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# Leading for Growth: Leadership Behaviours in Horticultural Export Firms in Kenya

**Moses Simiyu, Veronica Kaluyu & Mary Mutisya**
*United States International University – Africa, Kenya*

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**Abstract**
The horticultural export industry in Kenya is of great economic significance, but it is experiencing a decrease in global market share, labour-management problems, regulatory pressures, and volatile markets. While a manager's leadership behaviours style does not cause structural failures in the global market, it affects the firm's attention, risk interpretation and resource allocation, which in turn affects whether the firm expects or is prepared for volatile demand, high buyer standards, and regulatory disturbances. The study analysed the relationship between leadership behaviours and growth of horticultural export enterprises in Kenya. The research was grounded in Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which explains how leadership behaviours can influence the quality of leader–employee relationships which in turn influence a firm's growth. Positivism philosophy and descriptive-correlational research design were applied. The target population was managers of 3948 firms and the sample consisted of 363 respondents, of which 300 responded and returned questionnaires. The self-reporting bias risk was mitigated by using objective financial data for growth. Descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression were used to analyse data. Transformational leadership had the largest relationship with growth ($\beta = .334$) while performance expectation and feedback were the second ($\beta = 0.210$), followed by ethical/value-based leadership ($\beta = 0.173$) and contingent reward behaviour ($\beta = 0.163$). However, leader's agreeableness had no statistically significant relationship with growth ($\beta = 0.086$, $p = 0.074$). The study recommends leadership training systems that focus on transformational leadership practices, ethics, accountability, feedback and innovation, and on performance-based rewards.

## Introduction

The horticultural export industry is of strategic importance to Kenya in terms of agricultural output, foreign exchange earnings, employment and rural livelihoods. The subsector contributes around 33% of agricultural gross domestic product and 1.45% of national gross domestic product, and directly employs an estimated 350,000 people (Fresh Produce Exporters Association of Kenya [FPEAK], 2025). The sector also has an estimated additional six million people involved in its economic activities through production, processing, transport and marketing (Kangai & Gwademba, 2025). However, horticultural export companies face climate variability, fluctuating global demand, labour-management issues, and strict export regulations. Adhering to traceability systems, pesticide residue limits, phytosanitary controls, certification requirements, and buyer standards is vital for maintaining access to international markets (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). Firm growth thus relies on leadership behaviours, as well as on markets and physical resources, to coordinate employees, maintain compliance, and drive organisational adaptation. While a manager's leadership behaviour does not cause structural failures in the global market, it affects the firm's attention, risk interpretation and resource allocation, which in turn affects whether the firm expects or is prepared for volatile demand, high buyer standards, and regulatory disturbances (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Such managerial behaviours can strengthen leader–employee relationships characterised by trust, respect, support, and reciprocity, thereby promoting coordinated learning, compliance, innovation, and employee performance that contribute to firm growth (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Ethical leadership and agreeableness could influence rejection of a shipment of horticultural products by reinforcing the organisational processes through which phytosanitary compliance and operational resilience is ensured. Ethical leadership fosters accountability, proper certification, traceability, residue control processes, and respect for buyer requirements and standards, while agreeableness and approachability encourage employees to report contamination risks, incorrect documentation, and process deviations before dispatch (Legood et al., 2021). Transformational leadership fosters innovation and quick responses to market and regulatory demands by aligning staff members with a shared vision of compliance and quality (Mach et al., 2022). Moreover, clear expectations and frequent feedback help minimise role ambiguity; contingent rewards help reinforce timely harvesting, handling, and quality assurance, as well as compliance-related performance before products enter the export chain (Nsiah et al., 2022; Premru et al., 2023). Together, these leadership behaviours and practices foster high-quality leader–member relationships based on trust, communication, support, and reciprocity, thereby encouraging employees to report regulatory threats, respond to emerging opportunities, and improve production, documentation, logistics, and quality-control procedures (Dulebohn et al., 2012).

