

Self-Leadership and Organisational Performance: The Moderating Role of the Institutional Environment in Kenyan County Governments

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Abstract

Purpose: This study addresses the persistent underperformance and service delivery challenges within Kenyan County Governments. It aims to propose an integrated conceptual framework that examines the relationship between employee Self-Leadership (SL) strategies and County Government Performance (CGP), while analyzing the moderating role of the External Institutional Environment (IE). **Design/Methodology/Approach:** This is a conceptual paper that relies on a theoretical triangulation of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and Institutional Theory (IT). The study reviews existing literature to construct a multi-level model that bridges micro-level individual behaviors with macro-level organizational outcomes and environmental constraints. **Findings:** The conceptual analysis suggests that disaggregated SL strategies—specifically Behaviour-Focused strategies, Natural Reward strategies, and Constructive Thought Patterns—are critical drivers of organizational performance. However, the study posits that this relationship is not unconditional. The External Institutional Environment acts as a critical boundary condition: supportive normative isomorphism amplifies the positive impact of SL on performance, whereas high coercive isomorphism and political instability attenuate or nullify these effects. **Practical Implications:** To enhance public sector performance, the study suggests that County Governments should move beyond traditional top-down leadership training. Instead, administrators should implement interventions focused on behavioral self-management, revise hiring practices to screen for self-leadership traits, and strategically “buffer” technical staff from political interference to allow individual initiative to flourish. **Originality/Value:** This research contributes to literature by shifting the discourse from formal leadership traits to employee agency. It offers a novel

perspective by defining the specific institutional conditions (“road blocks”) that determine when and how individual self-leadership (“the engine”) translates into tangible public sector success in developing economies.

Keywords

Self-Leadership, County Government Performance, Institutional Theory, External Institutional Environment, Kenya, Public Sector Management

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

Leadership is recognized globally as a crucial determinant of organizational success, particularly within the public sector, which is tasked with complex and multifaceted service delivery (OECD, 2023; Taylor, 2021). Historically, leadership discourse has shifted from trait-based models toward ethical and distributed styles that foster empowerment and innovation (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Goldsby, Goldsby, Neck, & Neck, 2020). In the African context, decentralized governmental units are uniquely challenged by issues of capacity gaps and institutional fragility (Nachum & Stevens, 2023; Boso, Amankwah-Amoah, & Esuman, 2023).

In Kenya, the context is fundamentally shaped by the 2010 Constitution’s devolution mandate, requiring counties to exhibit strategic, ethical, and performance-oriented capabilities (Kimani, Oluoch, & Ncabira, 2021; CGK CIDP, 2022-2027). However, Kenyan county governments consistently exhibit poor performance, evidenced by fiscal shortfalls (Republic of Kenya, 2023), accumulating pending bills, and widespread service inadequacies (Mbui & Minja, 2023). Literature attributes these failures, which directly impede national goals, partly to deficiencies in the governance structure (the IE) (Waithaka et al., 2018). Since strong leadership and effective governance are essential, this background necessitates an examination of Self-Leadership (SL), an internal, individual-level mechanism, and its conditional effectiveness within this challenging External Institutional Environment (IE).

1.2. Defining Self-Leadership in the Public Sector Context

Self-Leadership (SL) is an intrapersonal process where individuals influence themselves to achieve the self-direction and self-motivation necessary for goal accomplishment (Manz, 1986). It complements conventional leadership styles (Park & Byon, 2024) by enhancing psychological empowerment in autonomous settings (Dorssen-Boog et al., 2021), which translates naturally into proactive behaviors.

SL is comprised of three core strategies (Neck, Manz, & Houghton, 2020):

1) Behaviour-Focused Strategies: Techniques for managing one’s own behavior (e.g., self-goal setting, self-observation) necessary for routine and challenging tasks (Nnaemeka et al., 2020).

2) Natural Reward Strategies: Efforts to find enjoyment or pleasure in the task itself, fostering intrinsic motivation for sustained effort and creativity (Ramendra Singh, Singh, & Banerji, 2018).

