

Behavior-Focused Self-Leadership and County Government Performance in Kenya: A Micro–Macro Analysis

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Abstract:

Background: This study examines the nexus between Behavior-Focused Strategies (BFS) and organizational performance within Kenyan county governments, responding to persistent concerns over service delivery and fiscal distress post-devolution. **Materials and Methods:** Adopting a positivist philosophy and an explanatory cross-sectional design, primary data were synthesized from 235 senior and middle-level managers across the Nyanza region. Empirical rigor was maintained through a dual-source triangulation strategy, validating perceptual responses from the Revised Self-Leadership Questionnaire (RSLQ) against objective fiscal metrics manually extracted from Auditor General reports. **Results:** Multiple regression analysis revealed that BFS is a potent and significant predictor of performance ($\beta = 0.420, p < 0.001$), with the strongest influence observed in the Internal Process dimension of the Balanced Scorecard ($\beta = 0.510, p < 0.001$). However, exploratory findings indicate that while individual behavioral agency is high ($M = 3.98$), macro-organizational outcomes are systematically dampened by external institutional moderators. The study identifies a "triangulation gap" and a "capability-visibility gap," suggesting that micro-level efficiencies are often uncoupled from macro-fiscal results due to structural bottlenecks. **Conclusion:** These findings underscore the necessity of institutionalizing BFS within public sector frameworks while creating fiscal buffers to protect technical innovation from political interference.

Key Words: behavior-focused strategies, county government performance, social cognitive theory, balanced scorecard, Nyanza region.

I. Introduction

Can the internal self-regulation of an individual manager bridge the systemic failures of a decentralized government? This question sits at the heart of modern public administration. Globally, the performance of decentralized and devolved governments has become a critical area of policy and academic inquiry, often centered on complex issues of intergovernmental coordination, fiscal equalization, and accountability mechanisms (Martinez-Vazquez, 2021; Faguet, 2023). Within the African context, these performance challenges are frequently exacerbated by deep-rooted systemic issues, including weak public financial management, political interference, and persistent corruption (Amoah & Ahianyo, 2021; Smoke, 2022). Kenya's experience with devolution since 2013 mirrors these regional struggles; despite high expectations, the performance of county governments has been widely criticized for its inconsistency, marked by fiscal deficiencies, service delivery inadequacies in healthcare and infrastructure, and systemic weaknesses in organizational oversight (Kiprotich & Muturi, 2023; Jumanne et al., 2023; Waweru & Anyika, 2021).

These persistent deficiencies suggest that the performance crisis in Kenyan county governance is, at its core, a leadership problem (Obeti, 2019; K'Ararap-Tanui & Sang, 2021). Conventional leadership paradigms, which typically prioritize top-down authority and the influence of senior executives, have proven largely insufficient in addressing the granular, daily inefficiencies that characterize devolved units (Obeti, 2019). This failure necessitates a fundamental shift in perspective—moving beyond formal oversight toward the self-directed agency of public officers. It requires an understanding of how individuals regulate their own performance when stringent external supervision is absent or ineffective (Waweru & Anyika, 2021).

In response to this need, this study investigates Behavior-Focused Self-Leadership (BFS) as a micro-foundational approach to reclaiming organizational productivity. Behavior-focused strategies offer self-management mechanisms designed to foster self-awareness and facilitate the successful completion of essential but potentially difficult or unattractive tasks (Esen & Bulut, 2022). By examining the link between these internal behavioral strategies and broader organizational outcomes in the Nyanza region, this research seeks to determine if individual self-influence mechanisms can effectively mitigate the chronic "implementation gaps" that continue to hinder Kenyan governance (Ochieng & Wandera, 2022).

II. Literature Review And Empirical Comparison

Empirical Comparison: BFS and Performance Nexus

The empirical relationship between BFS and organizational performance demonstrates a consistent positive correlation, though the strength of this nexus is often influenced by the geographical and institutional context.

