

## **The Effect of Ethical Practices on The Relationship Between Strategic Leadership and Service Delivery of County Governments in Kenya**

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**Abstract:** Public sector entities are striving towards enhanced service delivery and an understanding of mix of factors which can help achieve these enhanced services is a continuous endeavor. The study sought to understand whether ethical practices affect the relationship between strategic leadership and service delivery using a case of County Governments in Kenya. The relevant theories underpinning this study were the New Public Management (NPM) theory and the agency theory. This study used a positivist research philosophy and a cross sectional survey. The sample was 282 respondents was drawn from drawn from the Education, Health services, Public works, Economic planning, Natural resources and Agriculture departments. The study used purely primary data which was collected using a structured questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used in the data analysis. simple and multiple linear regressions were used. The study found that ethical practices and strategic leadership were significant in influencing service delivery among county governments in Kenya. The study recommends that the county leadership should concentrate on building and monitoring ethical behaviours among the county officers for quality service provisions. There is also need to audit, review and strengthen existing code of conducts and enforcement of sanctions on unethical practices by county officials.

**Key words:** Ethical Practices, Strategic Leadership; Service Delivery

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Public sector entities are striving towards enhanced service delivery and an understanding of mix of factors which can help achieve these enhanced services is a continuous endeavor. Among these factors Gaitho (2019a) conceptualized that ethical practices tend to influence the relationship between strategic leadership and service delivery. Ethical practices help in overcoming any ethical issues arising from relationships that are networked in an organization and that may arise in the line of duty and thus enhances service delivery and public satisfaction through proper ethical decision making process. There are varied standpoints on what constitutes ethical practices. Bubble (2012) contends that ethical practices constitute moral principles that are deemed to guide the officials in an organization in work related aspects which controls conflicts of interest and abusing of positions or offices by the individuals in hierarchical positions.

According to Flite and Harman (2013), ethical practices in organizations are operationalized as integrity, transparency, confidentiality, codes of conducts and honesty. Some ethical practices have legal implications that stakeholders must be aware of and adhere to (Rushton, 2002). Ethical practices also relate to justice and integrity in the conduct of tasks by all stakeholders (Goodstein & Aquino, 2010). In certain scenarios stakeholders have also to uphold privacy in addition to exhibiting self-control (Culnan & Williams, 2009). Gaitho (2019a) held that in the context of public entities, ethical practices involve codes of conduct, professionalism, confidentiality, integrity and honesty which guide leaders and employees in executing their mandate in the service provision.

According to Siphumeze (2015), political leaders and government officials across Africa face complex situations when dealing with ethical issues in service delivery and broader development agendas. These unethical practices are fuelled by societal expectations where in some cases ethical and diligent leaders are derided for not helping themselves, their tribes and family members, a situation which has leads to poor services by public entities (Abdullahi, 2013; Fobosi, 2011; Odhiambo-Mbai, 2003). Other ethical challenges in an African context as far as political leaders are concerned is that once elected, they tend to ignore the service

delivery promises they made to the citizens during political campaigns thus breaching the social contract which is based on expectations that the leadership will act ethically and morally. Gaitho (2019b) found that political leaders in Kenya used religion as a cover for their unethical practices and the consequent inability to deliver services to the citizens. It was from these viewpoints that the study sought the effect of ethical practices on the relationship between strategic planning in the context of county governments in Kenya.

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The relevant theory reviewed for this study was the New Public Management (NPM) theory and the agency theory. The new public management theory advocates application of private sector's best practices for efficient and responsive service delivery by public entities (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Hope, 2001; Savoie, 2003). Therefore, the NPM perspective key tenets as put forward by Haque (2004) and Islam (2015) align with the objectives of this study whose drive is the quest for better services by public entities by a strategic leadership which is ethical. The proposed study hypotheses hold that strategic leadership, ethical practices and service delivery concepts have been applied successfully in the private sector and thus the need to test how they fare in public entities based on NPM.