Leadership behaviours, therefore, are important because they mediate the conversion of strategic priorities to employee behaviour and operational results. Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory suggests that firm performance can be explained by the quality of relationships between leaders and employees, developed through managerial behaviours that promote trust, respect, support, communication, and reciprocal commitment (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). For the purposes of this study, the leadership behaviours considered were transformational leadership, ethical/value-based leadership, contingent reward behaviour, expectations of leader performance and feedback, and leader agreeableness. Transformational leaders communicate a vision and inspire innovation and performance beyond expectations, while ethical leaders reinforce integrity, fairness, and accountability (Mach et al., 2022). Contingent rewards link employee effort to recognition; clear expectations and constructive feedback guide them towards organisational goals (Nzomoi et al., 2022). Agreeableness can be useful for building cooperation and a friendly leadership style, and it can be helpful for growth when paired with a friendly touch focused on strategy and discipline (Ng'ethe, 2022).

Extant empirical findings indicate that leadership behaviours are significantly associated with firm growth. Strategic leadership has been noted to have contributed to the development of flower farms in Kenya (Korir & Kilika, 2023), and transformational leadership has been correlated with greater team performance through collaboration and teamwork (Mach et al., 2022). Similarly, performance-based rewards can positively affect motivation and organisational performance when employees perceive them as fair and linked to performance (Nsiah et al., 2022). Ethical and supportive leadership can boost employee commitment and willingness to meet challenging quality standards (Hilton et al., 2021). However, much of this evidence is found in a number of disjointed contexts across telecommunications, education, insurance, sports, and experimental contexts. Thus, the results obtained from such studies cannot be readily applied to horticultural export firms, which must deal with perishable products, labour-intensive processes, tight delivery schedules, and high levels of regulatory and environmental uncertainty.

While there is some evidence of the link between leadership practices and organisational performance in the fields of telecommunications, professional sport, poultry agribusiness, flower farming and other agricultural businesses (Hilton et al., 2021; Mach et al., 2022; Nsiah et al., 2022; Korir & Kilika, 2023; Nyamota et al., 2024), there is little evidence in the horticultural export sector itself. Although these studies offer valuable insights into employee performance, team cohesion, rewards, and strategic leadership, they fall short of explaining how leadership behaviours influence export firm growth in the context of export-oriented horticultural businesses operating in a perishable, high-quality, standardised international market with regulatory uncertainty and unpredictable demand. Further, transformational leadership, ethical leadership, contingent rewards, performance expectations, and feedback have been studied largely in isolation, with few empirical studies examining their relationships with the growth of Kenyan horticultural export firms. Current leadership and governance structures in unpredictable African export markets have not been sufficiently tested for their contextual relevance and explanatory power. The aim of this study was to fill the gap between the empirical and theoretical aspects of the study by applying Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory to examine whether leadership behaviours foster high-quality leader–employee relationships that strengthen commitment, coordination, performance, and the growth of horticultural export firms (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

This study was therefore justified by the theoretical need to extend dynamic capabilities theory to the export-oriented horticultural industry in Kenya and the practical need for evidence-based leadership interventions. The study aimed to examine the relationship between leadership behaviours and the growth of horticultural export firms in Kenya and to determine the relative predictive contribution of each leadership behaviour to reported firm growth. Specifically, it examined the relationship between firm growth and transformational leadership, ethical/value-based leadership, contingent reward behaviour, performance expectations and feedback, and leader agreeableness. The article provides evidence specifically related to the concept of leadership as an internal strategic resource and the most important aspect for the competitiveness, organisational resilience and sustainable growth of horticultural export firms.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which views leadership as a social–exchange process between a leader and every member within the organisation. LMX theory is based on research on vertical dyad relationships and suggests that leaders, through their various behaviours, have different quality relationships with followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Good behaviours involve exchanges that involve trust, respect, support, loyalty, and mutual obligation, whereas poor behaviours are more often contractual and limited to formally specified responsibilities (Dulebohn et al., 2012). For the purposes of the current study, leadership behaviours are understood as mechanisms that enable horticultural export leaders to build and maintain productive relationships with their employees, who, in turn, drive firm growth.

Transformational leadership behaviours can enhance employees' organisational commitment through vision, innovation, and learning (Nyamota et al., 2024). An ethical and value-based approach can help build trust, accountability, and fairness in managers' decisions (Legood et al., 2021). Likewise, strategic rewards, unambiguous performance metrics, and encouraging feedback acknowledge employees and equip them with the tools to excel. While being agreeable helps with empathy, cooperation, and open communication, it can also lead to perceptions of favouritism and a lack of discipline within the organisation (Kao & Chiou, 2020). According to LMX theory, employees who experience positive leadership behaviours will reciprocate by increased commitment, knowledge sharing, citizenship behaviour and task performance (Martin et al., 2016). In horticultural export companies, these results could enhance compliance with quality standards, coordination of perishable-product business, responsiveness to international purchasers, and control over market uncertainty. This suggests that good and equitable leader–member relationships can drive productivity, resilience, market performance, and the firm's long-term growth.

