

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE IN THE KENYAN PUBLIC SECTOR: EVIDENCE FROM CENTRAL GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study assessed the effect of adaptive leadership on organizational performance in central government ministries in Kenya.

Statement of the Problem: Despite two decades of administrative reforms, organizational performance in Kenya's central government ministries continues to fall below established standards. During the 2022/2023 audit cycle, the Office of the Auditor General documented approximately KSh 145 billion in unsupported, irregular or misallocated public expenditure. Only 41 percent of ministries fully achieved their annual service delivery targets.

Design/Methodology: Guided by a pragmatist philosophy, the study adopted a correlational cross-sectional design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. Structured five-point Likert-scale questionnaires were completed by 264 employees across three central government ministries, while fifteen senior and technical officers participated in Key Informant Interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression, while qualitative evidence was used to explain the statistical results.

Findings: Adaptive leadership had a statistically significant positive effect on organizational performance ($B = .199$, $\beta = .196$, $t = 4.433$, $p < .001$) and a strong positive bivariate correlation with performance ($r = .672$, $p < .01$). However, its standardized coefficient was the smallest among the four strategic leadership dimensions examined. Qualitative findings showed that hierarchical approvals and procedural rigidity constrained adaptive action.

Conclusion: Adaptive leadership contributes positively to organizational performance, although its implementation is structurally bounded by institutional procedures.

Recommendation: Central government ministries should establish delegated adaptive-authority protocols, develop expedited procurement pathways for emergency circumstances, and strengthen adaptive leadership development programmes.

Keywords: *adaptive leadership, organizational performance, public sector, structural constraints, procedural rigidity, Kenya*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary public institutions operate in increasingly complex environments shaped by technological change, fiscal pressures, policy uncertainty, service disruptions, and rising citizen expectations. These conditions require public organizations to maintain institutional stability while remaining sufficiently responsive to problems that cannot be anticipated through established procedures alone. Moser-Plautz and Schmidhuber (2023), for instance, demonstrate that external disruption can accelerate organizational and technological transformation within public administrations, although the extent of adaptation differs across organizations. Similarly, Cedergren and Hassel (2024) argue that resilient public organizations require adaptive capacity alongside conventional planning because predefined procedures cannot adequately address every unexpected disruption. Leadership within contemporary public administration must therefore extend beyond maintaining administrative continuity to enabling institutions to learn, adjust, and respond effectively to changing conditions.

This requirement gives adaptive leadership particular relevance to public-sector organizations. Adaptive leadership distinguishes technical problems, for which established expertise and procedures provide identifiable solutions, from adaptive challenges that require learning, experimentation, behavioural adjustment, and reconsideration of established organizational practices (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009). Rather than positioning leaders principally as providers of solutions, the framework emphasizes their role in mobilizing organizational members to diagnose emerging problems and develop workable responses under uncertainty. Gadolin et al. (2023) extend this reasoning within the public sector and show that adaptive leadership practices must accommodate complex interactions among actors rather than simply impose predetermined responses. Consequently, adaptive leadership is especially pertinent where leaders must reconcile formal institutional requirements with circumstances demanding flexibility and organizational learning.

The relationship between adaptive leadership and organizational performance is, however, more complex in public organizations than in less regulated institutional environments. Public-sector performance encompasses service quality, operational efficiency, achievement of policy objectives, responsible resource utilization, and adherence to governance requirements. Leaders must therefore improve responsiveness without compromising accountability, legality, transparency, or procedural consistency. Cedergren and Hassel (2024) identify trust, organizational autonomy, clear objectives, prior experience, and coordination across organizational levels as important conditions supporting public-sector adaptive capacity.

Gadolin et al. (2023) similarly establish that the institutional context influences how adaptive practices are exercised and whether they become viable responses to complexity. These findings suggest that leadership effectiveness cannot be separated from the structures that enable or restrict managerial discretion.

This institutional tension is particularly relevant to central government ministries. Ministries operate through statutory mandates, formal reporting arrangements, budgetary controls, procurement regulations, hierarchical authorization systems, and established administrative procedures intended to protect public accountability. Such arrangements are indispensable for legitimate governance, yet they may simultaneously restrict rapid adjustment when emerging problems require responses outside conventional routines (Oc, 2018; Randall and Coakley, 2007). Adaptive leadership should therefore not be understood as disregard for administrative rules. Its significance lies in enabling leaders to recognize when existing routines are insufficient and to mobilize organizational learning and legitimate adjustment within governance boundaries. The critical analytical issue is thus whether leaders can generate sufficient adaptive space to respond to changing demands while retaining the controls required of public institutions.

