

Strategic Leadership and Service Delivery Excellence: A Study of Level Six Hospitals in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Strategic Leadership, Service Delivery Excellence, Transformational Leadership Theory, Resource-Based View Theory.

This study examines the relationship between strategic leadership practices and service delivery excellence in Level Six hospitals in Kenya. An empirical review of peer-reviewed literature published in the last decade was conducted, utilizing databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. The review synthesized evidence to identify leadership-related factors that influence hospital performance and patient outcomes. Findings indicate that hospitals led by managers employing strategic leadership practices such as visionary planning, participative decision-making, performance monitoring, and effective communication demonstrate higher levels of patient satisfaction, timely service delivery, and adherence to clinical protocols. Additionally, strategic leadership was associated with enhanced resource optimization, financial performance, staff motivation, and operational efficiency. Nevertheless, challenges persist, including limited infrastructure, workforce shortages, and misalignment with national healthcare policies, which hinder the full realization of leadership benefits. The review highlights the importance of strengthening strategic leadership initiatives to promote service delivery excellence, with particular attention to aligning hospital practices with national health quality standards and addressing systemic constraints.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Level Six hospitals, also referred to as tertiary or quaternary care centers, represent the apex of healthcare delivery, offering specialized, advanced, and highly technical medical services (WHO, 2016; MOH Kenya, 2020). These institutions manage complex and critical cases, including organ transplants, specialized surgeries, oncology treatments, and advanced diagnostics, supported by state-of-the-art technologies and highly skilled multidisciplinary teams (WHO, 2016). As referral centers, they provide specialized expertise to lower-level health facilities and play

a key role in medical research, policy formulation, and healthcare workforce training (MOH Kenya, 2020).

However, Level Six hospitals in Kenya face significant challenges, including high operational costs, inefficient resource utilization, staff shortages, and delayed service delivery, all of which compromise patient outcomes and satisfaction (Kakibibi et al., 2025).

Level Six hospitals in Kenya include Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH), Mathari National Teaching and Referral

Hospital (MNTRH), Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital (MTRH), National Spinal Injury Referral Hospital, and Kenyatta University Teaching, Referral and Research Hospital (KUTRRH) (MOH, 2023). These hospitals struggle with overcrowding, infrastructure constraints, and inconsistent implementation of healthcare policies, raising concerns about the overall quality of care delivered (Omondi et al., 2024).

Strategic leadership has been identified as a critical mechanism for addressing these challenges and enhancing service delivery excellence in high-tier hospitals. Defined as the ability of organizational leaders to envision the future, set direction, influence stakeholders, and align resources with institutional goals, strategic leadership fosters effective decision-making, staff motivation, and operational efficiency (Northouse, 2021; Hughes et al., 2023). In Level Six hospitals, strategic leaders guide policy implementation, coordinate multidisciplinary teams, and drive initiatives aimed at improving patient outcomes and organizational performance. By integrating vision-driven planning, participatory decision-making, and performance monitoring, strategic leadership has the potential to transform Level Six hospitals into models of healthcare service excellence (Baker & Jones, 2024).

This study is anchored on Transformational and Strategic Leadership Theories, the Resource-Based View (RBV), which emphasizes leveraging unique organizational resources such as human capital and advanced technology, and Donabedian's Structure-Process-Outcome (SPO) Model, which links hospital structures and managerial processes to service delivery outcomes. Together, these frameworks provide a robust foundation for investigating how strategic leadership influences service delivery excellence in Kenya's Level Six hospitals.

Strategic Leadership in Healthcare in Healthcare

Strategic leadership in healthcare involves proactive management practices that influence organizational direction, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement to achieve superior service delivery (Yukl, 2022). In Level Six hospitals, strategic leaders play a pivotal role in ensuring coordinated operations, aligning clinical and administrative goals, and fostering a culture of accountability and innovation (Avolio & Bass, 2023). Effective leadership practices such as participatory decision-making, clear communication, and performance monitoring have been linked to improved staff motivation, adherence to clinical guidelines, and enhanced operational efficiency (Hughes et al., 2023).