3) Constructive Thought Patterns: Strategies for managing destructive thoughts and beliefs (e.g., self-talk, mental practice), building the resilience needed for problem-solving and service improvement (Liu, Peng, & Wen, 2023).

In contexts like Kenyan county governments, where bureaucratic inertia and resource scarcity are pervasive, SL is critically relevant. It acts as a necessary micro-level response to macro-level institutional deficiencies, empowering public servants to proactively engage in service improvement (Botha & Steyn, 2022; Gkontelos, Vaiopoulou, & Stamovlasis, 2023). This study is significant as it disaggregates these strategies to test their specific, direct contributions to Kenyan county performance, acknowledging that this contribution is critically moderated by the IE.

1.3. Self-Leadership Strategies, External Institutional Environment and Performance

This study moves beyond the direct relationship between Self-Leadership (SL) and performance by examining the critical influence of the External Institutional Environment (IE). Self-leadership strategies—Behaviour-Focused, Natural Reward, and Constructive Thought Patterns—are fundamentally individual-level mechanisms designed to enhance goal attainment and drive proactivity (Maden-Eyiusta & Alparslan, 2022; Inam, Ho, & Sheikh, 2023). Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that these strategies contribute significantly to improved individual and collective outcomes in autonomous and modern work settings (Ilker, Meral, & Gulay, 2021; Knotts & Houghton, 2021).

However, the efficacy of individual initiative in the public sector is rarely determined solely by the employee. As stipulated by Institutional Theory (IT), the macro-level IE acts as a powerful conditional force (Swaminathan & Wade, 2016). Recent research confirms that institutional pressures moderate the translation of positive individual behaviors into organizational performance (Su, Mou, & Zhou, 2023; Zuo, Li, & Alam, 2023). Specifically, the moderating nature of the IE dictates the extent to which self-directed behavior is supported, legitimized, and rewarded (Gleim, Smith, & Cronin Jr., 2019).

Where the IE is characterized by strong normative isomorphism (e.g., clear professional standards, an ethical climate that rewards initiative), the positive influence of SL strategies on County Government Performance (CGP) is expected to be amplified (Goetz & Morschett, 2023). Employees' efforts toward self-management and resilience are reinforced by a supportive system (Karimi et al., 2022). Conversely, in environments dominated by high coercive isomorphism (e.g., political meddling, rigid bureaucratic compliance, or weak legal enforcement leading to corruption), the effects of SL are often attenuated or nullified (Neck et al., 2023). An employee's self-directed efforts may fail to translate into better CGP if systemic

integrity issues render their best efforts meaningless. This conceptualization establishes the IE as the critical boundary condition, addressing the knowledge gap in the introduction by ensuring the study tests the conditional effectiveness of SL capacity within the challenging governance context of Kenyan counties.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

This study's conceptual framework is anchored in the integration of three complementary theories: Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and Institutional Theory (IT). This triangulation provides a robust, multi-level explanation, bridging individual motivation and behavior with organizational outcomes and external environmental constraints, with a specific focus on the Institutional Theory's role as the macro-level boundary.

2.1. Social Cognitive Theory

Championed by [Bandura \(1986\)](#), SCT posits that human functioning is influenced by the reciprocal interaction of behavior, personal factors (cognition), and the environment ([Beauchamp, Crawford, & Jackson, 2019](#)). SL is a direct application of SCT, providing the specific cognitive and behavioral strategies that employees use to influence their motivation and subsequent proactive behavior within the organizational environment ([Manz, 1986](#); [Nnaemeka et al., 2020](#)). Research confirms that SL strategies, such as setting challenging goals and utilizing constructive thought, enhance self-efficacy (a core tenet of SCT), which, in turn, fuels the behaviors necessary for improving performance ([Park & Byon, 2024](#); [Limo, Biwott, & Maru, 2019](#)).