The agency theory on the other hand foresees a situation where the leadership is faced with ethical issues which require appropriate ethical practices for efficient service delivery and thus need for integration of various mechanisms to moderate the conflicts and tensions (Batley, 2004; Van Slyke, 2007). Heath (2009) noted that the theory focuses on ethical practice and accountability mechanisms to correct opportunistic behaviour that result from principals exploiting asymmetric information to the disadvantage of the agents. The study held that public officials in their mandate to deliver services have to contend with ethical dilemmas emanating from conflict of interests in areas such as project prioritisation, procurement, recruitment of staff and in the actual delivery of services. The agency theory principles were thus found to be suitable anchor for the study.

## **III. PREVIOUS LITERATURE LINKING ETHICAL PRACTICES, STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE DELIVERY**

Research works have put emphasis on how ethical practices are important in determining how strategic leaders can transform service delivery to public satisfaction with some reporting positive relationships and others negative relationships and even others concluding that the variables exhibits no relationship at all. According to Siphumeze (2015) strategic leadership is required to adhere to certain ethical requirements for the desire of quality service delivery to be accomplished. Kuye and Mafunisa (2003) insist that there is need for ethical structures to guide strategic leadership in organisations.

According to Rok (2009) the effective and ethical leadership implementing sustainability agenda are of the crucial importance for the public entities success in offering services. Further Rushton (2002) argues that Ethical structures support strategic leaders to enhance staff interactional abilities within organisations and thus improve service delivery. According to Goodstein and Aquino (2010), for strategic leaders to manage an organization ethical practices should relate to justice and integrity in the conduct of tasks where all stakeholders are engaged to enhance service deliver.

Strategic leadership should therefore put in place measures that can enhance ethical practices. This is because entities without ethical structures formulated and adopted by strategic leaders have no proper foundation for nurturing proper ethical processes (Alessandro, Lafuente&Santiso, 2014). With regard to enforcement of ethical structures and processes, the focus should be on how ethical practices and strategic leadership are conceptualized to enhance service delivery in the public organizations. The growing importance of ethical practices as a critical resource has encouraged organizations to pay greater attention to their strategies in enhancing service delivery. Ethical practices are good ways to effectively and efficiently create, sustain and enable good processes of service delivery (Davenport & Prusak, 2010). An appropriate ethical practices strategy is seen as a tool to build competitive advantage in the long term and therefore differentiates companies from competitors.

Ethical practices are very important in any organization and therefore strategic leaders are keen on how such practices can be distributed among different sections of the firm so that it can be used for the betterment of the organization (Alavi&Leidner, 2001). For any organization with a vision of achieving service delivery, strategic leadership should play the major role through fostering ethical practices (Dinwoodie, Quinn & McGuire 2014). The role of executing efficiently the applicable strategy is the key function of strategic leadership and thus the lack of better strategy execution can be attributed to inexperienced top management who are less concerned with strategic leadership (Hrebiniak, 2012).

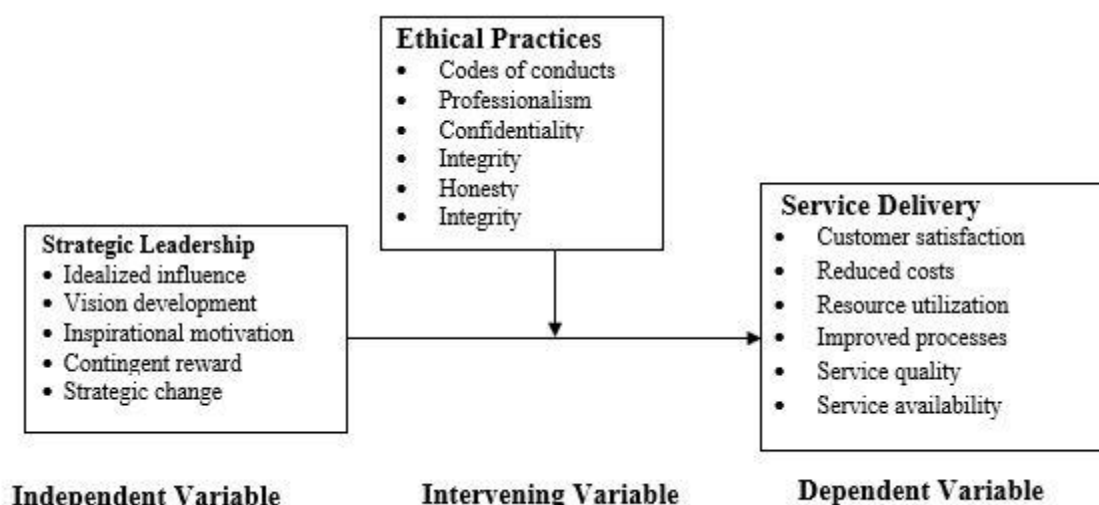
The issues that surround service delivery revolve around the concept of strategic leaders since the leaders are responsible for organizing all the strategic actions that are needed in any organizational success (Musyoka, 2011). All people in management should therefore find ways of enhancing their leadership abilities which are very crucial especially in identifying and implementing the required strategies. There are also other

