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Ethical Leadership Practices and Service Delivery of Public
Institutions in Narok County, Kenya



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Ethical Leadership Practices and Service Delivery of Public Institutions in Narok County, Kenya

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Abstract

Purpose: The study sought to determine the relationship between ethical leadership practices and service delivery of public institutions in Narok County, Kenya. The specific objectives were to assess the effect of integrity, transparency, fairness in decision-making and accountability practices on service delivery of public institutions in Narok County.

Methodology: A descriptive research design was adopted, and data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires. A sample of 171 respondents, was calculated using the Yamane's (1967) formula. Further selection of the participants was done using stratified random sampling technique. Data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression.

Findings: The findings revealed that all four dimensions of ethical leadership are positively and significantly associated with service delivery in public institutions. The regression model showed 73.1% of the variation in service delivery can be explained by the combined influence of the four ethical leadership variables. The findings also showed a significant F-statistic ($p < 0.05$).

Unique Contribution to Theory Practice and Policy: The study recommended that: public institutions should institutionalize regular training on ethical behavior, values, and integrity for both leaders and employees and should hold both leaders and staff accountable for service outcomes.

Keywords: *Corruption, Public Administration, Public Service, Personnel Management*

INTRODUCTION

Ethical leadership is central to effective public administration worldwide. On a global scale, its importance has been underscored following scandals and governance failures that have diminished public trust in many countries. In the United States, Brown and Treviño (2006) highlighted that ethical leadership fosters organizational cultures based on fairness and accountability, which are critical to ensuring efficient public service delivery. In Africa, however, the relationship between ethical leadership and public sector performance is more complex. Many African governments face challenges such as nepotism, lack of transparency, and weak accountability, which hinder service delivery. Hope (2017) notes that systemic corruption and leadership failures undermine public trust, though Botswana serves as a positive example, showing that ethical governance can lead to more efficient institutions (Sebudubudu & Botlhomilwe, 2012).

In Kenya, ethical leadership remains a challenge, despite legal frameworks such as Chapter Six of the Constitution, which sets leadership standards. Reports from the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC, 2023) reveal persistent lapses in leadership ethics, particularly at the county level, where transparency and accountability issues continue to hinder service delivery (Wambua & Mwai, 2020). Narok County, in Kenya's South Rift region, has made progress in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. However, leadership challenges, including corruption, favoritism, and poor resource allocation, persist. Reports from the Office of the Auditor-General (2022) highlight procurement irregularities and weak internal controls, especially in marginalized areas. While the county government has established an Integrity Assurance Committee to promote ethical leadership, its effectiveness remains limited due to weak enforcement and follow-up mechanisms (EACC, 2023).

Problem Statement

Public institutions in Kenya, particularly at the county level, were established with the aim of bringing services closer to the people and improving governance through devolution. However, despite the constitutional emphasis on integrity, transparency, and accountability as enshrined in Chapter Six of the 2010 Constitution, many counties continue to face persistent challenges in service delivery. Narok County, though endowed with vast natural resources and a growing development budget, has experienced a series of concerns relating to mismanagement, corruption, nepotism, and low public trust in its leadership indicators of weak ethical leadership (Office of the Auditor-General, 2022).

Numerous audit reports and citizen feedback reveal delays in project implementation, poor budget absorption rates, lack of transparency in procurement, and inadequate access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and clean water (Simiyu, 2023). These deficiencies are often attributed to ethical lapses in leadership ranging from favoritism and lack of accountability, to exclusion of community voices in decision-making processes. While the Narok County Government has initiated some reforms to promote ethical governance, including EACC-led training and the establishment of an Integrity Assurance Committee, the overall effectiveness of these efforts remains unclear and largely unmeasured (EACC, 2023). Although previous studies have explored general factors affecting service delivery in devolved units, few have specifically focused on how ethical leadership practices such as integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability influence service delivery outcomes at the local level. This study, therefore, sought to investigate how ethical leadership practices affect service delivery in Narok County's public institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on four main theories: Ethical Leadership Theory, Social Learning Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Agency Theory. These theories collectively help to explain how ethical leadership influences service delivery in public institutions.

Ethical Leadership Theory, conceptualized by Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005), emphasizes that ethical leaders demonstrate appropriate conduct and foster an ethical climate through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. The theory highlights leadership based on fairness, justice, honesty, and respect, and is grounded in universal ethical principles. While it has been critiqued for oversimplifying leadership dynamics (Kalshoven et al., 2011), it is relevant to this study as it aligns with Kenya's public service values. The theory helps assess how ethical leadership practices like transparency, accountability, and fairness impact service delivery in Narok County, guiding the research framework by connecting ethical behaviors to improved governance and public trust (Mayer et al., 2010; Omolo, 2018).

Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1977), suggests that individuals learn behaviors through observation and imitation, with leaders serving as role models. In public institutions, ethical leaders who exhibit traits like honesty and accountability influence their subordinates, leading to improved service delivery. Studies by Neubert et al. (2009) and Walumbwa et al. (2011) show that ethical leadership fosters positive employee behaviors.

Although the theory has been critiqued for underemphasizing internal moral reasoning (Bandura, 1986), it remains suitable for this study, as it aligns with the hierarchical nature of African public institutions. This framework helps link ethical leadership to enhanced service delivery in Narok County by emphasizing the role of leaders in modeling ethical behavior (Simiyu, 2023).

Transformational Leadership Theory, introduced by Burns (1978) and developed by Bass (1993), emphasizes leaders who inspire and motivate followers to exceed self-interests for the greater good of the organization. Transformational leaders align employees' values and goals with those of the institution, fostering significant change. While critics argue the theory can be idealistic and lacks operational clarity (Northouse, 2025), it remains relevant for this study as it aligns with Kenya's devolved governance, focusing on moral conduct and employee empowerment in the public sector. This theory informs the research by linking ethical leadership practices in Narok County's public institutions to improved service delivery, emphasizing values like integrity, transparency, and fairness (Kimanthi, 2024).

Agency Theory, developed by Jensen and Meckling (1976), explains the relationship between principals (citizens) and agents (public officials) in which agents may act in their own self-interest rather than in the best interests of the principals. In public institutions, ethical leadership serves as a control mechanism to reduce agency problems by promoting transparency, accountability, and fairness, thus aligning leaders' actions with public interests. The theory informs this research by highlighting the role of ethical leadership in improving service delivery in Narok County through enhanced accountability and trust. It helps construct the framework by illustrating how ethical leadership mitigates agency issues that hinder effective public service (Obong'o, 2009; Atambo & Momanyi, 2021).

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework serves as a visual and narrative roadmap that outlines the relationship between the study's variables. The conceptual framework was as illustrated below.