2.2. Self-Determination Theory

Developed by [Deci and Ryan \(1985\)](#), Self-Determination Theory focuses on the degree to which an individual's motivation is autonomous and intrinsic versus controlled and extrinsic ([Deci & Ryan, 2000](#)). SDT proposes that individuals possess three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness ([Ryan & Deci, 2018](#)). This study integrates SDT because self-leadership strategies—particularly Natural Reward and Constructive Thought Patterns—directly satisfy the needs for autonomy and competence ([Liu, Peng, & Wen, 2023](#); [Guo, 2023](#)). By fostering autonomous, intrinsic motivation, SDT explains the motivational depth necessary for employees to engage in the effortful, often risky, processes of problem-solving and service improvement that are required to improve the performance of county governments ([Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017](#)).

2.3. Institutional Theory and the External Institutional Environment

The External Institutional Environment (IE) is conceptualized as the critical macro-level factor that influences the effectiveness of internal organizational processes and individual agency ([Swaminathan & Wade, 2016](#)). The role of the IE is ex-

plained through Institutional Theory (IT), pioneered by Meyer and Rowan (1977). IT argues that organizations adopt structures and practices to gain legitimacy by conforming to external social and political pressures known as isomorphism: normative, coercive, and mimetic (Alberti, 2019). In the public sector, the IE (e.g., anti-corruption laws, oversight from the Controller of Budget, citizen demands) exerts powerful coercive and normative pressure on county governments for performance and accountability (Bwogen & Murigi, 2023; Ngugi, Musili, & Lutta, 2022).

While normative and coercive pressures are central, this study also acknowledges the potential role of mimetic isomorphism, where county governments may imitate the practices and structures of perceived successful peers to navigate uncertainty (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Recent studies in public administration indicate that mimetic pressures establish “best practice” benchmarks that can either validate or discourage individual innovation depending on the models being imitated (Baschung, 2024; Khan & Sami, 2023).

To ensure the moderating variable is concrete for future empirical testing, the “External Institutional Environment” is specifically operationalized through measurable dimensions including: (1) Regulatory Quality, defined by the clarity and consistency of local by-laws; (2) Political Stability, assessed by the frequency of leadership turnover and political interference (BTI Transformation Index, 2024); and (3) Anti-Corruption Enforcement, measured by the effectiveness of audit implementations (Koeswayo et al., 2024).

The IE is conceptualized as a critical moderator that establishes the boundary condition for the effectiveness of individual initiative. If the institutional environment provides clarity, supports ethical action, and rewards initiative (high normative isomorphism), the positive effect of SL on CGP will be amplified (Gleim, Smith, & Cronin Jr., 2019). Conversely, if the IE is characterized by political meddling, high coercive pressure focused purely on compliance, or weak legal enforcement, the effects of individual initiative will be attenuated or nullified (Zuo, Li, & Alam, 2023). The mechanism of this attenuation is distinct: high coercive pressure does not merely demotivate employees; it actively blocks the aggregation of self-led efforts. Even when an employee exercises high self-leadership, rigid bureaucratic bottlenecks and political gatekeeping prevent these proactive behaviors from converting into tangible organizational outputs, effectively severing the link between individual effort and county performance (Koeswayo et al., 2024).

2.4. County Government Performance

County Government Performance is defined as the extent to which a devolved government unit effectively and legitimately achieves its mandated objectives (Taylor, 2021; Mohangi & Nyika, 2023). Unlike private sector performance, CGP is inherently complex and multidimensional, lacking a single bottom line (Vignieri, 2018). It must simultaneously account for fiscal accountability, service quality, process efficiency, and long-term capacity building (Almatrooshi, Sing, & Farouk,

2016). This study adopts the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) Model (Kaplan & Norton, 1992, as adapted for the public sector) to operationalize CGP. The BSC is selected over alternative models because it moves beyond purely financial metrics, which are insufficient for the public sector. Recent empirical reviews in local government contexts confirm that the BSC aligns with the Kenyan constitutional mandate by integrating the “Citizen Perspective” and “Internal Processes,” ensuring that performance is measured not just by budget absorption, but by the tangible delivery of services and the efficiency of governance systems (Khunoethe et al., 2021; Gębczyńska & Brajer-Marczak, 2020). The four perspectives of the BSC directly correspond to major performance critiques in Kenya (Tawse & Tabesh, 2022):

- Financial Perspective: Addresses fiscal deficiencies (e.g., Own-Source Revenue and budget absorption) (Nzomo, 2023).
- Customer/Citizen Perspective: Addresses service inadequacies (e.g., healthcare access and infrastructure quality) (CGM CIDP, 2023-2027).
- Internal Process Perspective: Measures the efficiency of core administrative processes and proactive problem-solving (Pulakos, Mueller-Hanson, & Arad, 2019).
- Learning and Growth Perspective: Aligns with the independent variable (SL), assessing staff competency, IT adoption, and organizational readiness (Munala & Mwasiaji, 2023).