factors that might affect how service delivery is achieved within the organization. For instance, lack of aligning the strategies with the precursors of effective implementation is seen as the major obstacles that might lead to the collapse of organization vision (Slater, Olsen &Hult, 2010). It is thus important for an organization to put the best measures of aligning each strategy to structure and put measures of how ethical practices should be incorporated for service delivery to be realized.

It is therefore the role of each strategic leader to put in place all the necessary measures of enhancing ethical practices to be shared since those organizations that do their business without ethical practices, or not finding ethical practices as required to solve a certain technicality are known to perform poor as opposed to those that are well ethically placed in terms of leaders identifying best ethical practices and best structures that allow the flow of information to those areas that require technical changes.

#### IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The paper developed a conceptual framework for the effect of ethical practices on the relationship between strategic leadership and service delivery based on the foregoing discussions and in line with Gaitho (2019a) propositions. The indicators for ethical practices, strategic leadership and service delivery are borrowed from Gaitho (2019a). Ethical practices were thus indicated by codes of conducts, professionalism, confidentiality, integrity and honesty Gaitho (2019a) also identified customer satisfaction, reduced costs, resource utilization, improved processes, service quality and service availability, as dependable indicators of service delivery in public entities. This study conceptualized that ethical practices as the independent variable while service delivery was the dependent variable.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework for the Effect of Ethical Practices on the Relationship between Strategic Leadership and Service Delivery in Public Entities

Source: Gaitho (2019a) based on various views from literature.

Based on the conceptual framework a hypothesis to be tested was framed as follows;

H<sub>1</sub>: Ethical practices have a significant effect on the relationship between strategic leadership and service delivery in public entities

#### V. METHODS

This study used a positivism research philosophy and a cross sectional survey where the target population was drawn from the 47 counties in Kenya. Purposive sampling was used to select six departmental chief officers and administrators from each county. The study therefore had a sample of 282 respondents drawn from the Education, Health services, Public works, Economic planning, Natural resources and Agriculture departments. The study used purely quantitative primary data collected using a structured questionnaire with 5-point likert scale items. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used in the data analysis which entailed use of frequencies, mean, standard deviation and regression. The quality assurance protocols by the researcher found that out of the 282 returned questionnaires 272 were satisfactorily filled and thus used to generate the study findings.

## VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Descriptive Statistics Results and Discussions

The study began by analysing the nature of ethical practices as they manifested in the county governments in Kenya based on the descriptive statistics. This study provides a summary of the nature of ethical practices in the county governments in Kenya according to the responses from employees concerning the attributes as manifested in surveyed county government offices. These were the summarized in terms of codes of conduct, professionalism, honesty and integrity 5-pointlikertscale questionnaire items. The findings are as indicated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Summary of Ethical Practices Constructs**

Variable manifestations	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Coefficient of variation
Codes of conduct	272	3.729	1.077	0.28
Professionalism	272	3.551	0.944	0.30
Honesty	272	3.637	0.931	0.26
Integrity	272	3.843	0.831	0.22
Average Mean score	<b>272</b>	<b>3.69</b>	<b>0.946</b>	<b>0.27</b>

Source: Field data (2018)

The summary shows that integrity had the highest overall mean score of 3.843, standard deviation of 0.831 and CV of 22%. This was followed by code of conduct (Mean=3.729, SD=1.077 and CV=28%). Further Honesty had an overall mean of 3.637, standard deviation of 0.931 and coefficient of variation of 26% and lastly professionalism (mean=3.551, standard deviation=0.944 and CV=30%). These results indicate that county leadership integrity was the most influential factor in wooing customers to receive appropriate service delivery from the county government of Kenya. Integrity in service delivery is crucial for presenting the company in a good light to the public.