Kenyan evidence increasingly confirms that leadership practices matter for public-sector organizational performance, although the available literature remains fragmented across institutions and leadership approaches. Thiong'o and Minja (2023) found that communication, leadership support, accountability, and delegation significantly influenced the performance of public organizations in Nyeri County. Ringera and Okeyo (2024) similarly examined leadership and organizational performance within Kenya's National Treasury, reinforcing the significance of leadership processes within a central public-sector institution. These studies strengthen the broader proposition that organizational outcomes in Kenya's public sector are partly contingent on how leadership is exercised. Nevertheless, their emphasis is not specifically on adaptive leadership and therefore provides limited evidence regarding how leaders manage unfamiliar problems, institutional disruption, and changing demands within procedurally constrained ministries.

Research conducted in Kenya outside the core public service provides more direct evidence concerning adaptive leadership. Wamburu et al. (2022) established that adaptive self-leadership significantly influenced organizational performance among insurance companies, while Wamburu et al. (2023) found that creating a safe environment for adaptive work significantly predicted organizational performance within the same sector. These findings

demonstrate the potential performance value of adaptive leadership within the Kenyan organizational context. However, insurance companies operate under governance, incentive, accountability, and decision-making arrangements that differ materially from those of central government ministries. Evidence obtained from such settings cannot therefore establish whether adaptive leadership produces comparable performance effects where managerial discretion is bounded by public law, procurement requirements, bureaucratic hierarchy, and formal authorization processes.

A clear empirical and contextual gap therefore remains. Although international scholarship increasingly recognizes adaptive capacity as important to public-sector resilience and performance, empirical examination of adaptive leadership within public institutions remains comparatively limited (Gadolin et al., 2023; Cedergren and Hassel, 2024). In Kenya, existing leadership studies have concentrated on county institutions, public organizations generally, or private-sector settings, leaving the effect of adaptive leadership within central government ministries insufficiently established. This gap is consequential because ministries occupy a distinctive institutional position where leadership must simultaneously promote responsiveness and preserve administrative accountability. Accordingly, this study sought to establish the effect of adaptive leadership on organizational performance in central government ministries in Kenya. In doing so, the study contributes context-specific evidence on whether adaptive leadership remains performance-enhancing within a highly structured public-sector environment.

Statement of The Problem

Despite two decades of administrative reforms, organizational performance in Kenya's central government ministries continues to fall below established standards, with national oversight institutions reporting persistent weaknesses in efficiency, fiscal discipline, timeliness and service delivery (OAG, 2023; PSC, 2023). During the 2022/2023 audit cycle, the Office of the Auditor General documented approximately KSh 145 billion in unsupported, irregular or misallocated public expenditure across ministries and state departments. Similarly, the Public Service Commission Evaluation Report indicated that only 41 percent of ministries fully achieved their annual service delivery targets (OAG, 2023; PSC, 2023). Decision-making delays also remain prevalent, with approval processes in central ministries frequently extending beyond three to four weeks, thereby constraining institutional responsiveness to emerging challenges and weakening the adaptive capacity required in contemporary governance (PSC, 2023). These performance deficiencies persist despite the existence of formal strategic plans,

performance contracts and results-based management systems, suggesting that the underlying challenge extends beyond planning infrastructure to the leadership capacity required to adjust institutional processes, resource allocation and organizational practices in response to changing circumstances.

A growing body of scholarship indicates that adaptive leadership can enhance organizational performance by enabling leaders to diagnose emerging challenges, mobilize institutional responses beyond established routines and promote organizational learning under conditions of uncertainty (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009; Yukl and Mahsud, 2010; DeRue, 2011). However, the public sector represents a distinctive institutional setting in which adaptive leadership is exercised within regulatory frameworks, hierarchical decision-making systems, procurement procedures and accountability requirements that may restrict both the speed and scope of organizational adaptation (Randall and Coakley, 2007; Corazzini and Anderson, 2014). Although existing studies have examined adaptive leadership in different organisational settings, limited empirical attention has been given specifically to its effect on organisational performance in central government ministries. These ministries represent a critical case because they operate under a combination of statutory mandates, performance contracting obligations, procurement requirements and hierarchical approval processes that create a distinctive institutional context for leadership practice. The study therefore sought to establish the effect of adaptive leadership on organizational performance in central government ministries in Kenya.

Research Objective And Hypothesis

The study sought to establish the effect of adaptive leadership on organizational performance in central government ministries in Kenya.