**Empirical Review**

Empirical evidence suggests that a leader's behaviours affect organisational outcomes, with the effects mediated by employee expectations, motivation, trust, and behaviour. Veestraeten et al. (2019) analysed the Pygmalion effect and found that when leaders' and followers' implicit followership theories were congruent, leaders' positive expectations strengthened followers' engagement. Likewise, Guay et al. (2019) studied 1,204 participants across 167 teams and found that congruence between leaders' and followers' conscientiousness increased person–supervisor fit, job satisfaction, and organisational citizenship behaviour, and decreased turnover intentions. These studies show that leader expectations are not consistently effective; that the impact of leader expectations depends on how followers read leadership cues and their sense of compatibility. However, both studies lacked direct measures of firm growth, and their focus on individual attitudes limits inferences about growth.

Contingent rewards also show evidence of positive but context-dependent effects. Park et al. (2019) conducted an experiment with 64 university students and found that performance-contingent rewards resulted in significant improvements in learning, motivation, and engagement. The experimental design enhanced the internal validity, but the educational environment and sample size limited the generalisability of the findings. Hilton et al. (2021) surveyed 476 telecommunications workers and found that democratic leadership and contingent reward were positively associated ($r = .534$) and contingent reward reinforced the leadership–performance link ($B = .281$, $p < .05$). In the context of poultry agribusiness, both the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards positively predicted employees' performance (Nsiah et al., 2022). However, the studies used were mostly cross-sectional, based on perceptions, and assessed performance rather than the firm's growth.

Korir and Kilika (2023) conducted a survey of the strategic leadership dimensions in 43 Kenyan flower farms and discovered that the firms achieved around a 15 to 20% growth rate. This sectoral relevance is valuable, albeit there are limitations to causal inferences due to the small managerial sample and perceptual data. Another study by Mach et al. (2022) examined the effects of transformational leadership on the objective performance of 690 professional players in 59 Spanish sport teams and found that transformational leadership indirectly led to objective team performance through team cohesion ($b = .329$, $p < .05$). The mediated relationship was stronger when previous performance and leadership consensus were higher, showing context effects of leadership. Similarly, Nyamota et al. (2024) found that transformational leadership had a significant role in the performance of Kenyan agricultural enterprises ($\beta = .271$, $p < .05$).

Ethical and value-based leadership is consequential as it builds trust and legitimacy. Legood et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of 185 independent studies and found that ethical and servant leadership explained trust not accounted for by transformational and transactional leadership. The study also tested whether the relationship between trust and organisational citizenship outcomes and found a significant relationship ($r = .386$, $p < .05$). The meta-analytic design offered more robust evidence than individual surveys, but the heterogeneity in the sectors and measures makes it unclear what the relationship would be between ethical leadership and the different growth measures in horticulture. Furthermore, the majority of the studies reviewed focus on leadership styles without exploring interactions among styles, expectations, feedback, and rewards.

There is relatively mixed evidence regarding leader agreeableness. Among the 128 undergraduate students included in the study by Kao and Chiou (2020), agreeableness was found to moderate the relationship between anger and creativity. However, Fong et al. (2021) reported that agreeableness was a negative predictor of competitiveness ($\beta = -.384$, $p < .05$) in 304 participants of experimental auctions. The results indicate that agreeableness can foster cooperation while decreasing competitive assertiveness. However, their laboratory and student samples are not guaranteed to reflect the expected effects of organisational leadership or firm growth.

**Methodology**

The study adopted a positivist research philosophy, exploring the relationship between leadership behaviours and firm growth using quantitative variables and hypothesis testing (Park et al., 2020). The descriptive-correlational research design was used to study the direction and strength of the relationships between the variables of the study, leadership behaviours and firm growth, without the variables being manipulated. Multiple linear regression was used to estimate the contribution of each leadership behaviour to the prediction of the dependent variable, while statistically controlling for the other variables in the model (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019).