In developed economies, BFS is often viewed as a primary driver of efficiency within structured corporate and public environments. For instance, studies in the United States and Europe have shown that BFS strategies—specifically self-goal setting and self-observation—significantly predict individual task performance and career success (Neck et al., 2024; Junça-Silva & Camaz, 2023). In highly digitalized work environments in Portugal, BFS has been found to reduce burnout and enhance productivity by providing employees with the internal tools to manage task autonomy (Junça-Silva & Camaz, 2023). Similarly, in the Saudi Arabian healthcare sector, self-leadership strategies have been empirically linked to improved quality of care and administrative efficiency (Almeharish & Bugis, 2023).

Within the African public sector, the application of BFS is increasingly recognized as a vital "substitute for leadership" in environments characterized by weak formal oversight. Empirical work in Nigeria suggests that for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and public entities, behavior-focused strategies are essential for navigating bureaucratic hurdles and maintaining operational momentum despite environmental volatility (Nnaemeka et al., 2020). In Ghana, research indicates that the adoption of self-regulatory behaviors by public officers is a critical determinant of successful policy implementation, helping to bridge the gap between central government directives and local-level execution (Amoah & Ahianyo, 2021).

In Kenya, the empirical focus on BFS has evolved alongside the devolution journey. Early studies post-2013 highlighted the role of self-regulatory behaviors in improving civil service efficiency (Ochieng & Wandera, 2022). More recent inquiries within devolved units suggest that while managers exhibit high levels of internal BFS, the translation of these behaviors into macro-organizational performance (such as OSR growth) is often moderated by the institutional landscape (Kiprotich & Muturi, 2023). This study contributes to this body of evidence by specifically isolating behavior-focused strategies in the Nyanza region, providing a localized empirical account of how individual self-regulation impacts performance metrics in the context of persistent fiscal and service delivery challenges.

Theoretical Anchorage

Behavior-Focused Strategies and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT): The foundation of behavior-focused strategies is rooted in Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), pioneered by Albert Bandura (1986). The theory was further developed into the specific domain of self-leadership by Charles Manz and Christopher Neck, who translated Bandura's concepts of self-regulation and self-efficacy into actionable behavioral and cognitive strategies for the workplace (Manz, 1986; Neck et al., 2024). The link between BFS and SCT is fundamentally anchored in the concept of self-regulation within triadic reciprocal determinism, where human functioning results from a multidirectional interplay between personal factors, environmental influences, and behaviors. BFS represents the practical application of this "human agency," as managers use internal cognitive processes—specifically forethought—to intentionally influence their own behavioral outputs (Bandura, 1986). By utilizing strategies like self-observation and self-goal setting, managers are not merely reacting to the institutional environment; they are actively regulating their performance to achieve predetermined milestones (Inam et al., 2021; Esen & Bulut, 2022).

Despite its prevalence, SCT has faced critical scrutiny. Critics argue that the theory overemphasizes cognitive rationality, potentially downplaying the influence of biological predispositions, deep-seated emotional states, or the sheer weight of structural institutional constraints that individual agency may not easily overcome (Rotter, 1990; Baron, 2004). Others suggest that the theory's emphasis on individual agency may be culturally biased toward Western individualistic paradigms and less applicable in collectivist or highly restrictive bureaucratic environments where external control is absolute. Nevertheless, SCT remains highly appropriate for this study because Kenyan devolved governance is characterized by "institutional decoupling"—a state where formal macro-structures exist but often fail to provide clear guidance or oversight. In such environments, organizational outcomes rely heavily on the micro-behavioral agency of managers to fill the "supervisory vacuum" and drive performance through self-regulated resilience and self-efficacy (Neck et al., 2024; Ochieng & Wandera, 2022).