Leaders who possess integrity build trust with their customers and therefore this is a plus mark for the organizations that possess such leaders. Building trust with the customers is a crucial factor since in the case of minor service lapse, customers will still be loyal because of the trust they had already built earlier with the company. Despite integrity possessing a greater mean among the ethical practices established in the study said to influence service delivery, the study summarizes that the county leadership averagely upheld integrity and therefore it concludes that the matter to be looked into in order to improve service delivery.

Strict adhering of integrity by county leaders ensures that the public are able to receive services and needs catered in a fairly manner. It further ensures that there is no favouritism when discharging service to the public. Integrity additionally fosters confidence in the leadership by the citizens. By creating this atmosphere of trust, the administration enables the public understand that they are working with their best interests in mind and not out of selfish interests.

Code of conduct is put in place in the county government to ensure services are delivered in an equitable, impartially and fair manner in order to meet the needs of the public. This study summarizes that despite the county leadership encouraging practice of code of ethics, it established they were not strict on follow up and themselves did not also strictly practice the set ethics when it came to recruitment and employment. Further, it outlined that they were not consistent in offering discipline to areas that officers were reported to have breached the code of ethics. The study further summarizes that county government leadership should encourage participation in policy making and foster transparency by providing the public with timely, accessible and accurate information.

Honesty in service delivery is illustrated in terms of displaying transparency and openness when administering services to individuals as well as keeping your word and delivering on time the said products or services. Respondents in the study agreed that the county leadership acted quickly on matter or complains raised by majority of individuals. They further agreed that county leadership made promises and fulfilled them to the public. The study therefore depicts honesty as an important element that any public office is required to possess to ensure appropriate service delivery to the public. Honesty promotes accountability and provision of information to the citizens on what the governments and its agents are doing. Since honesty by county leadership was averagely met, this study further summarizes that county leadership should establish and strengthen reception and information units for users in a bid of assisting them in gaining access to services as well as recording their views, suggestion or complaints.

Professionalism had the lowest overall mean score of 3.551, standard deviation of 0.944 and CV of 30% which portrays a situation where professionalism was considered a less significant factor in influencing service delivery. Professionalism in public service delivery is whereby public offices discharge its services to the public displaying possession of high skills and expertise as well as offering good treatment to the public. The

study established that county government leadership portrayed professionalism averagely when discharging their duties and delivery of service to the public. Additionally, it was noted that there was minimal training and provision of professional courses to the official and staff of the county government offices.

Despite the importance of training which increases morale and confidence in employees that will see it in building public trust, the study established that it was not put as a priority by the county leadership. Further, it indicated that there was no fairness in allocation of resources to the various wards in the county as well as the leadership acted in nepotism. Civil servants and public officials are expected to maintain and strengthen the public's trust and confidence in government, by demonstrating the highest standards of professional competence, efficiency and effectiveness, upholding the Constitution and the laws, and seeking to advance the public good at all times.

**Hypothesis Testing**

The study then determined the influence of ethical practices as an intervening variable in the relationship between strategic leadership and service delivery through formulation of the following hypothesis.

**H<sub>1</sub>: Ethical practices has a significant effect on the relationship between strategic leadership and service delivery in County governments of Kenya**

Baron and Kenny (1986) four-step method was used to test the hypothesis using regression analysis. Step one involved regressing strategic leadership with service delivery. The process moves to step two if step one yields statistically significant results and if not significant, the process terminates and would be concluded that ethical practices do not mediate the relationship between strategic leadership and service delivery.

In step 2 strategic leadership was regressed against ethical practices. If the results are significant, the process moves to step 3 because the necessary condition for an intervening effect exist. In step three the influence of ethical practices on service delivery is tested using a simple linear regression model. A statistically significant effect of ethical practices on service delivery is a necessary condition in testing for the intervening effect

