their opinion on the influence of character dimension of leadership ethics on performance of county governments in Kenya. The respondents indicated that character dimension of leadership ethics plays a crucial role in influencing the performance of devolved governments in Kenya. Ethical leadership, characterized by strong moral character and integrity, has far-reaching implications for how leaders make decisions, interact with stakeholders, and foster a positive organizational culture. character dimension of leadership ethics is a foundational element that significantly influences the performance of devolved governments in

Kenya. Leaders who prioritize ethical behavior contribute to a positive organizational climate, foster trust with stakeholders, and set the stage for effective governance and service delivery. The impact of ethical leadership on performance is multifaceted, creating a ripple effect throughout the organization and the broader community.

### Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis is used to show the association between the independent and dependent variables. The association can be positive, negative, or no association. The Correlation results are shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 31: Correlation Analysis**

		Performance	Character Dimension of Leadership ethics
Performance	Pearson Correlation	1.000	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
Character Dimension of Leadership ethics	Pearson Correlation	.430**	1.000

The correlation results depicted in Table 3 establish a positive and significant association between character dimension of Leadership ethics and performance ( $r=.430$ ,  $p=.000$ ). The study concurs with Singo (2018) who revealed that the character dimension of Leadership ethics plays a pivotal role in promoting good governance in the Limpopo Province in South Africa. Madanchian et al. (2018) indicated a direct and positive effect of the character dimension of Leadership ethics on leadership effectiveness. Irawanto (2015) examined employee motivation and discovered a significant positive effect of the technical dimension of Leadership ethics among state-owned enterprises in Indonesia. Ouma et al. (2018) identified a positive and significant relationship with employee commitment among senior managers in the transport sector parastatals in Kenya. Silva and Dias (2016) highlighted the positive relationship between organizational training and employee commitment and Manduku (2017) also demonstrated a positive impact on the financial performance of listed firms in Kenya.

### Regression Analysis

Regression analysis is a set of statistical methods used to estimate relationships between variables. The regression analysis includes the presentation of model fitness, variance analysis (ANOVA) and regression coefficients. The summary the model fitness results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Model Fitness of Character Dimension of Leadership ethics and Performance**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.430	0.185	0.178	0.2799354

a Predictor: (Constant), Character Dimension of Leadership ethics

The results presented in Table 4 establish that character dimension of Leadership ethics is satisfactory in influencing performance of devolved governments in Kenya. The coefficient of determination, also known as the R square, was 0.185 (18.5%). This implied that character dimension of Leadership ethics can explain 18.5% of the variations in performance of devolved governments in Kenya. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) was determined and the study results are presented in Table 5

**Table 5: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of Character Dimension of Leadership ethics and Performance**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1.974	1	1.974	25.19	.000
	Residual	8.698	111	0.078		
	Total	10.672	112			

a Dependent Variable: Performance

b Predictors: (Constant), Character Dimension of Leadership ethics

Based on the study results presented in Table 5, the p-value was found to be 0 .000, which is less than 0.05; thus, character dimension of Leadership ethics are significant in explaining the performance of devolved governments in Kenya. Further, the result of regressions of the coefficients are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6: Regression coefficients of Character Dimension of Leadership ethics and Performance**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.348	0.166		20.147	0.000
	Character Dimension of Leadership ethics	0.210	0.042	0.43	5.019	0.000

a Dependent Variable: Performance

The model is;  $Y = 3.348 + 0.210X$ ; Where: - Y= Performance; X= Character Dimension of Leadership ethics

Table 6 shows that character dimension of Leadership ethics is positively and significantly related to performance of devolved governments in Kenya ( $\beta=0.210$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). The study rejects the null hypothesis because the P value (0.000) is less than 0.05. Therefore, character dimension of Leadership ethics has a substantial influence on performance of devolved governments in Kenya.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings highlight the pivotal role of the character dimension of leadership ethics in shaping the performance of devolved governments in Kenya. Leaders with strong moral character traits, including integrity, honesty, and ethical decision-making, significantly influence organizational effectiveness and governance outcomes. The study underscores the importance of cultivating ethical leadership practices that prioritize moral integrity and uphold ethical principles within the devolved government context. By emphasizing the significance of character-based leadership, this objective emphasizes the need for leaders to serve as ethical role models and inspire trust, accountability, and transparency within their organizations. Overall, the findings suggest that fostering a culture of ethical leadership characterized by moral integrity is essential for promoting effective governance and enhancing performance in devolved governments.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended to implement comprehensive ethical leadership training programs for current and aspiring leaders. These programs should focus on cultivating moral integrity, ethical decision-making, and values-based leadership behaviors. Incorporating case studies, role-playing exercises, and real-world ethical dilemmas can provide leaders with practical skills and strategies for navigating complex ethical challenges. Additionally, ongoing mentorship and coaching initiatives can offer personalized guidance and support in applying ethical principles in everyday leadership practices. By investing in ethical leadership development, devolved governments can foster a culture of integrity, trust, and accountability, ultimately enhancing performance and governance.

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