The respondents included top-level managers, middle-level managers, and supervisors from 658 horticultural export companies registered with the Agriculture and Food Authority of Kenya (AFAK), for a total target population of 3,948. Management staff were chosen as they had firsthand experience of leadership practices, decisions and organisational growth. The population was stratified according to management level, and then proportionate stratified random sampling was used to select the sample. According to Yamane's (1967) formula, the sample size at a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error was 363. An effective response rate of 82.6% was achieved, with 300 questionnaires returned. The study was based on non-independent observations as there was more than one respondent from the same firms. The model did not adjust for within-firm variation in the results; therefore, the reported standard errors and significance levels should be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

The structured questionnaire was used as a data-collection tool to gather primary data. Fifteen seven-point Likert-scale items were used to measure transformational leadership behaviours, ethical/value-based leadership, contingent reward behaviour, performance expectations and feedback, and leader agreeableness. The firm's growth was measured using turnover, profitability, productivity, and market share. The structured questionnaire was developed and tested for validity and reliability in a pilot study with 36 respondents. Exploratory factor analysis, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin test and Bartlett's test of sphericity were used to assess construct validity (Shrestha, 2021). The factor loadings of the leader-characteristic items ranged from 0.649 to 0.888, and Cronbach's alpha was 0.890, indicating high internal consistency.

Data cleaning, coding, and analysis were performed using SPSS version 28. The variables were described using frequencies, means, and standard deviations, and multiple linear regression was used to estimate the contribution of the five dimensions of leadership behaviours to firm growth at the 5% significance level. The assumptions of regression, such as normality, linearity, homoscedasticity and multicollinearity, were tested and satisfied. Ethical clearance was granted by NACOSTI, participation was voluntary, responses were anonymised, and data were kept protected and secured.

## Results

The study included 300 respondents, of whom 59.3% were male and 40.7% were female. Most were aged 30–39 years (34%), followed by 40–49 years (32%), while 22% were over 50 years old and 12% were under 30 years old. In terms of education, 54% had bachelor's degrees, 24% master's degrees, 18% diplomas, and 4% had doctorates. Regarding the number of years the organisations had been in operation, 32% had been in existence for 5–10 years, 28% for 11–15 years, and 24% for more than 15 years. Respondents were from production (18.3%), human resources (17.7%), administration (16.7%), other functions (16.7%), operations (15.3%) and finance (15.3%).

### *Descriptive Statistics*

The dependent variable in the study was growth of horticultural export firms in Kenya. This was measured using four dimensions: financial growth, operational growth, market growth, and reputational and human capital growth. Responses were analysed using means and standard deviations, and the findings are summarised in Table 1.

*Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Growth of Horticultural Export Firms*

| **Aspects of Growth** | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Financial Growth** | **Mean** | **Std. Deviation** |
| The firm's annual revenue has improved over the past three years. | 5.59 | .99 |
| Profit margins have remained stable or increased over time. | 5.77 | .93 |
| Operating costs have increased faster than profits in recent years (reverse-coded). | 5.62 | 1.01 |
| **Operational Growth** | | |
| Employee productivity has improved in the firm | 5.68 | .96 |
| The use of technology has increased operational efficiency | 5.70 | .90 |
| The firm uses its resources more effectively than before | 5.58 | 1.00 |
| **Market Growth** | | |
| The firm's export market share has expanded. | 5.73 | .98 |
| The firm is competitive within the horticultural export sector. | 5.64 | .95 |
| Customer satisfaction with the firm's products and services has increased. | 5.79 | .96 |
| **Reputational & Human Capital Growth** | | |
| Industry reputation has strengthened | 5.75 | .92 |
| Employee retention has improved | 5.82 | .87 |
| Customer satisfaction has increased | 5.74 | .97 |
| **Composite** | **5.70** | **0.95** |

Descriptive results showed that horticultural export companies generally exhibited positive, balanced growth, with a composite mean of 5.70 (SD = 0.95). Financial growth was evidenced by an increase in annual revenue (M = 5.59, SD = 0.99) and stable or rising profit margins (M = 5.77, SD = 0.93). The reverse-coded operating-cost measure (M = 5.62, SD = 1.01) indicated effective management of operating-cost pressures relative to profits. On the operational side, respondents reported improved employee productivity (M = 5.68, SD = 0.96), greater efficiency through technology (M = 5.70, SD = 0.90), and improved resource utilisation (M = 5.58, SD = 1.004). The market performance results showed similar favourable patterns for market share (M = 5.73, SD = 0.98), competitiveness (M = 5.64, SD = 0.95), and customer satisfaction (M = 5.79, SD = 0.96). Industry reputation was strong (M = 5.75, SD = 0.92), as well as employee retention (M = 5.82, SD = 0.867) and customer satisfaction (M = 5.74, SD = 0.97). The standard deviations were generally low, suggesting consistency in how respondents were evaluated across all measured growth dimensions.

