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**Empowering Followers as the Dominant Driver of Organizational
Performance: Evidence from Kenya's Water Sector**



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Empowering Followers as the Dominant Driver of Organizational Performance: Evidence from Kenya's Water Sector

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of exemplary transformational leadership on organizational performance among selected water service providers in Kenya, with specific focus on determining whether empowering followers is the most significant driver of performance.

Methodology: The study adopted a positivist philosophy and a cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected from 368 employees across 13 water and sewerage companies under the Athi Water Works Development Agency using structured questionnaires. Three leadership practices— modeling the way, challenging the process, and empowering followers were assessed and data analyzed using descriptive statistics, inferential statistic and multiple regression analysis in SPSS version 27.

Findings: The findings revealed unequal effects among the leadership practices. Modeling the way had a positive but statistically insignificant effect on performance ($\beta = 0.022$, $p = 0.779$), indicating a primarily foundational role. Challenging the process had a positive and significant effect ($\beta = 0.192$, $p = 0.016$), demonstrating the importance of innovation. Notably, empowering followers emerged as the strongest and most significant predictor of organizational performance ($\beta = 0.391$, $p < 0.001$), confirming it as the dominant leadership practice influencing performance outcomes.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy, and Practice: The study contributes to theory by advancing an integrative conceptualization of exemplary transformational leadership and providing empirical evidence that its dimensions exert differential effects on performance. It specifically establishes empowering followers as the central mechanism through which leadership translates into organizational outcomes. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest a shift toward empowerment-focused leadership development frameworks in the water sector. Practically, the study highlights the importance of delegation, participatory decision-making, and employee empowerment as key drivers of improved performance in public utilities.

Keywords: *Exemplary Transformational Leadership, Empowering Followers, Organizational Performance, Water Service Providers, Kenya*

1. Introduction

Organizational performance in public utilities remains a persistent challenge in many developing countries, particularly in the water sector where service delivery, efficiency, and sustainability concerns continue to dominate policy and management discourse. Globally, access to clean water and sanitation remains uneven despite the ambitions of Sustainable Development Goal 6, with a significant proportion of the population lacking reliable water services (UNICEF, 2019; UNESCO et al., 2019). These disparities are often attributed not only to infrastructure and resource constraints but also to variations in governance and leadership effectiveness (IFC, 2020; Muthoni & Odollo, 2024).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, water service provision is further constrained by institutional weaknesses and limited management capacity, with only a small proportion of the population accessing safely managed water services (Jenkins et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2019). Kenya reflects these broader regional challenges, as water service providers continue to experience inefficiencies, inadequate coverage, and increasing pressure from population growth (Miriti et al., 2025; Muraya & Rambo, 2019). Within such contexts, leadership is increasingly recognized as a critical determinant of organizational performance, influencing both strategic direction and employee contribution (Northouse, 2019; Stein et al., 2021).

Although transformational and exemplary leadership approaches have been widely linked to improved organizational outcomes (Bwalya, 2023; Ibrahim & Daniel, 2019), much of the existing literature treats leadership as a generalized construct, offering limited insight into how specific leadership behaviors translate into measurable performance outcomes. In this regard, exemplary transformational leadership is newly conceptualized as a three-practice framework comprising modeling the way, challenging the process, and empowering followers (Gachugia, 2025). This conceptualization refines the broader exemplary leadership model of Kouzes and Posner (2017) and the transformational leadership components by focusing on their most performance-relevant behavioral dimensions. These practices are theorized to enhance organizational effectiveness through value alignment, innovation, and employee capability development (Díaz et al., 2019; Miftahurrohmah et al., 2021). However, empirical evidence on their relative influence within public sector water utilities in developing economies remains limited.

This study builds on this gap by foregrounding empowering followers as the central mechanism linking leadership to organizational performance. While modeling the way may reinforce organizational values and challenging the process may foster innovation, empowering followers directly enhances employee autonomy, competence, and accountability. This aligns with employee engagement theory, which emphasizes psychological investment and involvement as key drivers of performance outcomes (Riyanto et al., 2021; Saks & Gruman, 2020).