Performance and the Balanced Scorecard (BSC): The founders of the Balanced Scorecard (BSC), Robert Kaplan and David Norton (1996), initially designed the framework to provide corporate executives with a more comprehensive view of performance than traditional financial accounting allowed. The framework has since seen significant further development, particularly in its adaptation to the public and non-profit sectors, where the "Customer" perspective is reframed as the "Citizen" or "Stakeholder" perspective to reflect the non-commercial

mandates of government (Hoque, 2022; Northcott & Taulapapa, 2012). The link between county government performance and the BSC lies in the framework’s ability to synchronize micro-managerial actions with the complex mandates of devolved governance. In the Kenyan context, the BSC provides a rigorous tool for measuring how individual inputs lead to macro-organizational outputs across four critical dimensions: the Financial perspective (Own-Source Revenue growth and budget absorption), the Citizen perspective (service delivery impact), the Internal Process perspective (administrative efficiency), and the Learning and Growth perspective (staff capacity and innovation) (Hoque, 2022; Mokaya & Muturi, 2021). By utilizing the BSC, this study establishes an empirical chain of accountability, demonstrating how the self-regulatory habits of managers (BFS) improve internal processes, which ultimately manifests as enhanced fiscal health and citizen satisfaction.

However, the BSC is not without its critics. Scholars have pointed out that the framework can be overly complex and difficult to implement, especially in resource-constrained public sector environments (Northcott & Taulapapa, 2012). Critics also argue that the weighting of various perspectives can be subjective and that the focus on measurable indicators may lead to "gaming" the system or neglecting important but non-quantifiable aspects of public service (Hoque, 2022). Despite these critiques, the BSC remains highly appropriate for this study because it aligns perfectly with the multi-dimensional nature of Kenyan county mandates. Unlike traditional metrics, the BSC allows for the simultaneous assessment of fiscal sustainability (OSR) and service quality, providing a holistic lens that is essential for understanding how micro-foundational self-leadership (BFS) translates into the broad public value expected from devolution (Mokaya & Muturi, 2021).

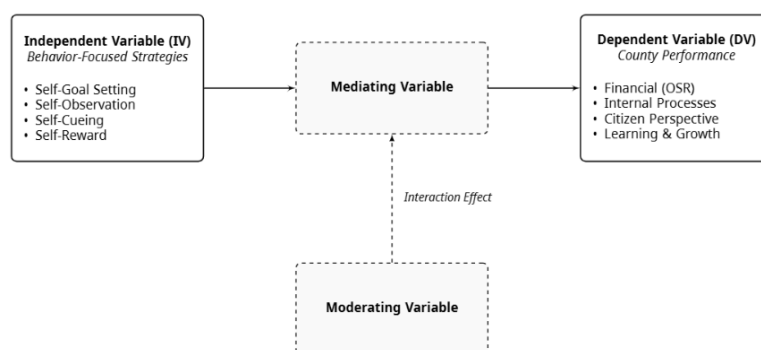
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is built on the premise that individual behavior-focused strategies (BFS) serve as the essential micro-foundational building blocks for broader organizational success. As illustrated in Figure 1, the theoretical model suggests that the impact of BFS on performance is rarely direct; instead, it is transmitted through internal mediating pathways and shaped by external moderating conditions (Musingo et al., 2026). Within this perspective, the intentional self-regulation practiced by managers—manifested through specific BFS such as self-goal setting and self-observation—is hypothesized to significantly enhance the overall performance of devolved units. However, at this early stage of the inquiry, we acknowledge that this relationship likely exists within a complex network of organizational and environmental factors (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In the Kenyan public service, these factors may include specific psychological states or workplace orientations that help align a manager's personal drive with official mandates. By mapping these connections, the framework moves beyond a simple cause-and-effect model to explore how BFS acts as a catalyst for systemic professional engagement and better governance (Hair et al., 2019; Ochieng & Wandera, 2022).

Additionally, the study proposes that the effectiveness of BFS is intrinsically linked to the institutional environment. A supportive organizational climate may amplify the positive effects of these behavioral strategies, while structural obstacles or political hurdles could potentially suppress them (Smoke, 2022). Within Kenya's devolved structure, elements such as bureaucratic traditions, the dynamic between political and administrative actors, and the stability of resource flows are expected to influence how effectively BFS translates into public service results (Northcott & Taulapapa, 2012; Kirichu & Karanja, 2024). Presenting these theoretical possibilities in a comprehensive but accessible manner ensures the study respects the complexities of the Kenyan context while maintaining a clear focus on the core BFS-performance link before the final data analysis is completed.