H0: There is no statistically significant effect of adaptive leadership on organizational performance in central government ministries in Kenya.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Adaptive Leadership Theory

This study was anchored on Adaptive Leadership Theory, originally developed by Heifetz (1994) and subsequently refined by Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky (2009). The theory provides a conceptual basis for understanding how leaders mobilize organizations to address challenges

that cannot be resolved through existing technical knowledge, established routines or hierarchical authority alone. A central proposition of the theory is the distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges. Technical problems have identifiable solutions that can be addressed through established expertise and procedures, whereas adaptive challenges require stakeholders to reconsider values, behaviour and institutional practices that sustain existing organisational arrangements (Heifetz, 1994; Northouse, 2022). Adaptive leadership therefore involves creating conditions in which organizations can confront difficult realities, experiment with alternative approaches and develop the collective capacity required to operate effectively under changing circumstances (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009; DeRue, 2011).

The theory rests on several assumptions that are directly relevant to the public-sector context examined in this study. First, it assumes that organisational environments are dynamic and that emerging challenges frequently exceed the capacity of existing procedures and institutional structures to provide adequate solutions. This proposition is particularly relevant to the fiscal, technological and governance challenges confronting central government ministries in Kenya (Uhl Bien and Arena, 2018; Oc, 2018). Second, Adaptive Leadership Theory conceptualizes leadership as a distributed practice rather than an attribute restricted to individuals occupying formal positions of authority. Adaptive leadership may therefore be exercised by individuals at different levels of an organisational hierarchy where circumstances require initiative, learning and adjustment (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009; Yukl and Mahsud, 2010). Third, the theory recognizes that adaptive work can generate discomfort because it requires individuals and organizations to reconsider established routines, question entrenched assumptions and tolerate the uncertainty associated with institutional change.

Adaptive Leadership Theory offers substantial explanatory value in examining the relationship between leadership and performance in government ministries, where institutions must simultaneously comply with established procedures and respond effectively to emerging challenges (Randall and Coakley, 2007; Corazzini and Anderson, 2014). Nevertheless, the theory has been criticized for insufficiently specifying the structural and institutional conditions that determine whether leaders can translate adaptive intentions into action within highly regulated settings (Oc, 2018; Northouse, 2022). In particular, regulatory, procedural and hierarchical structures may impose limits on adaptive action even where leaders possess the capacity and motivation to respond flexibly. Under such circumstances, adaptive implementation may be constrained more by institutional architecture than by deficiencies in

leadership capability. This study explicitly considered this theoretical limitation by integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence to examine whether the institutional environment of central government ministries constrains the contribution of adaptive leadership to organisational performance.

REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

Adaptive leadership has attracted increasing empirical attention as organizations across different sectors encounter challenges that cannot be adequately resolved through established technical procedures and hierarchical decision-making structures (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009; DeRue, 2011). Existing scholarship generally suggests that adaptive leadership contributes positively to organisational performance by promoting flexibility, learning and responsiveness to changing conditions. However, the literature also indicates that the strength of this contribution depends on the institutional environment within which adaptive behaviour occurs. Consequently, increasing attention has been directed towards the boundary conditions that facilitate or constrain the effectiveness of adaptive leadership.

Yukl and Mahsud (2010) examined adaptive leadership across organisational settings and established that leaders who demonstrate flexibility, environmental awareness and the capacity to reconfigure organisational responses to emerging challenges tend to achieve stronger performance outcomes than leaders who rely predominantly on established routines. Their analysis further conceptualized adaptability as a behavioral repertoire rather than a fixed personality characteristic, suggesting that adaptive leadership competencies can be developed and institutionally reinforced. This proposition has important implications for leadership development within the public sector, where institutional complexity demands both procedural compliance and responsiveness. Similarly, Uhl Bien and Arena (2018) advanced the concept of complexity leadership and argued that organizations should deliberately create spaces in which innovation, experimentation and unconventional problem-solving can occur without destabilizing the broader operational system.

Gadoline et al. (2023) examined adaptive and complexity-oriented leadership in Swedish healthcare organizations using a qualitative case-study design involving semi-structured interviews with 42 healthcare managers and professionals. The study found that adaptive leadership enhanced organisational responsiveness to patient-safety concerns and service-quality demands. However, regulatory requirements, professional hierarchies and institutional inertia constrained leaders' adaptive capacity, indicating that adaptive leadership operates

within identifiable institutional boundaries. These findings are pertinent to public-sector organizations, where formal rules and accountability structures similarly influence the extent to which leaders can exercise flexibility. In Ghana, Konadu, Owusu Ansah and Asante (2024) examined purposeful leadership and adaptive performance using survey data from 189 public servants and found that adaptive behaviour, including proactive problem-solving and flexible resource deployment, significantly predicted organisational performance.