2.5. Integrated Conceptual Framework

The study’s framework is built upon the integration of complementary theories, creating a robust, multi-level model that links micro-level behavior to macro-level outcomes.

1) **Micro-Level Mechanism (SCT & SDT):** Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) provides the foundation for the independent variable, Self-Leadership (SL) Strategies, by explaining the cognitive and behavioral self-influence processes (e.g., self-efficacy, self-goal setting). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) complements this by explaining the motivation depth of SL, particularly how Natural Reward and Constructive Thought strategies satisfy the psychological needs for autonomy and competence, thereby fueling the sustained, intrinsic effort required to achieve goals and drive County Government Performance (CGP).

2) **Macro-Level Boundary Condition (IT):** Institutional Theory (IT) establishes the crucial macro-level context by defining the External Institutional Environment (IE) as the primary moderator. While SCT and SDT explain the “engine” of performance (individual motivation and agency), Institutional Theory defines the “road conditions.” The framework posits that a powerful engine (high SL) cannot yield optimal speed (Performance) if the road is broken (adverse IE).

The link between individual-level SL and organizational-level performance is established through an aggregation mechanism: as the proactive and disciplined behaviors of many self-led individuals accumulate, they create superior organizational routines. This collective efficacy improves fiscal effectiveness and service

delivery, transforming micro-level inputs into macro-level organizational outcomes (Moura et al., 2020; EJBM, 2023).

The Integrated Conceptual Framework, depicted in **Figure 1**, establishes the link between micro-level behavioral drivers and macro-level organizational outcomes, positing that Self-Leadership (SL) Strategies (Behavior-Focused, Natural Reward, and Constructive Thought) are critical determinants of County Government Performance (CGP) (Fiscal Effectiveness, Service Delivery, and Governance Quality). This primary relationship is not unconditional but is significantly influenced by the External Institutional Environment (IE), which acts as a moderator, reflecting the crucial context of coercive and normative pressures derived from Institutional Theory (IT).