Empirical studies indicate that hospitals with strong strategic leadership demonstrate higher patient satisfaction, shorter service delivery times, and better resource utilization (Thomas et al., 2024). Conversely, weak leadership has been associated with inefficiencies, poor staff morale, and suboptimal clinical outcomes (Khan et al., 2023). Strategic leadership is particularly crucial in resource-constrained environments like Kenya, where leaders must balance limited financial, human, and infrastructural resources while maintaining high standards of care (Mulwa et al., 2021).

Service Delivery Excellence

Service delivery excellence in Level Six hospitals is anchored on the pillars of quality, safety, efficiency, and patient-centered care (Gupta et al., 2023). High-quality service is achieved through evidence-based clinical practices, adherence to safety protocols, timely diagnosis and treatment, and patient-centered interactions that foster shared decision-making and trust (Abdi et al., 2023; Lokota et al., 2023). Operational efficiency is enhanced through strategic workflow optimization, effective human resource management, and resource allocation that minimize waste and delays (Zeng et al., 2022; Nyawira et al., 2022). Continuous performance monitoring and evaluation are essential for sustaining excellence, with metrics such as patient satisfaction, treatment outcomes, infection control, and mortality rates guiding leadership decisions (Endalamaw et al., 2024). Hospitals that integrate strategic leadership practices into their operations demonstrate higher resilience, adaptability, and sustained service delivery performance (Baker & Jones, 2024).

Strategic Leadership and Service Delivery Excellence

The adoption of strategic leadership in Level Six hospitals has been linked to improved patient outcomes, staff engagement, and organizational performance (Jani & Chaudhary, 2023). Effective leaders ensure that policies, processes, and resources are aligned to maximize service delivery, enhance patient safety, and optimize operational efficiency (Omondi et al., 2024). Studies have shown that participatory leadership, clear communication of vision, and strategic resource allocation positively influence hospital performance indicators, including timeliness of care, clinical adherence, and patient satisfaction (Thomas et al., 2024; Andrieiev et al., 2024).

Strategic leadership also strengthens institutional resilience by fostering innovation, evidence-based decision-making, and continuous professional development among healthcare staff (Azis & Zulkifli, 2024; Murichu & Gachengo, 2023). Despite its importance, challenges persist due to governance

gaps, infrastructure limitations, and human resource constraints, highlighting the need for leadership interventions tailored to the Kenyan context. This study underscores the critical role of strategic leadership in achieving service delivery excellence, with a focus on aligning hospital practices with national healthcare standards and addressing systemic challenges in Level Six hospitals.

Level Six Hospitals in Kenya

The 2010 Kenyan Constitution mandates the Ministry of Health (MOH) to oversee and uphold healthcare standards. In pursuit of universal, high-quality, affordable, and equitable healthcare, the MOH has implemented key policy reforms (MOH, 2023). Following the 2013 devolution, governance was split between the national and county governments (Gwidi & Kilei, 2022). Responsibilities were likewise divided: county governments manage basic healthcare services, while the national government oversees referral hospitals, provides technical support, and handles policy and regulatory oversight.

Kenya's national level six hospitals such as Kenyatta University Teaching and Referral Hospital, Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital, Mathari National Teaching and Referral Hospital, National Spinal Injury Referral Hospital, and Kenyatta National Hospital are key institutions under the jurisdiction of the national government (MOH, 2023). These facilities receive state support in areas such as research development, infrastructure enhancement, human resource management, and quality assurance (Kenyan Parliament, 2019). Nevertheless, despite this institutional backing, these hospitals continue to encounter persistent challenges in relation to the complexities of service delivery and the effective coordination of quality management systems within the level six framework (Omondi et al., 2024).