Haule, Mwangike and Mkumbo (2024) investigated the influence of strategic leadership practices, including adaptive leadership, on the performance of Kigamboni Municipal Council in Tanzania. Using a quantitative research design involving 61 respondents, the study found that adaptive practices contributed positively to organisational performance, although the magnitude of their effect depended on the extent to which institutional structures allowed flexibility during implementation. The findings reinforce the proposition that leadership capability alone may not be sufficient to produce improved performance where organisational systems restrict adaptive action. Randall and Coakley (2007) similarly examined the application of Heifetz's adaptive leadership framework to public-sector organizations and identified legislative mandates, procurement requirements and hierarchical accountability structures as important constraints on adaptive behaviour. Their analysis suggests that public-sector leaders may possess both the willingness and capability to adapt while remaining constrained by institutional rules governing permissible action.

Corazzini and Anderson (2014) further demonstrated that the performance returns associated with adaptive leadership may diminish when institutional structures establish procedural ceilings on the extent of permissible adaptation. Their analysis implies that the relationship between adaptive leadership and organisational performance may not necessarily remain linear within highly regulated institutional environments. Instead, performance gains may increase only to the point at which regulatory and procedural constraints begin to restrict further adaptive action. Oc (2018) similarly concluded that leadership effectiveness cannot be understood solely in terms of individual leader capability because contextual and institutional factors determine the boundaries within which leadership behaviour translate into organisational outcomes.

Despite the growing evidence on adaptive leadership, a significant empirical gap remains. Existing studies have largely concentrated on healthcare organizations, local government institutions and broader organisational settings, leaving central government ministries comparatively underexamined. Specifically, limited empirical evidence exists on the effect of

adaptive leadership on organisational performance within Kenya's central government ministries. Furthermore, the possibility that hierarchical and procedural structures may impose non-linear constraints on the contribution of adaptive leadership has received limited empirical attention in this context. The present study addressed these gaps by examining adaptive leadership across three central government ministries and assessing the institutional conditions that facilitate or constrain its contribution to organisational performance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Philosophy

The study adopted a pragmatist philosophy and employed a mixed-methods correlational research design within a cross-sectional survey framework. This approach was consistent with the methodological recommendations of Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) for studies requiring the integration of statistical measurement with contextual understanding. The pragmatist orientation was appropriate for examining adaptive leadership because quantitative measurement through Likert-scale instruments captured perceived behavioral patterns, while qualitative inquiry provided insight into the structural and institutional conditions within which those behaviour were exercised or constrained (Bryman, 2016). The correlational design enabled the study to determine the direction and magnitude of the relationship between adaptive leadership and organisational performance. In addition, the cross-sectional framework facilitated the collection of data from a relatively large sample within a defined period (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Target Population and Sampling

The target population comprised employees drawn from strategic and operational-level units across three central government ministries purposively selected because of their centrality to Kenya's public-sector governance architecture. These were the Ministry of Public Service, Human Capital Development and Special Programs; the National Treasury and Economic Planning; and the Ministry of Interior and National Administration (Okwata, Wasike and Andemariam, 2022). The accessible population across the three ministries comprised 1,240 employees. From this population, a sample of 302 respondents was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95 percent confidence level, consistent with sampling conventions applied in public-sector organisational research (Kothari, 2014). A two-step stratified random sampling procedure was subsequently employed, with employees first stratified into senior management,

middle-level officers and junior staff, followed by simple random sampling within each stratum to achieve proportional representation across cadres (Etikan and Bala, 2017).

Data Collection Instruments

The study employed a structured questionnaire and Key Informant Interviews as the primary data collection instruments, consistent with the mixed-methods research design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). The structured questionnaire comprised five-point Likert-scale items ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Adaptive leadership was measured using ten items covering flexibility in problem-solving, responsiveness to emerging challenges, willingness to depart from established routines, tolerance for experimentation and the capacity to mobilize organisational resources under conditions of uncertainty (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009). Organisational performance was similarly measured using ten items covering service efficiency, target achievement, governance compliance, service quality and resource-utilization efficiency. Key Informant Interviews were conducted with fifteen senior and technical officers drawn from policy, finance, monitoring and evaluation, human resource, audit, ICT, procurement, legal, communications, field operations and administrative functions across the three ministries.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression in SPSS, following the analytical procedures recommended by Field (2018) for survey-based correlational research. Prior to regression analysis, diagnostic tests were conducted to establish whether the data satisfied the relevant statistical assumptions. These included the Durbin-Watson test for autocorrelation, the Variance Inflation Factor for multicollinearity and the ANOVA test for linearity (Field, 2018). Qualitative data obtained from the Key Informant Interviews were analysed thematically using the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The qualitative findings were used to corroborate, contextualize and extend the quantitative results, particularly in explaining the institutional conditions under which adaptive leadership behaviour was enabled or constrained.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate

Out of the 302 questionnaires administered, 264 were completed and returned in usable form, yielding a response rate of 87.4 percent. This response rate exceeded the 70 percent benchmark recommended for organisational surveys and was considered sufficient to support the statistical analyses undertaken in the study (Kothari, 2014; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The achieved response rate also preserved the statistical adequacy anticipated during the original sample-size determination. In addition to the questionnaire responses, fifteen Key Informant Interviews were successfully conducted with senior and technical officers across the three ministries. These interviews provided qualitative depth and contextual insight into the structural and institutional conditions within which adaptive leadership was exercised.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Respondents were distributed across years of service, current cadre, educational attainment, and employment category. Table 1 presents the consolidated demographic profile.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 264)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percent
Years of Service	Less than 1 year	30	11.4
	1 to 5 years	44	16.7
	6 to 10 years	73	27.8
	11 to 15 years	76	28.9
	Above 15 years	41	15.2
Current Cadre	Senior Management	53	20.1
	Middle Level	66	25.0
	Technical/Professional	91	34.5
	Support Staff	54	20.5
Education	Diploma	75	28.4
	Bachelor's Degree	70	26.5
	Master's Degree	89	33.7
	Doctorate	30	11.4

Employment Category	Permanent and Pensionable	115	43.6
	Contract	133	50.4
	Intern	16	6.1

Note. Source: Field Data (2026).

The sample was largely experienced, with 71.9 percent of respondents having served in their ministries for more than five years. This level of institutional exposure provided a strong foundation for assessing how adaptive leadership was practiced within the organizational environment. All four cadre categories were represented, from senior management (20.1 percent) to support staff (20.5 percent), enabling the study to capture perspectives across different organizational levels. Postgraduate qualification holders accounted for 45.1 percent of the sample.

Reliability and Validity

Internal consistency and construct adequacy were assessed prior to the substantive analyses. Table 2 summarizes the reliability and validity results for the two focal constructs.

Table 2: Reliability and Validity Results

Construct	Items	α	KMO	χ^2	p
Adaptive Leadership	10	.897	.811	146.523	< .001
Organizational Performance	10	.919	.830	183.895	< .001

Note. α = Cronbach's Alpha. KMO = Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure. χ^2 = Bartlett's Test of Sphericity approximate chi-square.

Adaptive leadership recorded a Cronbach's Alpha of .912, interpreted as excellent reliability, while organizational performance recorded .919, both substantially exceeding the .70 threshold recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1978) and Field (2018). The KMO values of .825 and .830 respectively exceeded the .60 threshold specified by Kaiser (1974), confirming that the sample data were adequate for factor analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant for both constructs ($p < .001$), indicating that the items within each construct were sufficiently interrelated to support the validity of composite measurement (Field, 2018).

Descriptive Findings

Adaptive Leadership

Descriptive analysis was undertaken to assess how respondents evaluated the individual practices constituting adaptive leadership. Table 3 reports the response distributions, item means, standard deviations, and overall construct score.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Adaptive Leadership

Statement	SD%	D%	N%	A%	SA%	M	SD
Leaders adjust strategies in response to emerging challenges.	11.36	16.67	0.00	50.76	21.21	3.54	1.29
Innovative approaches are encouraged when addressing new problems.	5.30	22.73	0.00	22.73	49.24	3.88	1.40
Decision making processes adapt to changing circumstances.	22.35	12.50	0.00	54.55	10.61	3.19	1.39
Resources are reallocated flexibly to respond to emerging priorities.	13.26	15.91	0.00	45.45	25.38	3.54	1.38
Leaders mobilize teams to address challenges beyond routine operations.	7.95	20.08	0.00	21.21	50.76	3.87	1.42
Established routines are revised when they no longer serve organizational needs.	19.32	8.71	0.00	68.18	3.79	3.29	1.27
Overall						3.57	1.28

Note. SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. Source: Field Data (2026).

Compared with the other three strategic leadership dimensions, adaptive leadership recorded the lowest overall mean ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.28$). The highest-rated item concerned the use of innovative approaches to address new problems ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.40$), with 49.24 percent of

respondents strongly agreeing, suggesting relatively strong openness to innovation within the sampled ministries (Konadu et al., 2024). Adaptation of decision-making processes to changing circumstances recorded the lowest item mean ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.39$), with 22.35 percent strongly disagreeing, suggesting that the structural capacity to translate adaptive intent into decision-making flexibility remains limited (Oc, 2018; Corazzini and Anderson, 2014).

This internal dynamic of greater willingness to innovate than structural ability to make adaptive decisions is theoretically meaningful. Adaptive Leadership Theory distinguishes readiness to adapt from the institutional capacity to do so, with the latter depending not only on individual leadership attributes but also on organizational structures, authority systems, and procedural frameworks (Heifetz, 1994; Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018). The descriptive findings support this distinction in Kenya's central government ministries and suggest that the principal limitation on adaptive leadership is structural rather than attitudinal.