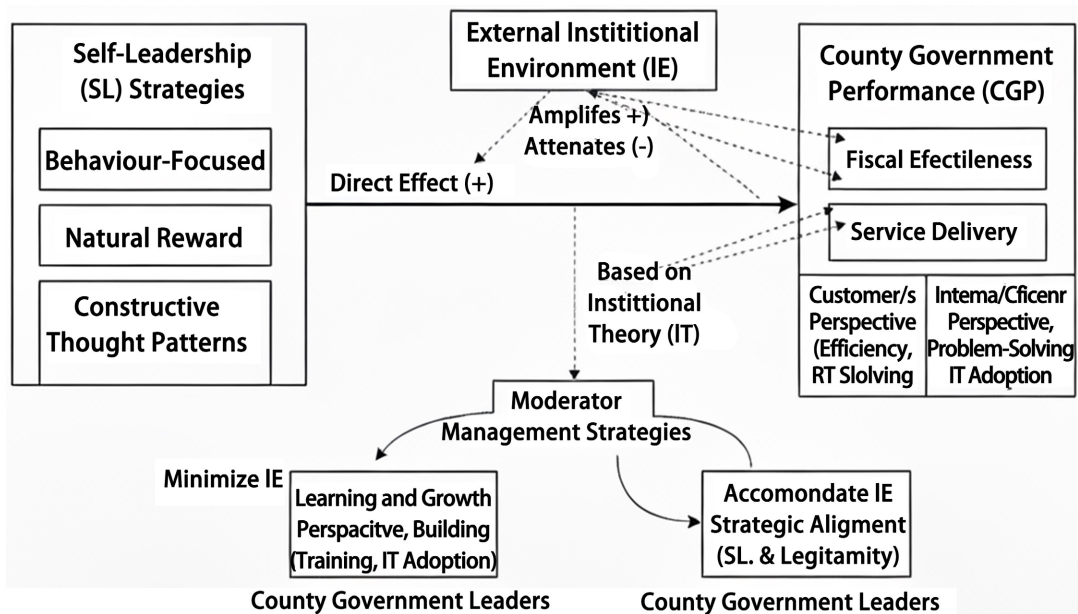


Figure 1. Conceptual model: self-leadership, institutional environment, and county government performance. Source (Author, 2025).

3. Conclusion

This conceptual analysis proposes a novel, integrated framework that reorients the performance crisis in Kenyan County Governments from a failure of formal, top-down leadership to a challenge of harnessing micro-level employee agency. By integrating Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and Institutional Theory (IT), we established that disaggregated Self-Leadership (SL) strategies—focused on behavioral discipline, intrinsic motivation, and constructive thinking—are the essential engine of organizational performance. Our central contribution lies in postulating the External Institutional Environment (IE) as the critical boundary condition. This macro-level context dictates the efficacy of individual initiative, suggesting that efforts driven by employee self-management will only translate into tangible organizational success (Fiscal Responsibility, Service Delivery, and Governance Quality) if the prevailing political, regu-

latory, and normative pressures allow for it. Ultimately, the framework addresses a significant knowledge gap by shifting the focus from simply *what* drives performance (SL) to *when* and *under what conditions* individual initiative effectively contributes to public sector effectiveness.

4. Policy Implications and Practical Implications

Based on the identified dynamic between the “engine” of self-leadership and the “road blocks” of the institutional environment, the following interventions are proposed to optimize performance:

4.1. Investing in Behavioral Interventions

To capitalize on behavioral drivers, County Governments must invest in targeted interventions that move beyond generic leadership workshops. Specifically, this requires implementing highly specific training modules focused on the three components of Self-Leadership: coaching staff on self-cueing techniques, developing non-routine work structures to facilitate natural reward strategies, and explicitly teaching thought-pattern modification to combat institutional cynicism. Furthermore, since Self-Leadership is powered by intrinsic motivation as posited by Self-Determination Theory, policies must be designed to protect and increase employee psychological resources. This involves granting staff greater control over their work methods and ensuring access to continuous professional development that validates their competence and builds the self-efficacy required for proactive service delivery.

4.2. Strategically Managing the Institutional Environment

In managing the external context, leaders must adopt a dual strategy of buffering and accommodation. County leaders must strategically buffer operational units—particularly those requiring high levels of innovation—from excessive external interference. A concrete example of this would be a county manager creating insulated ‘project implementation units’ for critical services like revenue collection or healthcare digitization; by formally separating these teams from political appointment cycles and reporting directly to technical heads, the manager buffers the staff from political patronage, allowing self-led efforts to succeed without external obstruction (Onyango, 2021). Simultaneously, for high-level success, leaders must accommodate the Institutional Environment by aligning SL-driven outcomes with prevailing demands, such as structuring incentives to reward employees whose self-managed efforts result in compliance with anti-corruption regulations. Finally, leaders should actively lobby for supportive institutional reforms, such as predictable funding mechanisms, to reduce coercive barriers and reinforce normative expectations of meritocracy.

4.3. Practical Implications for Local Government Practice

Beyond policy, this research holds immediate practical value for local government

administrators. Practically, it suggests that hiring practices should be revised to screen for self-leadership traits—such as self-goal setting and resilience—rather than just technical qualifications (Cvenkel, 2020). Furthermore, it implies that performance management systems in county governments must be decoupled from purely political objectives. Administrators must establish clear, merit-based performance metrics that allow self-led employees to see a direct line of sight between their personal initiative and organizational recognition, thereby sustaining motivation even in resource-constrained environments (Zahari & Kaliannan, 2023).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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