The paper therefore argues that empowering followers is not merely one dimension of exemplary transformational leadership but its most operationally significant component in driving organizational performance, particularly in resource-constrained and bureaucratic public sector environments. By empirically demonstrating its dominance over other leadership practices, the study provides a more precise and actionable understanding of leadership effectiveness in Kenya's water sector.

2. Problem Statement

Despite ongoing reforms and investments in Kenya's water sector, water service providers continue to experience persistent performance challenges characterized by inefficiencies in service delivery, inadequate coverage, and inability to meet growing demand (Miriti et al., 2025; Muraya & Rambo, 2019). These challenges persist even in the context of leadership improvement initiatives, suggesting that leadership effectiveness remains a critical but unresolved determinant of organizational performance in the sector.

Although leadership is widely recognized as a key driver of organizational performance (Northouse, 2019; Stein et al., 2021), existing empirical studies have largely conceptualized transformational and exemplary leadership as unified constructs. This broad approach limits a nuanced understanding of how specific leadership behaviors influence performance outcomes in practice. In this regard, exemplary transformational leadership is newly conceptualized as a three-practice framework comprising modeling the way, challenging the process, and empowering followers (Gachugia, 2025). Despite this conceptual refinement, there remains insufficient empirical evidence on the relative effects of these practices within public sector utilities, particularly water service providers.

Consequently, there remains limited empirical guidance for managers and policymakers on which specific leadership behaviors should be prioritized to enhance organizational performance in the water sector. This study therefore addresses this gap by examining the differential effects of exemplary transformational leadership practices, with a specific focus on empowering followers as the dominant driver of organizational performance in Kenya's water sector.

Study objectives

The main objective of this study was to investigate the effect of exemplary transformational leadership on the performance of selected water and sewerage companies in Kenya, guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To investigate the effect of the leadership practice, 'model the way', on the performance of selected water and sewerage companies in Kenya.
2. To examine the effect of the leadership practice, 'challenge the process', on the performance of selected water and sewerage companies in Kenya.

3. To assess the effect of the leadership practice, 'empowers the followers', on the performance of selected water and sewerage companies in Kenya.

Study Hypotheses

H₀₁. Modeling the way practice has no significant effect on the performance of selected water and sewerage companies in Kenya.

H₀₂. Challenging the process practice has no significant effect on the performance of selected water and sewerage companies in Kenya.

H₀₃. Empowering followers practice has no significant effect on the performance of selected water and sewerage companies in Kenya.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory posits that leaders enhance organizational performance by inspiring followers, fostering commitment, and aligning individual and organizational goals (Bass & Avolio, 1994). The theory emphasizes the role of leadership in motivating employees to exceed expected performance levels. However, it has been criticized for treating leadership as a broad, undifferentiated construct, which limits its explanatory precision in identifying which specific leader behaviors drive performance outcomes (Pitichat & Riggio, 2025). This limitation informs the need for a more disaggregated approach to leadership analysis in this study.

3.2 Integrative Framework of Exemplary Transformational Leadership

This study conceptualizes exemplary transformational leadership as an integrative framework that synthesizes two established but complementary leadership traditions (Gachugia 2025): Exemplary Leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) and Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Rather than treating these approaches as separate constructs, this study positions them as mutually reinforcing perspectives that jointly explain how leadership behaviors influence organizational performance.

From the transformational leadership perspective, leadership effectiveness is grounded in four core behavioral components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023). These components explain how leaders inspire, motivate, intellectually stimulate, and support followers toward higher levels of performance.

In parallel, the exemplary leadership model emphasizes five leadership practices—modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart—which describe how leadership is enacted in practical organizational settings (Konuk, & Posner, 2021).

This study integrates these two perspectives to come up with exemplary transformational leadership by aligning their overlapping behavioral dimensions into a unified three-practice framework relevant to public sector utilities. Specifically:

- **Modeling the way** reflects the convergence of *idealized influence* and ethical leadership behavior, where leaders demonstrate consistency between values, actions, and organizational expectations.
- **Challenging the process** aligns with *intellectual stimulation* and emphasizes innovation, continuous improvement, and questioning of existing systems.
- **Empowering followers** integrates *individualized consideration, enabling others to act, encouraging the heart, and inspirational motivation*, and represents the behavioral mechanism through which leaders develop employee capability, autonomy, and engagement.