Figure 1:

Conceptual Framework:



Source: Situma et al. (2026)

III. Materials And Methods

The selection of materials and methods for this study was driven by the requirement for empirical rigor and the mitigation of common method biases often found in behavioral research. Adopting a positivist philosophy, the study utilized an explanatory cross-sectional research design to examine hypothesized cause-and-effect relationships between Behavior-Focused Strategies (BFS) and County Performance at a single point in time, providing a clear snapshot of the "capacity-context gap" (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Central to this design was a dual-source primary data triangulation strategy, which purposefully juxtaposes managerial self-assessments against objective fiscal outcomes. This approach is superior to single-method designs because it effectively bridges the gap between perceived efficacy and tangible organizational results, thereby reducing the risk of social desirability bias. To capture the holistic nature of organizational outcomes, the study adopted the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) by Kaplan and Norton (1996) as the primary performance measurement framework. The BSC is uniquely suited for this public sector study because county performance is multi-dimensional and cannot be evaluated through financial indicators alone. By integrating four perspectives—Financial (Own-Source Revenue), Citizen (Service Delivery Quality), Internal Process (Efficiency and Innovation), and Learning and Growth (Human Capital Development)—the BSC allows the study to measure how micro-behavioral agency (BFS) translates into broad societal value.

The target population comprised 1,500 senior and middle-level managers across the six counties of the Nyanza region. This cohort represents the strategic and tactical core of county governance, possessing the requisite authority and agency to influence departmental performance through self-regulatory behaviors. From this population, a sample yielding 235 valid responses was achieved, representing a robust 81% response rate. This high participation rate ensures that the findings are statistically powerful and represent the administrative realities within the Nyanza regional block.

Data collection was executed through two distinct channels to ensure a multi-dimensional perspective. First, perceptual data regarding the application of BFS were gathered using structured Likert-scale questionnaires adapted from the Revised Self-Leadership Questionnaire (RSLQ). This validated instrument (Neck & Houghton, 2006) is widely recognized for its reliability in measuring internal self-regulatory sub-strategies like self-goal setting and self-observation. Second, to provide an empirical anchor, objective performance data were manually extracted from official reports of the Auditor General and the Controller of Budget for the 2020–2024 period. By focusing on Own-Source Revenue (OSR) growth and budget absorption rates, the study ensures that the performance metrics are grounded in verified fiscal reality rather than solely on managerial perception, a methodological choice that significantly enhances the validity of results in a public sector context.

IV. Results and Analysis

Descriptive Analysis of Behavior-Focused Strategies

Managers in the Nyanza region reported a high utilization of BFS, with a composite mean score of 3.98 (SD = 0.80). This orientation suggests that public officers at the strategic and tactical levels possess a strong micro-behavioral focus on professional standards and self-regulation.

Table 1:
Descriptive Statistics for BFS Indicators

Indicators	Mean (M)	Std. Dev (SD)
I am honest with myself about my failures (Self-observation)	4.21	0.68
I establish specific goals for my performance (Self-goal setting)	4.12	0.74
I keep track of my progress on projects	4.05	0.81
I use cues/reminders to stay focused (Self-cueing)	3.84	0.85
I reward myself when I complete a task (Self-reward)	3.68	0.92
BFS Composite Score	3.98	0.80

Source: Situma et al. (2026)

Diagnostic Tests for OLS Regression Assumptions

To ensure the robustness of the inferential analysis, the data were subjected to diagnostic testing for Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression. These tests verified that the model parameters were suitable for examining the relationship between BFS and performance.

1. Normality: The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($p = 0.171$) indicated that residuals followed a normal distribution.
2. Multicollinearity: The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) for BFS was 1.894, confirming the absence of multicollinearity issues within the independent variable.