Finally, Step four tested the influence of strategic leadership on service delivery while controlling for the effect of ethical practices. These tests were done using simple linear regression analysis. The influence of strategic leadership on service delivery should not be statistically significant when ethical practices is controlled. This is a necessary condition in testing for an intervening effect. Results from the four steps are presented in Table 2, 3, 4 and 5 respectively. Under Step One, strategic leadership was regressed against Service delivery. The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Kenny and Baron Step 1 Depicting Relationship between Strategic Leadership and Service Delivery**

a) Model Summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.802 <sup>a</sup>	.643	.640	.77199		
a. Predictors: (Constant), Strategic leadership						
b) ANOVA <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	124.427	1	124.427	208.779	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Residual	69.133	271	.596		
	Total	193.560	272			
a. Dependent Variable: Service delivery						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Strategic leadership						
c) Combined coefficients						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.499	.273		-1.829	.070
	Strategic leadership	1.163	.081	.802	14.449	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Service delivery						

The findings in Table 2 a statistically strong and positive relationship between strategic leadership and service delivery (R=.802). Coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup>=.643) depicts that strategic leadership explains 64.3% of service delivery. The F-value of 208.779 with p-value of 0.00 which is less than the level of significant 0.05, hence the model is statistically significant. The results thus confirmed the first step of testing for the intervening effect of ethical practices on the relationship between strategic leadership and service delivery.

The intervening testing then proceeded to step two that involved testing the effect of strategic leadership on ethical practices. The results of the tests are presented in Table 3

**Table 3: Kenny and Baron Step 2 Depicting Effect of Strategic Leadership on Ethical Practices**

<b>(a) Model Summary</b>						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.620 <sup>a</sup>	.384	.379	.46520		
a. Predictors: (Constant), Strategic leadership						
b. Dependent Variable: Ethical practices						
<b>(b) ANOVA<sup>a</sup></b>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	14.454	1	14.454	66.788	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Residual	23.156	271	.216		
	Total	37.610	272			
a. Predictors: (Constant), Strategic leadership						
b. Dependent Variable: Ethical practices						
<b>(c) Coefficients</b>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.813	.177		10.229	.000
	Strategic leadership	.424	.052	.620	8.172	.000
a. Predictors: (Constant), Strategic leadership						
b. Dependent Variable: Ethical practices						

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that strategic leadership have a positive and statistically strong relationship with ethical practices (R=.620). Further the coefficient of variation (R<sup>2</sup>=.384) depicted that 38.4% variation in ethical practices is explained strategic leadership. Further the F-value was 66.788 with P-value of .00 which is <0.05, hence the model is statistically significant. The results, therefore suggest that the second step of testing confirms the process of testing the intervening effect to move to step 3.

In Step Three, Ethical practices was regressed against service delivery. The results for the step 3 are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Kenny and Baron Step 3 Depicting Effect of Ethical Practices on Service Delivery**

<b>(a) Model Summary</b>						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.577 <sup>a</sup>	.333	.289	.62334		
<b>(b) ANOVA</b>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	8.909	1	2.970	7.642	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	17.873	271	.389		
	Total	26.782	272			
<b>(c) Coefficients</b>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.105	.416		7.467	.000
	Ethical practices	.238	.093	.355	2.570	.012
a. Dependent Variable: Service delivery						

The results in Table 4 indicate that ethical practices had a significant relationship with service delivery (R=.577) with ethical practices explaining 33.3% of the variations in service delivery (R<sup>2</sup>=.333), remaining percent being explained by other factors not considered in the model. The analysis from the model had F-value of 7.642 with P-value of 0.00 which is less than the level of significance 0.05, hence the model is statistically

significant. Therefore, the condition in the third step in testing for an intervening effect was satisfied and therefore progressed to **step 4** in testing for the intervening effect.

Finally, Step Four tested the influence of strategic leadership on service delivery while controlling for the effect of ethical practices. These tests were done using simple linear regression analysis. The influence of strategic leadership on service delivery should not be statistically significant at  $\alpha=.05$  when ethical practices is controlled. The relevant results are summarized in Table 5.