The study also gathered secondary data on growth to triangulate with the primary data. The data gathered were on growth in financial performance, market growth and expansion of the firms. Table 2 presents a descriptive analysis of data on the growth in financial performance of the surveyed horticultural firms.

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*Table 2: Growth in Financial Performance and Employee Base*

| Year | Average Revenue (KES millions) | Average Net Profit (KES) | Average Profit Margin (%) | Average Return on Investment (ROI) (%) | Average No. of employees |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2022 | 243.16 | 34.17 | 14.05 | 21.36 | 98 |
| 2023 | 289.61 | 42.64 | 14.72 | 23.18 | 113 |
| 2024 | 321.18 | 53.65 | 16.70 | 24.14 | 125 |

Table 2 shows a steady upward trend in the average financial performance of the surveyed horticultural export firms in Kenya during the three-year study period (2022-2024). The average revenue increased from KES 243.16 million in 2022 to KES 289.61 million in 2023, and to KES 321.18 million in 2024. Average net profit also rose from KES 34.17 million to KES 53.65 million, reflecting not only growth but also improved cost management and operating leverage. This is also supported by the gradual increase in profit margin, from 14.05% in 2022 to 16.70% in 2024, and in Return on Investment (ROI), which rose from 21.36% to 24.14% during the same period. The average number of employees rose from 98 in 2022 to 125 in 2024. These findings suggest good financial health and increasingly positive trends in firm performance and growth across Kenya's horticultural export value chain.

The secondary data on financial performance supported and enhanced the data on firm growth provided through the questionnaire survey. The consistent growth in revenues from year 2022 to 2024 (KES 243.16 million in 2022 to KES 321.18 million in 2024), supports the high level of agreement on improvement of market share for exports (Mean = 5.73, Std Deviation = 0.98) and competitiveness in the horticultural export industry (Mean = 5.64, Std Deviation = 0.95), indicating that market-oriented strategies had led to tangible economic results. In addition, the profit margins improvement from 14.05% to 16.70% during the study period supported the perception of the respondents in terms of improvement in the use of resources (Mean = 5.58, Std Deviation =1.00) and in operational efficiency due to the use of technology (Mean = 5.70, Std Deviation =0.90), which means that the improvement in the use of resources and in the efficiency of operations as a result of the use of technology was not only perceived but was also reflected in the bottom line of the companies. The increase in net profit (KES 34.17 million to KES 53.65 million) also aligned with respondents' views on industry reputation (Mean=5.75, Std Deviation=0.918), while the increase in employee numbers supported views on employee retention (Mean=5.82, Std Deviation=0.87). Therefore, the average growth, as analysed from the questionnaire survey (mean = 5.70, SD = 0.95), corroborates quantitative secondary data indicating that Kenyan horticultural export companies experienced positive growth across various facets of the business between 2022 and 2024.

Leadership behaviours, the independent variable, were measured using five constructs: transformational leadership, ethical/value-based leadership, contingent reward behaviour, performance expectations and feedback, and leader agreeableness. Respondents were provided with various statements for each construct and were required to rate them on a scale of 1 to 7. Means and standard deviations were used to analyse the responses, and the findings are presented in Table 3.