Organizational Performance

The organizational performance construct was examined across efficiency, target achievement, governance compliance, service quality, and resource utilization indicators. Table 4 presents the descriptive results.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Organizational Performance

Statement	SD%	D%	N%	A%	SA%	M	SD
Tasks are completed efficiently across departments.	3.04	24.71	0.00	65.78	6.46	3.48	1.03
Service delivery procedures promote operational efficiency.	21.21	6.82	0.00	68.94	3.03	3.26	1.29
Organizational performance targets are consistently met.	12.88	15.15	0.00	50.00	21.97	3.53	1.33
Governance requirements are consistently adhered to.	7.95	20.08	0.00	20.83	51.14	3.87	1.42

The Ministry consistently delivers high quality services.	11.36	16.67	0.00	33.33	38.64	3.71	1.41
Resources are utilized efficiently to support operations.	13.26	14.77	0.00	46.59	25.38	3.56	1.36
Overall						3.61	1.28

Note. Source: Field Data (2026).

Organizational performance recorded an overall mean of 3.61 (SD = 1.28), with governance adherence recording the highest item mean (M = 3.87, SD = 1.42) and service delivery efficiency recording the lowest (M = 3.26, SD = 1.29). This compliance versus efficiency gap in the dependent variable mirrors the attitudinal versus structural gap observed in adaptive leadership, suggesting a systemic pattern in which the sampled ministries are institutionally stronger on formal compliance than on the operational flexibility and responsiveness that adaptive leadership is designed to enhance (OAG, 2023; PSC, 2023).

Inferential Analysis

Correlation Analysis

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Between Adaptive Leadership and Organizational Performance

Variable	AL	OP
Adaptive Leadership (AL)	—	
Organizational Performance (OP)	.672**	—

Note. **p < .01 (2-tailed). N = 264.

The Pearson correlation between adaptive leadership and organizational performance was $r = .672$ ($p < .01$), indicating a strong positive bivariate association consistent with the theoretical expectation that adaptive leadership contributes meaningfully to organizational performance (Heifetz, 1994; Yukl and Mahsud, 2010). This correlation is the lowest among the four strategic leadership dimensions examined, a ranking that aligns with the theoretical prediction that adaptive leadership faces greater institutional friction in hierarchical government settings than

direction setting, participation, or accountability practices (Randall and Coakley, 2007; Oc, 2018).

Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was conducted to test the null hypothesis, with adaptive leadership entered alongside the other three strategic leadership dimensions to isolate its unique contribution while controlling for shared variance among the leadership constructs (Field, 2018).

Table 6: Model Summary

R	R²	Adjusted R²	SE of Estimate
.830	.689	.684	.319

Note. Predictors: (Constant), Adaptive Leadership, Accountability Oriented Leadership, Participative Decision Making, Strategic Direction Setting. Dependent Variable: Organizational Performance.

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(4, 259) = 143.159$, $p < .001$, with the four strategic leadership dimensions collectively explaining 68.9 percent of the variance in organisational performance ($R^2 = .689$). Adaptive leadership had a statistically significant positive effect on organisational performance ($B = .199$, $SE = .045$, $\beta = .196$, $t = 4.433$, $p < .001$). The null hypothesis was therefore rejected at the .001 level of significance.

Table 7: ANOVA for the Regression Model

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Regression	58.225	4	14.556	143.159	.000
Residual	26.335	259	0.102		
Total	84.559	263			

Note. Dependent Variable: Organizational Performance.

The standardized coefficient of $\beta = .196$ was the smallest among the four strategic leadership dimensions. This means that, holding the other dimensions constant, a one-standard-deviation increase in adaptive leadership was associated with a .196 standard-deviation increase in organisational performance.

Table 8: Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.047	.167		0.283	.778
Strategic Direction Setting	.231	.046	.242	5.050	.000
Participative Decision Making	.271	.043	.300	6.296	.000
Accountability Oriented Leadership	.301	.046	.286	6.548	.000
Adaptive Leadership	.199	.045	.196	4.433	.000

Note. Dependent Variable: Organizational Performance. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient. The adaptive leadership row is the focal predictor.

Although comparatively smaller, the effect remained both statistically significant and substantively meaningful, demonstrating that adaptive leadership contributes to organisational performance even within the relatively constrained institutional environment of central government ministries (Yukl and Mahsud, 2010; Gadoline et al., 2023). Its comparatively smaller contribution is itself an important empirical finding because it supports the proposition that adaptive leadership encounters greater institutional friction in hierarchical public-sector environments than leadership practices that can operate more readily within established structures and procedures (Randall and Coakley, 2007; Corazzini and Anderson, 2014).