Independent Variables

Dependent Variable

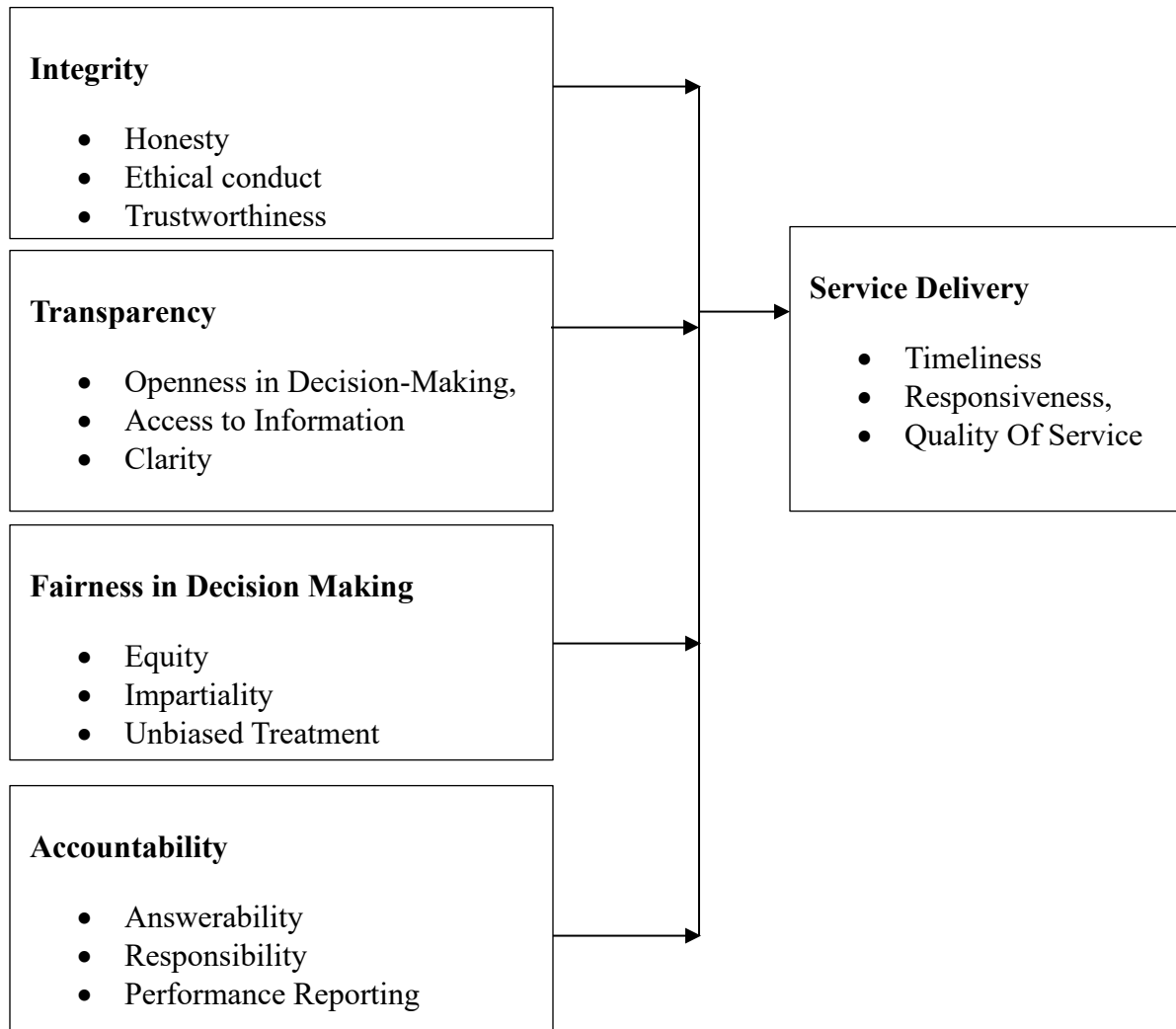


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Empirical Review

In public institutions, integrity is characterized by honesty, adherence to moral and legal standards, and doing the right thing even when it is difficult or inconvenient (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007). Mutonyi & Otieno (2021) investigated the role of leadership integrity in enhancing service delivery in Nairobi County. Their findings revealed that departments led by individuals who adhered to ethical standards showed greater transparency in budgeting, faster project completion rates, and improved responsiveness to public needs. Employees in these departments also reported higher

morale and commitment to service delivery goals. This study presented a contextual gap as it focused on leadership integrity only while the current study included not only integrity but also transparency, fairness in decision-making and accountability.

Transparency in public leadership involves the disclosure of information, active engagement with stakeholders, and free access to government operations and data (Rawlins, 2008). In the context of ethical leadership, transparency is vital for fostering accountability, reducing corruption, and improving service outcomes in public institutions. Ndungu et al. (2019), studied the role of transparency in county governance and found that open budgeting processes, participatory planning, and public disclosure of procurement data significantly increased citizens' satisfaction with county services. Their study emphasized that transparency acts as a safeguard against mismanagement and a motivator for timely service execution. This study generalized all Counties, the current study focused on Narok Study. Additionally, the study by Ndung'u et al., (2019) presented a contextual gap as it did not focus on service delivery.

Fairness refers to the impartial, equitable, and unbiased treatment of all individuals in organizational processes such as resource allocation, recruitment, disciplinary actions, and access to services (Cropanzano & Greenberg, 2001). Runyenje, & Ragen, (2021), in a study conducted in Kisumu County, found that employees who perceived decision-making processes as fair were more committed to service goals and more willing to engage in collaborative service improvement efforts. The study also noted that fairness reduced internal conflicts and encouraged accountability among staff. This study presented a geographical gap as it was carried out in Kisumu County, while the current study was based in Narok County.

Accountability involves mechanisms through which public officials are held responsible for their actions and outcomes, particularly in the use of public resources and the performance of duties (Bovens, 2007). Mwesigwa, Bogere, & Ogwal, (2022) in Uganda demonstrated that regular audits, citizen reporting mechanisms, and transparent leadership contributed to better service outcomes in education and sanitation. They noted that accountability must be both internal (within the institution) and external (to the public and oversight agencies) to be effective. This study presented a geographical gap as the study was based in Uganda.