*Table 3: Descriptive Analysis of Leadership behaviours*

| **Aspects of Leadership behaviours** | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Transformational Leadership** | **Mean** | **Std. Deviation** |
| I communicate a compelling organisational vision. | 5.67 | .98 |
| I encourage creativity and innovation. | 5.77 | .95 |
| I motivate employees to go beyond basic job requirements. | 5.62 | .93 |
| **Ethical/Value-based leadership** | | |
| I demonstrate ethical behaviour consistently | 5.89 | .90 |
| I ensure others are responsible for their actions | 5.78 | .93 |
| I Take action when employees violate ethical standards | 5.81 | .98 |
| **Contingent reward Behaviour** | | |
| Employees receive recognition for good performance | 5.72 | .90 |
| Rewards and recognition are fairly linked to employee performance | 5.69 | 1.02 |
| Rewards rarely reflect actual performance (reverse-coded) | 5.85 | .88 |
| **Performance expectation & feedback** | | |
| I provide clear performance expectations. | 5.74 | .98 |
| I offer constructive feedback regularly. | 5.81 | .96 |
| Employees understand what is expected of them in their roles. | 5.73 | .94 |
| **Leader Agreeableness** | | |
| I remain approachable when staff need help. | 5.78 | .97 |
| I manage disagreements fairly. | 5.83 | .96 |
| I promote a work environment characterised by mutual respect. | 5.72 | .94 |
| **Composite** | **5.76** | **0.95** |

Descriptive results showed positive ratings across all five leadership behaviour constructs, with an overall mean of 5.76 (SD = 0.95). The results showed that communication of a compelling vision (M = 5.67), encouragement of creativity and innovation (M = 5.77), and motivation beyond basic job requirements (M = 5.62) were all evidence of transformational leadership. The ratings for ethical and value-based leadership were high, with consistent ethical behaviour (M = 5.89), accountability (M = 5.78), and action to correct unethical behaviour (M = 5.81) rated high. The recognition of good performance (M = 5.72), the reward/performance linkage (M = 5.69), and the reverse-coded reward item (M = 5.85) were also positively evaluated as contingent reward behaviour. In terms of performance management, leaders provided clear performance expectations (M = 5.74), gave constructive feedback (M = 5.81), and clarified roles (M = 5.73). Agreeableness was manifested in the attitudes of approachability (M = 5.78), just handling of disagreements (M = 5.83), and respect for each other (M = 5.72). Standard deviations ranged from 0.88 to 1.02, suggesting fairly homogeneous assessments. The overall results suggest that leadership in horticultural export companies was transformational, ethical, and results-driven, and that it promoted productive relations with employees.

### *Inferential Statistics*

The research conducted a multiple linear regression to assess which of the five leadership behaviours (Transformational Leadership, Ethical/Value-based leadership, Contingent reward behaviour, Performance expectation & feedback and leader agreeableness) had significant influence on the growth of horticultural export firms. Table 4 provides the results.

*Table 4: Influence of Leadership behaviours on Growth*

**Model Summary**

| R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|---|---|---|---|
| .739[a] | .547 | .539 | .26663 |

a. Predictors: (Constant), Transformational leadership, Ethical/Value-based leadership, Contingent reward behaviour, Performance expectation & feedback, Leader agreeableness

**ANOVA[a]**

| | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Regression | 26.995 | 5 | 5.399 | 71.039 | .000[b] |
| Residual | 22.394 | 294 | .076 | | |
| Total | 49.389 | 299 | | | |

a. Dependent Variable: Growth
b. Predictors: (Constant), Transformational leadership, Ethical/Value-based leadership, Contingent reward behaviour, Performance expectation & feedback, Leader agreeableness

**Coefficients[a]**

| | Unstandardised Coefficients | | Standardised Coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | t | Sig. |
| (Constant) | .418 | .213 | | 1.964 | .050 |
| Transformational Leadership | .342 | .050 | .334 | 6.851 | .000 |
| Ethical/Value-based leadership | .140 | .036 | .173 | 3.859 | .000 |
| Contingent Reward Behaviour | .158 | .054 | .163 | 2.935 | .004 |
| Performance expectation & feedback | .182 | .044 | .210 | 4.174 | .000 |
| Leader Agreeableness | .095 | .053 | .086 | 1.794 | .074 |

a. Dependent Variable: Growth

The regression model derived from the analysis was;

Growth = 0.418 + 0.334 Transformational Leadership + 0.173 Ethical/Value-based leadership + 0.163 Contingent Reward Behaviour + 0.210 Performance expectation & feedback

The study findings in Table 4 showed that the multiple correlation coefficient (R) was 0.739, indicating a strong positive linear relationship between the combined predictor variables and the dependent variable (growth). Results showed that the five leadership behaviours explained 54.7% of the variance in growth ($R^2 = 0.547$), yet, considering the number of predictors in the model, the five constructs explained about 53.9% of the variance in growth (adjusted $R^2 = 0.539$). The ANOVA results confirmed that the overall regression model was significant ($F = 71.039$, $p < 0.001$); thus, there is strong evidence that the combined effect of the five leadership behaviours on growth is not due to chance and that the model is a significantly better fit than an intercept-only model.