2.0 EMPIRICAL REVIEW

The reviewed empirical studies collectively underscore the central role of strategic leadership in promoting service delivery excellence, highlighting several interconnected factors that influence patient outcomes and organizational performance. Vision-driven leadership, participatory decision-making, and effective communication are foundational to achieving high-quality healthcare services. Al-Abri and Al-Balushi (2014) observed that proactive managerial practices significantly improve patient satisfaction, a finding supported by Omore and Misuko (2023), who emphasized that strategic leadership and

stakeholder engagement foster stronger patient relationships and enhance service delivery outcomes.

Healthcare infrastructure and resource management consistently emerge as critical determinants of organizational performance. Essar et al. (2022), Olinyo et al. (2025), and Kabeta et al. (2023) argued that strategic allocation of resources, investment in infrastructure, and proactive management of operational bottlenecks are essential for improving efficiency and quality, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Leadership and workforce development further underpin service excellence. Mehta et al. (2019) and Cherop et al. (2022) highlighted that effective leadership competencies, employee motivation, and engagement strengthen organizational performance. Similarly, Ndambuki et al. (2023) demonstrated that sustained staff development and targeted capacity-building initiatives are associated with lower turnover intentions and higher service quality.

Data-driven decision-making and fostering a culture of accountability also contribute to service delivery performance. Subburaman et al. (2025) noted that hospitals with advanced data systems and analytical capabilities are better positioned to optimize resource use and improve clinical outcomes. Noghrehchi et al. (2024) further observed that a strong culture of patient safety, reinforced by committed leadership, enhances overall healthcare effectiveness. In addition, reliable service delivery and strong partnerships with suppliers play a supporting role. Mulwa et al. (2021) found that hospital operations adhering to quality assurance standards, supported by dependable supplier networks, consistently achieve improved patient outcomes. In contrast, Ahamed and Degu (2022) reported that patients at Kenyatta National Hospital experience persistent gaps in care quality, highlighting the need for strategic leadership interventions targeting vulnerable patient populations.

Cherop et al., (2022) noted that clinical leaders require strategic leadership competencies to effectively guide health systems, manage patient care, and ensure optimal treatment outcomes at Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital. Similarly, Cheruiyot, Kavale, and Chebii (2025) demonstrated that leadership development is critical to enhancing the effectiveness of strategic initiatives by generating actionable insights for policymakers and managers operating in resource-constrained settings, thereby supporting the achievement of universal health coverage goals in Kenya's national referral hospitals. In addition, Abdi et al., (2023) established that leadership significantly shapes health policy as a fundamental component of healthcare system governance and directly influences service delivery outcomes, including

affordability, access, coverage, client satisfaction, and timeliness at Kenya's national referral hospitals.

Overall, these studies collectively affirm that strategic leadership is pivotal for service delivery excellence, requiring a holistic approach that integrates visionary management, resource optimization, workforce development, data-informed decision-making, and patient-centered care. This evidence base provides critical guidance for policymakers and hospital administrators seeking to strengthen service delivery performance in Kenya's Level Six hospitals.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this study was an empirical review, aimed at systematically identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research on strategic leadership and service delivery excellence in Level Six hospitals. This approach enabled a structured and comprehensive assessment of current literature, revealing patterns, gaps, and emerging trends while adhering to predefined protocols to ensure transparency, consistency, and reproducibility. The key methodological steps included developing a systematic search strategy targeting peer-reviewed journals, policy reports, and grey literature, and applying strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. Relevant studies were screened, and data were extracted on strategic leadership dimensions such as visionary planning, participatory decision-making, performance monitoring, communication effectiveness, and resource alignment, as well as indicators of service delivery excellence, including patient satisfaction, clinical outcomes, operational efficiency, and adherence to safety protocols.

The quality of the selected studies was critically appraised, and findings were synthesized using thematic analysis to identify consistent patterns, leadership best practices, and methodological gaps. This empirical review was chosen for its capacity to provide evidence-based insights into how strategic leadership drives service delivery excellence in tertiary care, inform policy recommendations, and guide hospital managers in adopting effective leadership practices. The methodology ensured a comprehensive exploration of the influence of leadership on structural, procedural, and outcome indicators in Level Six hospitals, thereby contributing to knowledge advancement in healthcare governance and management.