Service delivery is a critical outcome of public sector performance and a key indicator of effective governance, especially under Kenya's devolved system. Chepkemai and Katam (2021) conducted a study in Uasin Gishu County to assess the role of ethical leadership in influencing service delivery in county departments. The study found that integrity and accountability had the strongest

influence on service quality, while transparency significantly impacted citizen satisfaction. This study presented a geographical gap as it was based in Uasin Gishu County while the current study was based in Narok County.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive research design. Since the goal of this study was not to control or alter the leadership environment, but rather to understand how ethical leadership influences service delivery outcomes, a descriptive approach provided the most accurate and practical framework. The target population for this study comprised public officers and service beneficiaries within public institutions operating under the County Government of Narok. Specifically, the study focused on employees working in key service delivery departments such as health, education, water and sanitation, infrastructure, and public administration, as well as a select number of citizens who directly benefit from county services. This population was selected because these departments are at the core of county-level service provision and interact directly with the public. The study employed a sample size of 171 respondents, calculated from a total target population of 300 individuals. To determine the sample size, Yamane's (1973) formula was used, which is suitable for finite populations to ensure fair representation of all relevant subgroups, the study adopted a stratified random sampling technique. The population was first stratified into two main groups: county government employees and community service beneficiaries. Within the employee stratum, further categorization was done based on departments such as health, education, water and sanitation, public works, and public administration. A proportional allocation method was used to determine the number of respondents to be selected from each department and beneficiary group based on their representation in the population. The primary data collection instrument for this study was a semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. A 5-point Likert scale was used for most closed-ended questions to allow respondents to express the degree of their agreement or disagreement with given statements. Additionally, a few open-ended questions were included to gather deeper insights into respondents' personal experiences and perceptions regarding ethical leadership and public service delivery. The data collection exercise lasted approximately two weeks, ensuring coverage of all identified departments and respondent categories within the study sample. Data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26. The analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistics. Regression analysis was used to show linear relationship between the variables was illustrated as follows:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \varepsilon$$

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis

Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with key integrity-related statements on a 5-point Likert scale.

Descriptive Analysis on Integrity

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Integrity

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	M	S.D
Leaders in this institution demonstrate honesty in their daily operations.	2.2%	6.5%	17.4%	45.7%	28.3%	3.91	0.94
Leaders act consistently with their stated values and commitments.	2.9%	5.1%	18.1%	47.8%	26.1%	3.89	0.91
Ethical behavior is a priority for leadership at all levels.	3.6%	7.2%	21.7%	40.6%	26.8%	3.80	1.01
Staff are encouraged to act with integrity.	1.4%	5.1%	15.2%	49.3%	29.0%	3.99	0.88
There are clear consequences for unethical behavior.	5.1%	10.9%	19.6%	41.3%	23.2%	3.67	1.09

The overall mean values for integrity-related statements ranged from 3.67 to 3.99, indicating that most respondents agreed that integrity is generally upheld in their institutions.

Descriptive Analysis of Transparency

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Transparency

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	M	S.D
Decision-making processes are open and participatory.	3.6%	8.7%	21.7%	42.0%	24.0%	3.75	1.02
Employees are informed of changes affecting their duties.	4.3%	9.4%	19.6%	43.5%	23.2%	3.72	1.06
Leaders communicate policies and expectations clearly.	2.9%	6.5%	18.1%	48.6%	23.9%	3.84	0.95
There is easy access to institutional information.	4.3%	10.1%	22.5%	41.3%	21.7%	3.66	1.07
Financial and operational reports are shared openly.	5.8%	13.0%	25.4%	38.4%	17.4%	3.49	1.10

The responses indicate a moderately high level of transparency within public institutions in Narok County. The mean scores for all items ranged between 3.49 and 3.84, suggesting that while many transparency practices are present, there is room for improvement particularly in the area of financial reporting.

Descriptive Analysis of Fairness in Decision-Making

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Fairness in Decision-Making

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	M	S.D
Promotions and rewards are based on merit and fairness.	5.1%	10.1%	19.6%	40.6%	24.6%	3.69	1.08
All employees are treated equally regardless of rank/background.	4.3%	7.2%	20.3%	43.5%	24.6%	3.77	1.00
Disciplinary actions are applied fairly and consistently.	5.8%	8.0%	18.1%	42.8%	25.3%	3.74	1.06
Leadership handles complaints and grievances impartially.	4.3%	9.4%	21.7%	41.3%	23.2%	3.70	1.03
Staff selection and recruitment processes are fair.	6.5%	11.6%	22.5%	39.1%	20.3%	3.55	1.11

The responses show a generally positive but cautious assessment of fairness in public institutions in Narok County. Mean values range from 3.55 to 3.77, reflecting that many employees perceive leadership decisions as moderately fair, but also suggest areas needing improvement particularly in recruitment and promotions.