3. Independence of Errors: The Durbin-Watson statistic (1.892) fell within the acceptable range (1.5–2.5).
4. Homoscedasticity: Visual inspection of residual scatterplots confirmed constant variance across the dataset.

Triangulation Analysis: Perceptual vs. Objective Performance

A critical validation step involved correlating perceptual performance scores from managers with objective fiscal metrics extracted from Auditor General reports. The analysis revealed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.542, p < 0.01$), confirming that managerial perceptions of performance are reliably linked to verified fiscal outputs.

Table 4: Correlation Analysis of Perceptual and Objective Performance Metrics

Relationship	Correlation (r)	Sig. (p)	Strength
Perceptual Performance Objective Fiscal Metrics (OSR/Absorption)	0.542	0.000	Moderate Positive

Source: Situma et al. (2026)

However, a "triangulation gap" was observed, where perceptual scores consistently exceeded objective results, empirically supporting the "institutional decoupling" narrative where internal efficiency is often hindered from manifesting macro-fiscal results by external bottlenecks.

Hypothesis Testing (H₀₁)

Hypothesis H₀₁: Behavior-focused strategies have no significant effect on the performance of county governments.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Coefficients

Variable	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig (p)
(Constant)	1.124	0.215	—	5.228	0.000
Behavior-Focused (BFS)	0.415	0.052	0.420	7.981	0.000

Source: Situma et al. (2026)

Statistical Decision: Since $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ and the t-value (7.981) exceeds the critical value (1.96), H₀₁ is rejected. The results indicate that Behavior-Focused Strategies are a highly potent and significant predictor of organizational performance in Kenyan county governments.

Balanced Scorecard Analysis: BFS Influence on Performance Dimensions

Disaggregating performance into the four BSC perspectives highlights where BFS agency is most effective.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Balanced Scorecard Perspectives

BSC Perspective	Mean (M)	Std. Dev (SD)	Rank
Learning and Growth	3.75	0.78	1
Internal Process	3.68	0.81	2
Citizen Perspective	3.52	0.88	3
Financial Perspective	3.12	0.94	4

Source: Situma et al. (2026)

The analysis reveals a "capability-visibility gap": BFS is a significantly stronger predictor of Internal Process ($\beta = 0.510, p < 0.001$) than the Financial Perspective ($\beta = 0.280, p = 0.012$). While managers effectively optimize the internal machinery of governance, the macro-fiscal outcomes remain secondary to systemic institutional factors.

Exploratory Findings: The Role of Agency and Context

Beyond the primary direct effect, hierarchical regression was employed to explore deeper layers of the BFS-performance relationship. These findings suggest that individual behavioral agency is both facilitated by internal psychological vehicles and constrained by external structural forces.

The analysis revealed that Innovative Work Behavior (IWB) serves as a partial mediator in the path between BFS and performance. This indicates that managers who engage in high levels of BFS (such as self-goal setting and observation) do not merely perform routine tasks more efficiently; rather, their heightened self-awareness triggers a proactive search for creative solutions to local governance challenges. BFS provides the internal structure that empowers managers to deviate from rigid, failing bureaucratic norms to experiment with

new service delivery methods. Consequently, BFS enhances organizational performance largely because it fosters the innovative spirit necessary to navigate resource-constrained environments.

Conversely, the External Institutional Environment (IE) was found to be a significant negative moderator ($\beta = -0.180$, $p = 0.031$). This result implies a "chilling effect" of the macro-environment on individual behavioral agency. In counties characterized by high levels of political interference and frequent exchequer delays, the positive impact of BFS on performance is systematically dampened. The interaction effect suggests that when institutional friction is high, the "marginal benefit" of a manager's self-regulation decreases, as energy is diverted from performance-enhancing activities to navigational survival within a volatile political landscape. This provides a definitive empirical explanation for the "capacity-context gap": even the most competent and self-led managers find their impact limited when the structural environment is fundamentally unsupportive.

V. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that Behavior-Focused Strategies (BFS) serve as a primary micro-behavioral driver of organizational performance in Kenyan county governments. The regression results ($\beta = 0.420$, $p < 0.001$) provide robust empirical support for Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), specifically validating Bandura's (1986) concept of human agency through triadic reciprocal determinism. By utilizing self-goal setting and self-observation, managers in Nyanza are not merely reacting to the systemic failures of devolution; they are actively exercising forethought to maintain administrative standards and professional accountability in the absence of stringent external oversight (Neck et al., 2024).

This study's evidence of high BFS utilization (Composite $M = 3.98$) aligns with regional research in Ghana and Nigeria, which identifies individual self-regulation as a "substitute for leadership" in volatile public sectors (Amoah & Ahianyo, 2021; Nnaemeka et al., 2020). However, the moderate correlation ($r = 0.542$) between perceptual self-assessments and verified fiscal results highlights a critical "triangulation gap." This discrepancy empirically confirms the narrative of institutional decoupling, where individual managerial efficiency at the micro-level is systematically "uncoupled" from macro-fiscal outcomes due to structural bottlenecks like exchequer delays and political interference (Kiprotich & Muturi, 2023).

The disaggregated Balanced Scorecard (BSC) analysis further illuminates this phenomenon through what this study terms the "capability-visibility gap." While BFS is a potent predictor of internal process improvements ($\beta = 0.510$), its influence on the financial perspective is significantly attenuated ($\beta = 0.280$). This suggests that while self-led managers successfully optimize the "internal machinery" of county governance, these efforts are often "invisible" in macro-fiscal reports because the structural environment acts as a restrictive moderator. This aligns with the "capacity-context gap" theorized by Smoke (2022), where individual behavioral agency is necessary but insufficient to overcome the sheer weight of macro-institutional "handbrakes" (Kirichu & Karanja, 2024). Consequently, the study proves that while BFS is a mandatory prerequisite for reclaiming public value, its full transformative potential is contingent upon a supportive institutional landscape that allows micro-level efficiencies to manifest as macro-level performance.

VI. Conclusion And Recommendations

Conclusion

The study concludes that Behavior-Focused Strategies (BFS) are a fundamental micro-foundational prerequisite for organizational success in Kenyan county governments. While individual behavioral agency allows managers to maintain administrative productivity and innovative drive, its ultimate translation into macro-fiscal performance is mediated by creative behaviors and systematically moderated by the prevailing institutional climate.

This research significantly advances the existing body of knowledge through theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions. Theoretically, it extends the application of Social Cognitive Theory and the Balanced Scorecard to Kenyan devolved governance, providing empirical validation that individual human agency effectively serves as a potent substitute for formal leadership in environments where oversight is weak. Conceptually, the study introduces and defines the "capability-visibility gap" and the "triangulation gap," offering scholars novel tools to investigate why micro-level managerial efficiencies in developing public sectors often fail to translate into macro-level fiscal outcomes.

Methodologically, the study provides a robust template for mitigating social desirability bias in behavioral public administration research by successfully implementing a dual-source primary data triangulation strategy that balances perceptual survey data with objective fiscal metrics. Finally, the research contributes valuable localized empirical evidence regarding the "capacity-context gap" within the Nyanza regional block. This provides a definitive explanation for the persistent performance uncoupling that has historically hindered the progress of Kenyan devolution.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study offers several recommendations for policy and practice. First, county governments should move toward the policy institutionalization of behavior-focused strategies within their Human Resource and performance management frameworks, officially recognizing self-regulation as a core competency for public officers. To safeguard the impact of these strategies, it is further recommended that counties establish administrative and fiscal buffers designed to protect technical innovation and internal processes from the "chilling effect" of macro-institutional volatility and political interference. Finally, capacity-building initiatives should be refocused away from traditional top-down leadership models in favor of programs that emphasize individual behavioral agency. These programs should specifically prioritize the practical application of BFS, such as self-goal setting and self-observation, to enhance localized problem-solving and service delivery.

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