4.0 SYNTHESIS OF THE FINDINGS

Strategic Leadership Practices: Empirical evidence highlights that effective strategic leadership in tertiary hospitals centers on visionary planning, participatory decision-making, performance monitoring, staff engagement, and resource alignment. In Kenya, Omore and Misuko (2023) established strong links between these leadership practices and improved service delivery performance, including higher patient satisfaction, timely care, and adherence to clinical guidelines. Across broader African settings, Alolayan et al. (2020) emphasized that top management support, clear communication of organizational goals, and alignment with national healthcare policies are critical for sustaining high-performing hospital systems. Common barriers include weak governance structures, insufficient managerial capacity, and inconsistent staff involvement, which hinder the full realization of leadership benefits (Alzghaibi & Hutchings, 2025). Ahamed and Degu (2022) observed that patients at Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) continue to experience suboptimal care outcomes, highlighting the need for leadership-driven interventions to improve patient well-being. To standardize excellence across all Level Six facilities, particularly in underserved and rural hospitals, evidence underscores the importance of strong leadership, clear governance frameworks, and alignment with national health policy objectives (Okonta et al., 2024).

Service Delivery Excellence: Studies on service delivery excellence consistently emphasize patient safety, timeliness, responsiveness, and overall satisfaction as key outcomes of effective strategic leadership. Kibira et al. (2022) demonstrated that leadership-driven infection prevention initiatives in Kenyan hospitals significantly improved compliance with safety protocols. Similarly, Ntwiga et al. (2019) linked routine leadership engagement, quality audits, and patient feedback mechanisms with higher patient satisfaction and improved clinical processes. Evidence from Tanzania (Powell-Jackson et al., 2023) and Ethiopia (Birhanu et al., 2010) further highlights that effective managerial practices, communication, and staff motivation foster patient trust and satisfaction, contributing to service excellence. According to Daniel and Mansur (2021) and Priyantini et al. (2023), patients in public hospitals report greater satisfaction and confidence when leaders demonstrate accountability, responsiveness, and clinical oversight. Cherop et al. (2022) also assert that strategic clinical leadership at Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital drives the delivery of high-quality healthcare, reinforcing the pivotal role of leadership in achieving service delivery excellence.

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overall satisfaction as key outcomes of effective strategic leadership. Kibira et al. (2022) demonstrated that leadership-driven infection prevention initiatives in Kenyan hospitals significantly improved compliance with safety protocols. Similarly, Ntwiga et al. (2019) linked routine leadership engagement, quality audits, and patient feedback mechanisms with higher patient satisfaction and enhanced clinical processes. Evidence from Tanzania (Powell-Jackson et al., 2023) and Ethiopia (Birhanu et al., 2010) further underscores that effective managerial practices, clear communication, and staff motivation foster patient trust and satisfaction, thereby contributing to service excellence. Daniel and Mansur (2021) and Priyantini et al. (2023) reported that patients in public hospitals express greater confidence and satisfaction when leaders demonstrate accountability, responsiveness, and clinical oversight.

In Kenya, the importance of strategic clinical leadership is particularly evident. Cheruiyot et al., (2025) demonstrated that leadership development enhances the effectiveness of strategic initiatives by generating actionable insights for policymakers and managers in resource-constrained settings, thereby supporting the achievement of universal health coverage goals in Kenya's national referral hospitals. In addition, Abdi et al., (2023) established that leadership significantly shapes health policy as a core component of healthcare system governance and directly influences service delivery outcomes, including affordability, access, coverage, client satisfaction, and timeliness at Kenya's national referral hospitals. Collectively, these studies reinforce the pivotal role of strategic leadership in driving service delivery excellence across healthcare systems in the region.

5.0 COMPARISON OF RESULTS

While most studies converge on the positive influence of strategic leadership on service delivery excellence in healthcare, notable divergences persist regarding the relative importance of leadership practices versus infrastructural investments in improving hospital performance. Some scholars argue that investments in modern medical equipment, adequate space, and physical infrastructure significantly enhance patient safety, satisfaction, and overall quality of care (Al-Abri & Al-Balushi, 2014; Kabeta et al., 2023). These studies emphasize how tangible resources support clinical procedures and operational efficiency, particularly in resource-limited settings (Essar et al., 2022; Ruzycki et al., 2025).