Descriptive Analysis of Accountability

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Accountability

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	M	S.D
Leaders take responsibility for their decisions and actions.	2.9%	5.8%	15.9%	45.7%	29.7%	3.94	0.95
Employees are held accountable for their duties.	2.2%	4.3%	14.5%	48.6%	30.4%	4.01	0.89
Performance evaluations are conducted regularly and fairly.	3.6%	9.4%	18.8%	41.3%	26.8%	3.79	1.02
There are clear mechanisms for monitoring performance.	4.3%	7.2%	20.3%	42.0%	26.1%	3.78	1.00
Public officials are answerable to the citizens they serve.	5.1%	10.1%	17.4%	40.6%	26.8%	3.74	1.09

The results indicate strong perceptions of accountability within public institutions in Narok County, with mean values ranging from 3.74 to 4.01.

Descriptive Analysis of Service Delivery

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Service Delivery

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	M	S.D
Services are delivered in a timely manner.	3.6%	9.4%	20.3%	43.5%	23.2%	3.73	1.03
The institution is responsive to public concerns.	4.3%	10.9%	18.8%	41.3%	24.6%	3.71	1.08
Service quality meets citizen expectations.	2.9%	8.0%	21.0%	45.7%	22.5%	3.76	0.98
There is minimal delay or bureaucracy in accessing services.	5.1%	13.8%	19.6%	40.6%	20.9%	3.58	1.13
The institution uses feedback to improve services.	4.3%	11.6%	22.5%	39.9%	21.7%	3.63	1.07

The mean values for service delivery indicators range from 3.58 to 3.76, indicating a moderate level of agreement that service delivery is effective in public institutions in Narok County.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of the linear relationship between the independent variables (integrity, transparency, fairness in decision-making, and accountability) and the dependent variable (service delivery). Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used due to the continuous and normally distributed nature of the data. The results are summarized below.

Table 6: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	Service Delivery	Integrity	Transparency	Fairness	Accountability
Service Delivery	1.000				
Integrity	0.601**	1.000			
Transparency	0.522**	0.484**	1.000		
Fairness	0.541**	0.452**	0.496**	1.000	
Accountability	0.672**	0.528**	0.506**	0.467**	1.000

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation results show that all four dimensions of ethical leadership are positively and significantly associated with service delivery in public institutions

Regression Analysis

To examine the extent to which ethical leadership practices influence service delivery, a multiple linear regression analysis was performed.

Model Summary

Table 7: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.855	0.731	0.720	0.47896

The model shows a high explanatory power, with an R Square of 0.731. This means that 73.1% of the variation in service delivery can be explained by the combined influence of the four ethical leadership variables. This indicates that the model fits the data very well.

ANOVA Results

To evaluate the overall significance of the regression model, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted.

Table 8: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (p-value)
Regression	58.722	5	14.681	63.914	0.000**
Residual	21.605	133	0.162		
Total	80.327	138			

Note: Significant at $p < 0.01$

The F-statistic = 63.914 with a p-value < 0.001 indicates that the regression model is highly significant. This means that the combination of the four ethical leadership variables (integrity, transparency, fairness in decision-making, and accountability) significantly predicts service delivery in public institutions in Narok County.

Regression Coefficients

Table 9: Regression Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients (β)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.358	1.241	–	1.094	0.004
Integrity	0.218	0.055	0.263	3.964	0.000
Transparency	0.203	0.064	0.245	3.172	0.002
Fairness	0.169	0.060	0.211	2.817	0.003
Accountability	0.294	0.058	0.335	5.069	0.000

Note: Significant at $p < 0.0$

The constant ($\beta = 1.358$) implies that when all independent variables are held constant, service delivery would still have a positive baseline value.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, the study concludes: that integrity is a fundamental pillar of ethical leadership that positively influences service delivery, the study establishes that transparency is essential in promoting effective service delivery, fairness in decision-making significantly contributes to improved service delivery and accountability plays the most critical role in enhancing service delivery.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the study recommended: Public institutions should institutionalize regular training on ethical behavior, values, and integrity for both leaders and employees; institutions should strengthen internal and external communication mechanisms to ensure timely and accurate dissemination of information; to promote fairness, public institutions should adopt and enforce merit-based policies in recruitment, promotion, and disciplinary procedures; Institutions should put in place robust systems to monitor performance, track responsibilities, and hold both leaders and staff accountable for service outcomes; County and national government bodies should integrate ethical leadership principles into public sector reforms and governance strategies.

Suggestions for Further Study

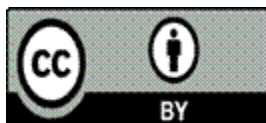
While this study provided valuable insights into the influence of ethical leadership on service delivery in public institutions, it was limited in scope and methodology. Future studies could be conducted in other counties or at the national government level to compare how ethical leadership influences service delivery across different administrative units. Such comparative studies would enrich understanding of regional variations and policy impacts.

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