Within this integrated framework, empowering followers is conceptualized as the most operationally significant leadership behavior because it directly translates leadership influence into employee action, engagement, and performance outcomes. While modeling the way and challenging the process provide structural and cognitive support for leadership effectiveness, empowering followers' functions as the primary mechanism through which leadership is converted into organizational performance.

This integrative conceptualization allows the study to move beyond theoretical fragmentation and provides a unified explanation of how leadership behaviors collectively influence performance in public sector organizations, particularly in Kenya's water service providers.

3.3 Balanced Scorecard Framework

The Balanced Scorecard (BSC) framework provides a multidimensional approach to organizational performance measurement by extending evaluation beyond traditional financial indicators to include customer, internal process, and learning and growth perspectives (Kaplan & Norton, 1992). This approach is particularly relevant for public sector utilities such as water service providers, where performance is not solely defined by financial returns but also by service delivery efficiency, accessibility, reliability, and institutional capacity (Abedian et al., 2021).

In the context of this study, the BSC framework is used to conceptualize organizational performance as a holistic construct encompassing operational efficiency, customer satisfaction, service coverage, and organizational learning. These dimensions are critical in assessing the effectiveness of water service providers, where service quality, economic efficiency, and operational sustainability are as important as financial viability. By adopting this framework, the study ensures that performance measurement reflects the complexity of public utility service delivery environments.

4.0 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

4.1 Exemplary Transformational Leadership and Organizational Performance

Leadership is widely recognized as a critical determinant of organizational performance, particularly in public sector organizations where outcomes are strongly influenced by managerial behavior and employee motivation (Northouse, 2019; Stein et al., 2021). Transformational leadership theory posits that leaders enhance performance by inspiring followers, fostering commitment, and aligning individual efforts with organizational goals (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Similarly, exemplary leadership emphasizes practical leadership behaviors that enable individuals and organizations to achieve shared goals through clear values, innovation, and collaboration (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Empirical studies have shown that transformational leadership is positively associated with various dimensions of organizational performance, including efficiency, service delivery, and employee productivity (Bwalya, 2023; Ibrahim & Daniel, 2019). However, much of this evidence treats leadership as a unified construct, limiting understanding of how specific leadership behaviors influence performance outcomes. This study addresses this limitation by focusing on an integrated framework that disaggregates leadership into modeling the way, challenging the process, and empowering followers.

4.2 Empowering Followers and Organizational Performance

Empowering followers is increasingly recognized as a central leadership behavior that enhances employee autonomy, motivation, and performance in contemporary organizations. Within the transformational and exemplary leadership traditions, empowerment is closely linked to individualized consideration and enabling others to act, both of which emphasize developing employee capability, fostering participation, and strengthening ownership of work outcomes (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Empowering leadership theory further conceptualizes empowerment as leader behaviors that delegate authority, encourage participation in decision-making, and promote self-directed work behavior (Arnold et al., 2000). Empirical evidence consistently shows that such leadership practices enhance psychological empowerment, which translates into improved employee performance and proactive work behavior (Zhang & Bartol, 2010; Maynard et al., 2012). Psychological empowerment—comprising meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact—has been established as a key psychological mechanism linking leadership to performance outcomes (Spreitzer, 1995).

Recent empirical studies reinforce the importance of empowerment in shaping employee engagement and organizational effectiveness. For instance, Cheong et al. (2019) found that empowering leadership significantly improves team performance through shared responsibility and enhanced coordination. Similarly, Schermuly et al. (2022) demonstrate that empowerment-

oriented leadership predicts higher levels of innovation and task performance through increased employee initiative and psychological ownership.

In African public sector contexts, empowerment has been shown to be particularly important due to structural inefficiencies, bureaucratic constraints, and limited resource flexibility. Studies in public utilities and service organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa indicate that leadership practices that decentralize decision-making improve responsiveness, employee commitment, and service delivery outcomes (Aboramadan et al., 2021; Mwesigwa et al., 2020). In water service institutions specifically, empowerment enables frontline employees to respond more effectively to operational challenges, customer needs, and service disruptions, thereby improving overall service reliability and efficiency.