Conversely, other researchers contend that leadership-driven process improvements such as participatory decision-making, staff engagement, performance monitoring, and strategic governance are more critical for sustaining service delivery excellence (Mehta et al., 2019; Rasool et al., 2022; Sfantou et al., 2017; Mosadeghrad, 2015). For example, Mutunga (2022) found that managerial commitment, effective communication, and human resource capabilities were stronger predictors of patient satisfaction and service quality than infrastructural enhancements alone. Similarly, Dekawati et al. (2022) argue that while infrastructure provides a necessary foundation, it must be complemented by strategic leadership practices to achieve tangible improvements in healthcare performance.

This divergence in findings suggests that structural investments alone are insufficient without concurrent development in leadership, staff capacity, and process optimization. Studies by Aisyah et al. (2024) and Mourajid et al. (2024) underscore the importance of balanced strategies, where infrastructure supports, but does not replace, effective leadership, clinical governance, and organizational processes. The evidence therefore highlights that sustainable service delivery excellence in Level Six hospitals requires a synergistic approach, integrating strategic leadership with adequate resources and robust operational systems.

6.0 KEY INSIGHTS

One fundamental insight from the empirical literature is the central role of strategic leadership practices including visionary planning, participatory decision-making, performance monitoring, and staff engagement in aligning hospital operations with national or institutional quality frameworks to enhance service delivery excellence. For instance, Alolayyan et al. (2018) and Subburaman et al. (2025) demonstrate that strong managerial commitment and structured governance systems are associated with improved patient outcomes, operational efficiency, and adherence to clinical guidelines. Similarly, effective healthcare management is driven by leadership engagement, resource optimization, data-informed decision-making, and patient-centered care standards. These leadership elements collectively enhance patient satisfaction, reduce service delays, and strengthen hospital performance (Lsloum et al., 2024). Omore and Misuko (2022) further confirm that integrating leadership-driven initiatives with national-level performance targets improves workflow efficiency, reduces bottlenecks, and ensures optimal allocation of resources.

A second key insight highlights persistent regional and institutional disparities in the implementation of strategic leadership practices and service delivery performance. Studies indicate that rural or lower-resourced Level Six hospitals often face challenges such as limited managerial capacity, insufficient staff training, and constrained governance structures, which undermine the effectiveness of leadership interventions (Jatayu et al., 2024). Bergh et al. (2022) in East Africa further document that hospital readiness, guided by competent leadership, is a stronger predictor of patient satisfaction and service quality than the mere availability of infrastructure. Addressing these disparities through targeted capacity building, structured leadership development programs, and governance reforms is therefore essential to promoting equitable and high-quality tertiary care across all regions.

7.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The reviewed empirical studies collectively affirm that achieving service delivery excellence in Level Six hospitals is a multidimensional process, requiring the integration of strategic leadership, staff engagement, data-driven systems, and resource optimization. Omore and Misuko (2023) established that leadership engagement, participatory decision-making, and performance monitoring significantly enhance patient satisfaction, timely service delivery, and adherence to clinical protocols. These insights are consistent with broader evidence emphasizing that continuous leadership oversight and effective communication strengthen patient-provider relationships and promote operational efficiency.

The infrastructural dimension remains important, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. Essar et al. (2022) highlighted that modern medical equipment and adequate physical infrastructure support clinical operations and improve system efficiency. Similarly, Olinyo, Kariuki, and Mwangi (2025) found that strategic investments in hospital facilities positively influence patient outcomes and operational capacity at Kenyatta National Hospital. However, the evidence underscores that infrastructure alone is insufficient; Ruzicki et al. (2025) note that material support must be complemented by strong leadership, workforce well-being, and capacity-building initiatives to sustain high performance.