Qualitative Evidence

The Key Informant Interviews provided convergent explanatory evidence for both the statistically significant positive effect of adaptive leadership and the comparatively smaller magnitude of its contribution to organisational performance. Respondents drawn from procurement, field operations, ICT and Programme management consistently identified rigid approval hierarchies, statutory procurement timelines and multi-layered authorization processes as major constraints on the exercise of adaptive leadership within the sampled ministries (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009; Randall and Coakley, 2007).

One respondent from a procurement function observed that "the willingness to adapt is not the problem; the procedures require multiple approvals and procurement timelines that prevent rapid reallocation of resources even when the need is obvious and urgent" (KII, 2026). A

respondent from field operations similarly noted that "at the field level, we see what needs to change, but the approval chain back to headquarters means that by the time authorization arrives, the window for adaptive response has often closed" (KII, 2026). A third respondent observed that "innovative approaches are genuinely welcomed in principle, but the regulatory framework is designed for predictability and compliance, not for speed and flexibility, so adaptive behaviour is constrained not by leadership but by the system within which leadership must operate" (KII, 2026).

These qualitative accounts complement the quantitative findings and provide a coherent explanation of how adaptive leadership operates within the sampled ministries. The significant regression effect ($p < .001$) confirms that adaptive leadership is associated with meaningful improvements in organizational performance, thereby supporting the central proposition of Adaptive Leadership Theory (Heifetz, 1994; DeRue, 2011). However, the comparatively smaller standardized coefficient ($\beta = .196$) suggests that the institutional space within which adaptive leadership can be exercised is narrower than that available to direction-setting, participation, and accountability practices (Oc, 2018; Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018). The reported significant deviation from linearity ($p = .010$) indicates that the linear specification may not fully capture the relationship; however, the direction and functional form of any non-linear association require dedicated non-linear modelling before stronger conclusions can be drawn.

Discussion

The finding that adaptive leadership had a statistically significant positive effect on organisational performance ($\beta = .196, p < .001$) is broadly consistent with the existing empirical literature. At the same time, its position as the strategic leadership dimension with the smallest standardized effect provides additional evidence concerning the institutional boundaries within which adaptive leadership operates in government settings. Yukl and Mahsud (2010) argued that leaders who demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness to changing organisational conditions achieve stronger performance outcomes than those who depend primarily on procedural consistency. The significant positive effect established in the present study supports this proposition.

The findings also correspond with those of Gadoline et al. (2023), who established that adaptive leadership improved responsiveness within Swedish healthcare organizations but was constrained by regulatory frameworks, professional hierarchies and institutional inertia. Similar constraints emerged from the qualitative evidence in the present study, particularly

through respondents' identification of prolonged approval chains, statutory procurement requirements and regulatory systems oriented towards compliance and predictability. The convergence of these findings indicates that the effectiveness of adaptive leadership depends not only on leaders' willingness and capability to adapt but also on the institutional latitude available for translating adaptive intentions into organisational action.

The significant deviation from linearity ($p = .010$) warrants further examination but does not, by itself, establish diminishing performance returns. Corazzini and Anderson (2014) proposed that institutional restrictions may constrain the returns associated with adaptive leadership in highly regulated environments, while Randall and Coakley (2007) similarly identified structural limits on adaptive action in public institutions. The qualitative findings in the present study identify plausible mechanisms through which such constraints may operate, including procurement timelines, multi-layered authorization procedures, and regulatory frameworks designed primarily to ensure predictability and accountability. More specialized non-linear modelling is therefore required to determine whether the relationship plateaus, diminishes, or follows another functional form.

The findings also have implications for Adaptive Leadership Theory. The theory correctly anticipates that adaptive leadership contributes positively to organisational performance, a proposition supported by the statistically significant regression effect observed in this study (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009). However, the theory provides comparatively limited specification of the institutional conditions that may restrict adaptive behaviour within highly regulated organizations (Oc, 2018; Northouse, 2022). In such settings, the organisational environment functions not merely as a context that leaders must interpret and manage but also as a structural boundary defining the speed, scope and range of permissible adaptive action.

The evidence therefore supports the concept of institutionally bounded adaptiveness. Under such conditions, leaders may possess both the motivation and competence required to adapt, yet procedural architectures constrain the translation of adaptive intent into adaptive implementation. Hierarchical approval systems, procurement requirements and statutory accountability mechanisms may consequently restrict the speed, scope and reversibility of adaptive interventions in government organizations (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018). This interpretation extends the application of Adaptive Leadership Theory by emphasizing that leadership effectiveness depends partly on the institutional space available for adaptive action.