In the Kenyan context, water service providers continue to face inefficiencies, limited responsiveness, and operational constraints that hinder service delivery (Miriti et al., 2025; Muraya & Rambo, 2019). Within such environments, empowering followers becomes particularly critical as it enhances employee discretion, problem-solving capacity, and responsiveness at operational levels. This is especially important where rigid bureaucratic structures limit centralized decision-making.

Within this study's conceptualization, empowering followers is therefore positioned as the most influential leadership practice within exemplary transformational leadership. Unlike modeling the way or challenging the process, which primarily shape values and innovation orientation, empowering followers directly transforms employee behavior through autonomy, psychological ownership, and engagement. Consequently, it is hypothesized to have the strongest direct effect on organizational performance in Kenya's water service providers.

4.4 Organizational Performance in Public Utilities

Organizational performance in public utilities such as water service providers is multidimensional and extends beyond financial outcomes to include service delivery efficiency, customer satisfaction, operational effectiveness, and institutional learning (Lee et al., 2022). The Balanced Scorecard framework provides a comprehensive approach for evaluating these dimensions, making it particularly suitable for assessing performance in public sector contexts (Kaplan & Norton, 1992).

In the Kenyan water sector, performance challenges such as inefficiencies, inadequate coverage, and resource constraints highlight the importance of leadership and employee behavior in achieving service delivery objectives (Miriti et al., 2025; Muraya & Rambo, 2019). As such, understanding how leadership translates into performance outcomes is critical for improving sector effectiveness.

4.5 Conceptual Synthesis

Based on the reviewed literature, this study conceptualizes organizational performance as an outcome of an integrated process in which exemplary transformational leadership influences performance outcomes. Within this framework, empowering followers is positioned as the most influential leadership behavior due to its direct effect on employee autonomy, engagement, and accountability.

This conceptualization underpins the study's central argument that leadership effectiveness in Kenya's water sector is not uniform across behaviors but is primarily driven by empowerment-oriented leadership practices.

4.6 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study illustrates the hypothesized relationships between exemplary transformational leadership practices, and organizational performance in Kenya's water sector.

The independent variable is exemplary transformational leadership, conceptualized as an integration of transformational leadership and exemplary leadership perspectives. It comprises three key practices: modeling the way, challenging the process, and empowering followers (Gachugia, 2025). These leadership practices are expected to influence organizational performance, although their effects are hypothesized to differ in magnitude.

The dependent variable is water company performance, conceptualized using the Balanced Scorecard framework, which includes service quality, economic efficiency and operational sustainability (Kaplan & Norton, 1992). This multidimensional approach is particularly relevant for public utilities such as water service providers.

The framework proposes that exemplary transformational leadership influences organizational performance directly through its three practices; modelling the way, challenging the process and empowering followers. However, within this study, empowering followers is proposed to be the most dominant leadership practice influencing performance outcomes.