Strategic leadership emerges as a pivotal determinant of service delivery excellence. Mehta, Diwakar, and Arya (2019) emphasized that visionary planning, staff involvement, and continuous performance monitoring drive organizational outcomes, a finding echoed by Subburaman et al. (2025), who demonstrated that data-driven leadership

significantly enhances clinical and operational performance. Lsloum et al. (2024) further showed that integrating leadership engagement with technology and performance oversight reduces delays, optimizes workflow, and improves patient satisfaction.

Patient safety culture and quality governance are additional areas of convergence. Noghrehchi, Hefner, and Walker (2024) found that fostering a robust patient safety culture, underpinned by leadership commitment, enhances overall hospital performance. Similarly, Mulwa et al. (2021) highlighted that dependable service delivery and strong supplier relationships contribute to consistent adherence to quality standards.

Staff engagement is another critical dimension. Ndambuki et al. (2023) demonstrated that employee dedication, professional development, and targeted training reduce turnover intentions and reinforce service quality. Cherop, Wachira, Korir, and Bagire (2022) similarly underscored the role of strategic clinical leadership encompassing professional competencies, interpersonal skills, and managerial capabilities in sustaining high-quality care at Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital.

Patient-centered considerations remain central to service delivery excellence. Ahamed and Degu (2022) observed that vulnerable patient populations, such as cancer patients at KNH, continue to experience suboptimal care outcomes, signaling the need for leadership-driven targeted interventions. CQI-led initiatives and patient feedback mechanisms, as reported by Kibira et al. (2022) and Ntwiga et al. (2019), have been shown to enhance infection control, responsiveness, and satisfaction, reinforcing the link between leadership, process improvements, and patient-centered outcomes.

Overall, the evidence indicates that while infrastructure and resources are necessary, sustainable service delivery excellence is more strongly driven by strategic leadership practices, quality governance, data-informed decision-making, and workforce capacity development. This aligns with findings from Alolayyan et al. (2018), Subburaman et al. (2025), and Mutunga (2022), who collectively demonstrate that effective leadership frameworks and governance systems underpin continuous performance gains and high-quality outcomes in tertiary healthcare settings.

7.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Service delivery excellence in Level Six hospitals is a multifaceted process that extends beyond infrastructure and material resources. While adequate facilities and equipment

are necessary, sustained improvements are primarily driven by strategic leadership practices, including visionary planning, participatory decision-making, performance monitoring, and effective resource alignment. Leadership that actively engages staff, fosters accountability, and promotes a culture of patient-centered care is critical to improving hospital efficiency, clinical outcomes, and patient satisfaction.

Empirical evidence further highlights that staff engagement, capacity building, and data-informed decision-making are essential components of leadership-driven performance improvement. Hospitals that integrate these practices with structured governance frameworks and a strong patient safety culture demonstrate higher levels of service quality, responsiveness, and operational efficiency. Targeted interventions for vulnerable patient populations, guided by strategic leadership, are particularly important for reducing disparities in care and enhancing overall service delivery.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Leadership Capacity:** Hospital management should invest in continuous leadership development programs, focusing on strategic planning, decision-making, and performance monitoring skills.
2. **Promote Participatory Governance:** Leaders should involve multidisciplinary teams and staff in operational and clinical decision-making to enhance ownership, accountability, and motivation.
3. **Integrate Data-Driven Systems:** Hospitals should implement robust information and analytics systems to guide resource allocation, monitor performance, and support evidence-based decision-making.
4. **Enhance Patient-Centered Care:** Leadership should prioritize patient engagement, feedback mechanisms, and targeted interventions to address the needs of vulnerable populations.
5. **Align with National Policy Frameworks:** Hospital leadership must ensure that service delivery strategies are consistent with national healthcare policies, quality standards, and regulatory requirements.

In conclusion, strategic leadership is the central driver of service delivery excellence in Level Six hospitals. Effective leaders who combine governance, staff engagement, resource optimization, and patient-centered approaches create a sustainable pathway for improved healthcare outcomes, operational efficiency, and equity in tertiary care services.

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