**Table 5: Regression Results Depicting Effect of Ethical Practices on Relationship between Strategic Leadership and Service Delivery**

<b>(a) Model Summary</b>						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.802 <sup>a</sup>	.643	.640	.77199		
2	.854	.730	.732	.04492		
<b>(b) ANOVA</b>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.029	1	.029	14.193	0.001
	Residual	.065	271	.002		
	Total	.093	272			
2	Regression	.059	2	.30	26.867	0.021
	Residual	.034	270	.001		
	Total	.093	272			
<b>(c) Coefficients</b>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.632	.694		3.794	.000
	Strategic leadership	.218	.212	.099	1.029	.0406
	Ethical practices		.459	.087	.578	5.263

a. Dependent Variable: Service delivery

The results in Table 5 show that strategic leadership explain 64.3% of the variation in service delivery ( $R^2 = .643$ ). At model 2, ethical practices adds significantly to the service delivery as the variation increased from .634 to .730 and  $p\text{-value}=.000$ . The results reveal that the variance explained by ethical practices is significant ( $F=14.193$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.001$ ) and the significance was increased ( $F=26.867$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ) in the second model.

The results revealed that the regression coefficients for strategic leadership increased from .802 to .854 when ethical practices were added to the regression suggesting that ethical practices may be exerting a partial intervening effect. The hypothesis that ethical practices intervenes the relationship between strategic leadership and service delivery was therefore partially accepted. This can imply that the attributes of ethical practices discussed are partially manifested in the organization to the extent of influencing the strategic leadership and subsequent the service delivery.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

The study further concludes that ethical practices adopted by county government are important in ensuring professional public service delivery. The ethical practices put in place include serving public interest, transparency, integrity, legitimacy, fairness, responsiveness, efficiency and effectiveness. This study established ethical practices as code of conduct, professionalism, honesty and integrity. The findings of the study further indicate that the county leadership has moderately maintained ethics and code of conduct in the public sector.

The study hypothesis  $H_1$  which stated that ethical practices had a significant effect on the relationship between strategic leadership and service delivery among county governments of Kenya was formulated. The study findings established that ethical practices affect significantly the relationship between strategic leadership and service delivery. The hypothesis that ethical practices intervenes strategic leadership and service delivery relationship was thus accepted.

The public entities are constantly changing through new leadership, environmental influences and the socio-political dynamics. They are expected to maintain and strengthen the public trust and confidence in government through displaying the highest standards of professional competence, efficiency and effectiveness

while upholding the constitutional laws and seeking to progress the public. Additionally, public officials ought to make decisions and act in a fair, equitable manner with no bias or prejudice considering only the virtues of the matter and respecting the citizens' rights. The study gives the summary that county leadership should establish and strengthen reception and information units for users in a bid of assisting them in gaining access to services as well as recording their views, suggestion or complaints. For any organization with a vision of achieving service delivery aspects strategic leadership should play the major role through fostering ethical practices.

### **VIII. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Ethical practices constitute moral principles that are deemed to guide the officials in county governments in work related aspects which controls conflicts of interest and abusing of positions or offices by the individuals in hierarchical positions. This also helps to promote what is good and those ethical issues that promote the general good within a certain industry or society. However unethical issues have been reported in various government ministries and departments and more so in county governments that have seen several county officials and even governors implicated. Tendering processes in county governments in Kenya has been associated to a number of unethical business practices that violates codes of conduct. For instance, when tendering processes is not executed in a transparent manner, then suppliers may have chances and vantages to solicit for consideration by advancing bribes and other forms of corruption. Transparency, fair treatment in bidding and awards of tenders, accountability and responsible purchasing and supply have a positive implication on procurement processes in any organization and could thus result into increased performance and service delivery. This is not possible without employing ethical theories.

In this case, public procurement is the main process through which the government operates and spends public money. It is estimated that in Kenya public procurement accounts for over 10% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), making it a large market for suppliers and contractors (GoK 2016). With this amount of resource public procurement tops the list of sectors with high opportunities for corruption. This therefore means that every effort should be made to erect safeguards to check against corrupt malpractices in public procurement. It is against this background that Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission has partnered with the Public Procurement Oversight Authority (PPOA) to issues corruption prevention guidelines in public procurement as part of its corruption prevention strategies and in line with the wider public financial management reforms that Kenyan government has been initiating. The issuance of these guidelines is further anchored in Section 9(c) (i) and (iv) of the Public Procurement and Disposal Act, 2005 read together with regulation 30 of the Public procurement and Disposal regulations, 2006. These guidelines are aimed at assisting public procuring entities in checking unethical practices in the procurement processes and instilling ethics as well in public procurement. This guideline highlights procurement methods, the procurement processes and various manifestations of corruption and corruption prevention strategies.

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