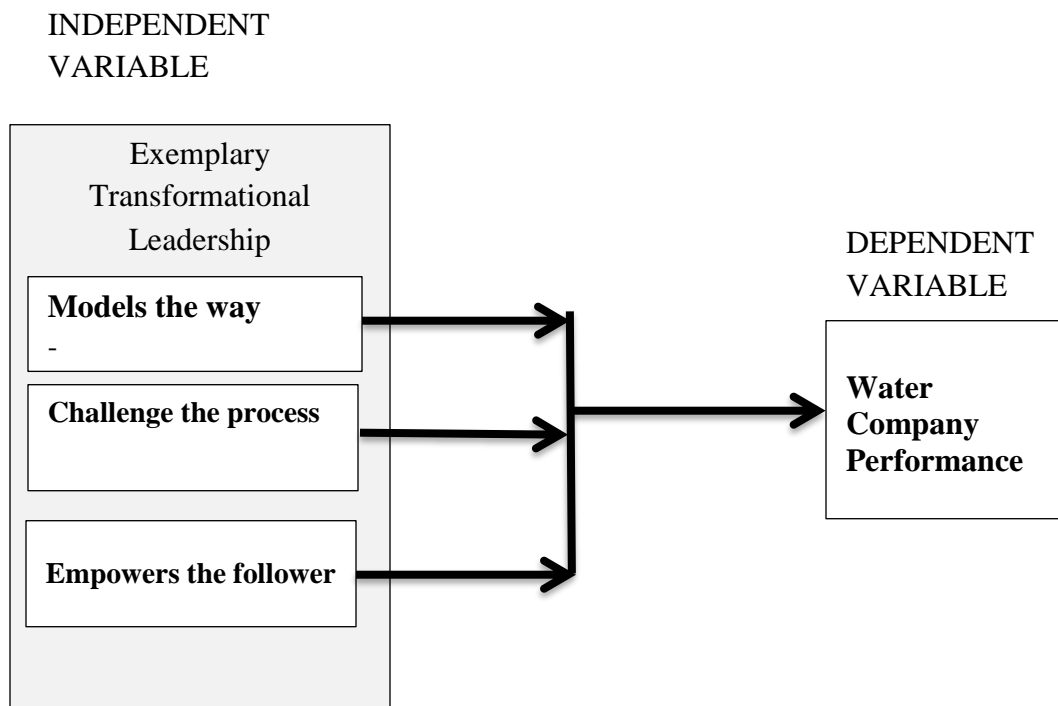


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

4.7 Research Gaps

The reviewed literature reveals important conceptual, contextual, and methodological gaps in the understanding of leadership and organizational performance. Conceptually, prior studies have largely treated transformational and exemplary leadership as broad, unified constructs, with limited attention to how specific leadership practices differentially influence performance outcomes (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 2017). This has limited theoretical precision, particularly regarding the relative contribution of key practices such as modeling the way, challenging the process, and empowering followers. Additionally, although empowering leadership has been widely examined, its integration within a combined exemplary–transformational leadership frameworks remains underexplored.

Contextually, most empirical evidence is drawn from developed economies and private sector settings, with limited focus on public sector utilities in developing countries. In Kenya, existing studies on water service providers have primarily emphasized structural and operational determinants of performance (Miriti et al., 2025; Muraya & Rambo, 2019), with minimal attention to leadership behavior. Methodologically, previous research has often relied on aggregated leadership constructs and has rarely examined the comparative effects of individual leadership dimensions within a single model. This study addresses these gaps by adopting an integrative conceptualization of exemplary transformational leadership (Gachugia, 2025), disaggregating it

into three core practices, and empirically examining their differential effects on organizational performance in Kenya's water service providers.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Philosophy and Design

This study adopted a positivist research philosophy, which assumes that social phenomena can be objectively measured and analyzed using quantitative methods (Creswell, 2018; Khatri, 2020). The choice of positivism was appropriate that study's focusses on testing hypothesized relationships between leadership practices and organizational performance using statistical techniques.

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to examine the relationship between exemplary transformational leadership and organizational performance among employees of selected water and sewerage companies in Kenya. This design enabled the collection of quantitative data from a large population at a single point in time, allowing for generalization of findings.

The target population comprised 4,655 employees drawn from 13 public water and sewerage companies operating under the Athi Water Works Development Agency selected using cluster sampling approach. This was followed by random sampling method to ensure representativeness. A sample size of 368 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula, which is appropriate for finite populations.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of closed-ended items measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This approach ensured consistency and facilitated quantitative analysis.

5.2 Measurement of Variables

Exemplary transformational leadership was operationalized based on the integrated framework developed by (Gachugia, 2025), drawing from Kouzes and Posner's leadership practices and transformational leadership components. The construct was measured using three dimensions: modeling the way, challenging the process, and empowering followers, each captured through multiple Likert-scale items.

Organizational performance was measured using indicators adapted from the Balanced Scorecard framework, encompassing service quality, economic efficiency, and operational sustainability (Kaplan & Norton, 1992). These dimensions were selected to reflect the multidimensional nature of performance in public water service providers.

5.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to address the study objectives.

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were used to summarize respondents' perceptions of exemplary transformational leadership practices and organizational performance. These measures provided an overall understanding of data patterns and trends.

Inferential statistics were used to test the hypothesized relationships among the study variables. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of relationships between the dimensions of exemplary transformational leadership and organizational performance.