The constant of 0.418 indicated that if the five leadership behaviours were held at zero, the firms' growth would be 0.418. The analysis of individual regression coefficients indicated that four of the five predictor variables had statistically significant relationships with the growth of horticultural export firms. Transformational leadership was the most powerful predictor ($B = 0.342$, $\beta = 0.334$, $t = 6.851$, $p < 0.001$), implying that for every unit increase in the transformational leadership behaviour, growth increased by 0.342 units when all other predictors were held constant. Performance expectation and feedback was the second most influential predictor ($B = 0.182$, $\beta = 0.210$, $t = 4.174$, $p < 0.001$), followed by ethical/value-based leadership ($B = 0.140$, $\beta = 0.173$, $t = 3.859$, $p < 0.001$) and contingent reward behaviour ($B = 0.158$, $\beta = 0.163$, $t = 2.935$, $p = 0.004$), all of which demonstrated statistically significant positive relationship with growth. However, the leader's agreeableness is not statistically associated with growth (B = 0.095, β = 0.086, t = 1.794, p = 0.074) after controlling for the effects of the other leadership behaviours.

## Discussion

The results show that the combined effect of leadership behaviours is significant on Kenyan horticultural export firms' growth. The high level of correlation (R = .739), the model explanatory power ($R^2$ = .547), and the significant model fit (F = 71.039, p < .001) show that leadership is an important internal growth resource. This aligns with Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which suggests that effective leadership behaviours induce trust, respect, support, and reciprocity, thereby strengthening leader–employee relationships and enhancing employee commitment and performance (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Tanaka & Ishiyama, 2023). It also aligns with the findings of Omilion-Hodges and Ptacek (2021), who suggest that supportive leadership behaviours enable high-quality exchange which is conducive to motivation, knowledge sharing and adaptability.

The behaviour showing the strongest relationship with growth was transformational leadership (β = .334, p < .001). This aligns with Mach et al. (2022), who concluded that transformational leadership was positively related to team performance via team cohesion. Additionally, the findings support Nyamota et al. (2024), who noted a significant positive association between transformational leadership and performance in agricultural enterprises in Kenya. The findings also align with those of Korir and Kilika (2023), who found that strategic leadership facilitated the development of flower farms in Kenya. In this context, communicating vision, inspiring innovation, and stimulating discretionary effort seem especially useful for the growth of horticultural export firms.

Performance expectations and feedback were significant predictors of growth (β = .210, p < .001), lending support to Veestraeten et al. (2019) and Guay et al. (2019), who linked leader expectations to engagement, satisfaction and organisational citizenship behaviour. But in those studies, conditional effects were found in relation to follower perceptions and congruence, whereas the present study shows direct effects in relation to leadership behaviours.

Ethical/value-based leadership also had a significant effect on growth (β = .173, p < .001), aligning with the study by Legood et al. (2021), which indicated that ethical leadership positively influenced trust and citizenship outcomes. Likewise, contingent rewards (β = .163, p = .004) were positively associated with employee performance and growth, consistent with the findings of Hilton et al. (2021) and Nsiah et al. (2022), which linked performance-based rewards to employee performance. In contrast, leader agreeableness did not show any significant effect on growth (β = .086, p = .074). This is contrary to the theoretical prediction that approachability would increase cooperation. However, the findings are in line with Fong et al. (2021), who observed that agreeableness can reduce competitiveness.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that the leadership behaviours have a significant relationship with the growth of Kenyan horticultural export firms. The vital behaviours included transformational leadership, performance expectations and feedback, ethical leadership and contingent rewards. The leader's agreeableness was not significantly associated with growth. Thus, companies need to focus on developing transformational leadership, strengthening moral responsibility, building a performance feedback system, and aligning rewards with quantifiable results. Although leader agreeableness may support cooperation and positive workplace relationships, it was not significantly associated with firm growth after controlling for transformational leadership, ethical leadership, contingent rewards, and performance expectations and feedback.

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