The practical significance of the finding should therefore not be diminished by the comparatively smaller standardized coefficient. Adaptive leadership is distinctive among the four strategic leadership dimensions because it directly addresses non-routine, emergent and structurally unfamiliar challenges for which existing procedures may provide inadequate solutions (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009; DeRue, 2011). Its statistically significant contribution despite operating within a highly constrained institutional environment suggests that carefully expanding the adaptive space available to public-sector leaders could generate meaningful performance improvements. Measures such as expedited approval pathways for emergency resource reallocation and appropriately delegated authority for field-level process adjustments may enable leaders to respond more effectively to emerging challenges while maintaining appropriate accountability safeguards (Konadu, Owusu Ansah and Asante, 2024; Haule, Mwagike and Mkumbo, 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that adaptive leadership has a statistically significant positive effect on organisational performance in central government ministries in Kenya ($B = .199$, $\beta = .196$, $p < .001$). The relationship was also supported by a strong positive bivariate correlation ($r = .672$). Consequently, the null hypothesis that adaptive leadership has no statistically significant effect on organisational performance was rejected at the .001 level of significance. These findings confirm that adaptive leadership constitutes a meaningful component of organisational performance within Kenya's central government ministries (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009; Randall and Coakley, 2007).

The reported deviation from linearity ($p = .010$), considered alongside the qualitative findings, suggests that a simple linear specification may not fully represent the relationship between adaptive leadership and organizational performance. Hierarchical approval systems, procedural rigidity, and statutory requirements were identified qualitatively as constraints on the translation of adaptive intentions into timely organizational action. Accordingly, the study concludes that adaptive leadership contributes positively to performance, while the precise form of any non-linear relationship should be established through dedicated modelling rather than inferred from the deviation-from-linearity test alone.

The study further concludes that the primary constraint on adaptive leadership within the sampled ministries is structural rather than attitudinal. Leaders and employees demonstrated openness to innovation and adaptive problem-solving, but institutional systems governing

approval, procurement and authorization imposed procedural timelines and limitations on the scope of permissible adaptive action (Corazzini and Anderson, 2014; Oc, 2018). This structural boundedness provides a plausible explanation for the comparatively smaller standardized coefficient and bivariate correlation associated with adaptive leadership. It also explains why adaptive leadership can contribute meaningfully to organisational performance while producing a relatively smaller effect than the other strategic leadership dimensions examined in the broader study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, central government ministries should establish delegated adaptive-authority protocols that permit field-level and departmental managers to make specified categories of resource-reallocation, process-adjustment and service-delivery decisions without requiring full headquarters approval. Such authority should operate within clearly defined thresholds and remain subject to appropriate post hoc accountability and reporting mechanisms. This approach would expand the institutional space available for adaptive leadership without weakening the governance structures required to ensure accountability within the public sector (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018; Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009).

Second, the National Treasury and Economic Planning should consider developing expedited procurement and resource-reallocation pathways for clearly defined emergency and adaptive circumstances. Existing procurement procedures remain essential for safeguarding transparency, integrity and fiscal accountability; however, conventional timelines may impede institutional responsiveness when ministries confront urgent or rapidly evolving challenges. Any expedited mechanism should therefore incorporate clearly specified trigger criteria, defined limits of authority and enhanced post-expenditure audit scrutiny to balance institutional flexibility with fiscal accountability (Randall and Coakley, 2007; Konadu, Owusu Ansah and Asante, 2024).

Third, the Kenya School of Government should strengthen adaptive leadership development programmes for senior and middle-level public officers. Such programmes should develop not only the behavioral competencies required to diagnose and manage adaptive challenges but also the institutional-design capabilities needed to create legitimate adaptive spaces within government organizations (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009; Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018). Particular attention should be given to the distinction between adaptive intent and adaptive implementation. This would enable public-sector leaders to identify procedural bottlenecks,

navigate regulatory constraints and develop institutionally legitimate strategies for increasing adaptive responsiveness without undermining established governance safeguards (DeRue, 2011; Northouse, 2022).

Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies should employ specialized non-linear modelling techniques, including polynomial or piecewise regression, to determine more precisely whether and at what point the performance returns associated with adaptive leadership plateau or diminish within central government ministries (Corazzini and Anderson, 2014; Field, 2018). Such approaches would provide a more rigorous specification of the structural ceiling suggested by the present findings.

Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in determining whether institutional reforms that expand delegated adaptive authority produce measurable changes in both the magnitude and functional form of the relationship between adaptive leadership and organisational performance. Tracking ministries over time would provide stronger evidence regarding whether modifications to approval procedures, procurement flexibility or delegated authority translate into sustained performance gains.

Finally, comparative research across ministries characterized by different levels of procedural rigidity would help determine whether institutionally bounded adaptiveness is a general feature of central government organizations or varies according to ministry-level institutional design. Such studies could identify which organisational arrangements enable adaptive leadership to contribute more effectively to performance while preserving the accountability requirements inherent in public-sector governance (Oc, 2018; Randall and Coakley, 2007).

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