Further, multiple regression analysis was applied to assess the effect of the three dimensions of exemplary transformational leadership—modeling the way, challenging the process, and empowering followers—on organizational performance. The regression model enabled the study to determine the relative contribution of each leadership practice to performance outcomes. All statistical tests were conducted at a 95% confidence level ($p < 0.05$).

5.4 Validity and Reliability of the Research Instrument

To ensure the quality and rigor of the measurement instrument, both validity and reliability tests were conducted.

Validity

Content validity was established through expert review, where academic supervisors and subject matter experts assessed the questionnaire for relevance, clarity, and alignment with the study objectives. Their feedback informed necessary revisions to improve the instrument.

Construct validity was assessed using factor analysis, which examined the extent to which measurement items accurately represented the underlying constructs. Factor loadings of 0.50 and above were considered acceptable, indicating that the items adequately measured their respective variables.

Reliability

The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to assess internal consistency among scale items. A threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ was considered acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). Each construct—modeling the way, challenging the process, empowering followers, and organizational performance—was tested separately. The results indicated that all variables achieved acceptable reliability levels, confirming that the instrument was consistent and suitable for analysis.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

6.1 Hypotheses Testing

The impact of exemplary transformational leadership on the performance of water companies was assessed through three formulated hypotheses based on the three practices; ‘modeling the way’, ‘challenging the process’, and ‘empowering the followers’. The comprehensive hypothesis testing revealed important patterns in the relationships between exemplary transformational leadership dimensions, and water company performance. The systematic evaluation of research hypotheses through multiple regression analyses provides definitive answers to the research objectives of this study, enabling clear conclusions about the relationships between exemplary transformational leadership dimensions, and company performance in Kenyan water sector organizations. The summary of hypotheses testing results are illustrated in the following Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Statistical Test	Result	Decision	Effect Size	Significance
H ₀₁ : ‘Models the Way’ has no significant effect on Company Performance	Multiple Regression	$\beta = 0.022, t = 0.281, p = 0.779$	Supported	Negligible	Not Significant
H ₀₂ : ‘Challenges the Process’ has no significant effect on Company Performance	Multiple Regression	$\beta = 0.192, t = 2.414, p = 0.016$	Rejected	Small-Medium	Significant
H ₀₃ : ‘Empowers Followers’ has no significant effect on Company Performance	Multiple Regression	$\beta = 0.391, t = 5.240, p = 0.001$	Rejected	Medium-Large	Highly Significant

6.1.1 Hypothesis One Testing

H₀₁: Modeling the way has no significant effect on the performance of selected water and sewerage company in Kenya.

The first hypothesis examined whether *modeling the way* has any significant effect on organizational performance. The regression results indicated that this leadership practice had a positive but statistically insignificant effect on performance ($\beta = 0.022, p = 0.779$), leading to the acceptance of the null hypothesis (H₀₁).

This finding suggests that *modeling the way* does not make a unique contribution to organizational performance when other leadership practices—specifically challenging the process and

empowering followers—are taken into account. However, this does not imply that the practice is unimportant. Rather, it indicates that modeling the way may play a foundational role, shaping values, norms, and leadership credibility that support the effectiveness of other performance-driving behaviors

6.1.2 Hypothesis Two Testing

H₀₂: Challenging the process has no significant effect on the performance of selected water and sewerage company in Kenya.

The second hypothesis examined whether *challenging the process* has a significant effect on organizational performance. The regression results revealed a positive and statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.192$, $p = 0.016$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis (H₀₂).

This finding indicates that leadership behaviors that promote innovation, question existing practices, and encourage experimentation contribute meaningfully to organizational performance. It further suggests that *challenging the process* plays an important role in enhancing adaptability and efficiency, particularly in dynamic and resource-constrained environments such as the water sector.

6.1.3 Hypothesis Three Testing

H₀₃: Empowering followers has no significant positive effect on the performance of selected water and sewerage companies in Kenya.

The third hypothesis examined whether *empowering followers* has a significant effect on organizational performance. The regression results revealed a strong positive and highly significant effect ($\beta = 0.391$, $p < 0.001$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis (H₀₃).

This finding indicates that leadership behaviors that promote employee participation, autonomy, collaboration, and recognition have the greatest impact on organizational performance among the three leadership practices examined. It further demonstrates that empowering followers is a critical driver of performance, as it directly enhances employee responsibility, motivation, and accountability in achieving organizational goals.

6.4 Multiple Regression Analysis - Leadership Dimensions Predicting Company

The results of the multiple regression analysis revealed varying effects of the three leadership practices on organizational performance as illustrated in table 2 below.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	1.814	.169			10.740	.000	1.482	2.147
	Models the Way	.019	.068	.022		.281	.779	-.115	.154
	Challenges the Process	.175	.073	.192		2.414	.016	.032	.318
	Empowers Followers	.342	.065	.391		5.240	.000	.214	.471

Modeling the way showed a positive but statistically insignificant effect on organizational performance ($\beta = 0.022$, $p = 0.779$). This suggests that while value-based leadership behaviors contribute to organizational culture, they do not directly translate into measurable performance outcomes when considered alongside other leadership practices. This finding supports the argument that modeling the way plays a foundational rather than performance-driving role.

Challenging the process demonstrated a statistically significant positive effect on organizational performance ($\beta = 0.192$, $p = 0.016$). This indicates that leadership behaviors that promote innovation and continuous improvement contribute meaningfully to organizational effectiveness, particularly in environments that require adaptability and problem-solving.

Empowering followers emerged as the strongest and most significant predictor of organizational performance ($\beta = 0.391$, $p < 0.001$). This finding confirms that leadership practices that enhance employee autonomy, participation, and accountability have the greatest impact on performance outcomes. The result is consistent with prior studies linking empowerment to improved motivation and productivity (Spreitzer, 1995; Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

Overall, the findings reveal a hierarchical pattern of influence, where empowering followers exerts the greatest effect, followed by challenging the process, while modeling the way has no significant direct effect. This supports the study's central proposition that not all leadership practices contribute equally to performance.

From a theoretical perspective, the results of the integrative exemplary transformational leadership demonstrates that its behavioral components have differential effects on performance outcomes. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that managers in water service providers should prioritize empowerment-oriented leadership practices to enhance organizational performance.

7. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the effect of exemplary transformational leadership practices—modeling the way, challenging the process, and empowering followers, on organizational performance in Kenya’s water service providers. The findings demonstrate that leadership practices do not contribute equally to performance outcomes, revealing a clear hierarchy of influence.

Empowering followers emerged as the most significant predictor of organizational performance, highlighting the critical role of leadership behaviors that enhance employee autonomy, participation, and accountability. Challenging the process also showed a positive and significant effect, indicating the importance of innovation and continuous improvement in enhancing service delivery. In contrast, modeling the way, while positively perceived, did not have a statistically significant effect on performance, suggesting that its role is primarily foundational in shaping organizational values rather than directly driving outcomes.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to leadership literature by advancing an integrated conceptualization of exemplary transformational leadership by (Gachugia, 2025), demonstrating that leadership effectiveness is better understood through specific behavioral dimensions rather than as a unified construct. The findings further refine transformational leadership theory by providing empirical evidence that its components exert differential effects on organizational performance.

From a practical standpoint, the study underscores the need for managers in water service providers to prioritize empowerment-oriented leadership practices. Enhancing employee autonomy, decentralizing decision-making, and fostering a culture of accountability can significantly improve service efficiency and responsiveness. Additionally, promoting innovation through challenging existing processes can further strengthen organizational performance in resource-constrained environments.

At the policy level, the findings suggest that leadership development programs in the water sector should shift focus from general leadership training to targeted capacity building in empowerment and participatory management practices. Such an approach can enhance the effectiveness of public utilities and improve service delivery outcomes.

Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its cross-sectional design, which restricts causal inference, and its focus on selected water service providers, which may limit generalizability. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs and extend the analysis to other sectors or regions to validate and expand the findings.

Overall, the study concludes that empowering followers is the most critical leadership practice for driving organizational performance in Kenya's water sector, providing both theoretical clarity and practical direction for improving public utility management.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation of the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with the participating water and sewerage companies and the need to protect the anonymity of the respondents.

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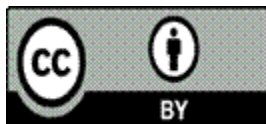
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