



DRIVING AGRIBUSINESS RESPONSIVENESS: EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS INTO STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND AGILITY IN KENYA'S POULTRY SECTOR

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Abstract

The endurance of agribusiness firms in emerging economies increasingly depends on how readily they can read and adjust to an unsettled environment, a quality captured in strategic agility. This study examined whether strategic leadership, once deployed by such firms, brings that agility into being. Working in the poultry farming value chain of Nairobi City County, Kenya, it drew on strategic leadership theory, the resource-based view and the dynamic capability theory to reason that agility emerges when leadership is placed into an organization as a strategic resource. All nineteen registered poultry firms were taken as a census, and a proportionate stratified random sample of 209 managers at the top echelon and business-unit levels was drawn, of whom 200 returned usable responses (95.69 percent), with every scale recording Cronbach's alpha above 0.7. The firms deployed strategic leadership at a high level ($M=3.99$; $SD=1.088$) and had built a comparably high level of strategic agility ($M=3.90$;

SD=1.028). Regression analysis showed that strategic leadership has a positive and significant effect on strategic agility ($\beta=0.304$; $p<0.001$), explaining about 35 percent of its variation (Adjusted $R^2=0.350$). The study concludes that strategic leadership functions not only as an antecedent of performance but as a generative source of organizational agility, so that managers seeking resilience are best advised to build agility by investing in leadership. The findings extend the dynamic-capability reading of strategic leadership into a seldom-studied agribusiness setting and invite longitudinal enquiry into how the capability matures.

Keywords: Strategic Leadership, Strategic Agility, Dynamic Capability, Agribusiness, Poultry Value Chain, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

For agribusiness firms operating in emerging economies, staying in business now depends less on holding a fixed position than on the speed with which they can perceive change and reorganise around it. That quality, the capacity to shift internal arrangements in step with external movement, is what the strategic management field terms strategic agility, and it has become a defining requirement wherever markets, regulations and technologies refuse to sit still (Elali, 2021; Shahzad et al., 2020). Yet agility does not appear on its own. It has to be produced within the firm, and the more pressing question for managers is where such a capability comes from and how it can be deliberately built.

This study locates the answer in strategic leadership. Strategic leadership is the work of top managers in envisioning a future, interpreting a complex environment and aligning the organization behind a shared course, and the literature has come to describe it through a recognisable set of dimensions, chiefly the setting of strategic direction, the building of core competencies, the building of organizational culture and networking (Finkelstein, Hambrick & Cannella, 2009; Hitt, Ireland & Hoskisson, 2021; Najmi, Kadir & Kadir, 2018). Read through the resource-based view, this leadership is an intangible strategic resource, and read through the dynamic capability theory, a resource of that kind should, once deployed in a turbulent setting, give rise to capabilities that let the firm sense and reconfigure (Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997). The proposition examined here is therefore straightforward: the agility a firm can call upon is, in part, a product of the leadership it has put in place.

The evidence needed to sustain that proposition, however, is largely missing. Studies of strategic leadership have concentrated on its link to performance and have accumulated mostly in developed economies and in manufacturing, education and financial-services settings rather than in agribusiness, and they have rarely brought several leadership dimensions together in a

single test (Ng et al., 2019; Vătămănescu et al., 2020; Korir & Kilika, 2023; Daritsu et al., 2025; Mohamed, Muathe & Kilika, 2026b). Strategic agility, for its part, has usually entered such work as a predictor or an outcome, and on the rare occasions it has served as an intermediate capability it has been tied to antecedents other than leadership, such as firm age, absorptive capacity or human-resource strategy (Reed, 2021; Kale et al., 2019; Adomako et al., 2022). The direct question of whether strategic leadership itself generates agility has thus been left open, and it is that gap the present study addresses.

The poultry farming value chain in Kenya offers a fitting site for the enquiry, since it concentrates precisely the turbulence that makes agility valuable. Firms in the chain contend with disease outbreaks, trade restrictions, a consumer shift towards welfare-compliant and antibiotic-free products, and sharp swings in feed prices, while domestic conditions add high production costs, currency instability, disruptive technology and competition from imports (FAO, 2021; Arndt et al., 2022). The strain is visible in output, which fell by roughly ten percent in 2021 and a further twenty-seven percent in 2022, with egg imports projected to climb and production growth recorded at only 0.3 percent in 2024 (KNBS, 2022; FAO, 2023; KNBS, 2025). The same sector, firms and dataset underpin a related study by the authors on contract farming and business growth (Mohamed, Muathe & Kilika, 2026a), on which the present enquiry builds by turning from growth to the emergence of agility. A sector under this much pressure is exactly where one would expect leadership either to generate the agility firms need or to fail to. Accordingly, the study asked whether the strategic leadership deployed by these firms has produced a corresponding level of strategic agility, and it contributes by measuring an integrated four-dimension conception of leadership in an agribusiness context, by anchoring the leadership-to-agility relationship in a combined strategic-leadership, resource-based and dynamic-capability lens, and by supplying emerging-economy evidence to a literature that has been drawn largely from elsewhere.

Statement of the Problem

Poultry farming enterprises in Kenya operate under sustained turbulence, disease outbreaks, volatile feed prices, currency instability, disruptive technology and competition from imports, that has driven sector output into successive decline, with production contracting by about ten percent in 2021 and a further twenty-seven percent in 2022, and expanding by only 0.3 percent in 2024 (KNBS, 2022; FAO, 2023; KNBS, 2025). Survival in such conditions depends on strategic agility, the capacity to sense change and reconfigure quickly; yet agility is not a given, but a capability that has to be generated within the firm. Strategic leadership is widely theorised to be the source from which such a capability springs, but the empirical basis

for the claim is thin. Existing studies have concentrated on the strategic leadership–performance link, have been drawn mainly from developed economies and from manufacturing, education and financial-services settings rather than agribusiness, have seldom combined several leadership dimensions in a single investigation, and have rarely treated strategic agility as an outcome of leadership at all (Ng et al., 2019; Vătămănescu et al., 2020; Korir & Kilika, 2023; Daritsu et al., 2025; Reed, 2021; Adomako et al., 2022). It is therefore not known whether, or to what extent, the strategic leadership deployed by poultry farming enterprises in Kenya generates strategic agility. The present study was undertaken to close this gap.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was to establish the effect of strategic leadership on the strategic agility of poultry farming enterprises in Nairobi City County, Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Three theories frame the argument, each carrying a distinct part of it. Strategic leadership theory identifies the source of the behaviour and its resource character; the resource-based view accounts for why deploying that resource should pay off; and the dynamic capability theory explains the particular form the payoff takes in a turbulent setting.

Strategic leadership theory extends the upper-echelon argument of Hambrick and Mason (1984), which holds that the traits, cognitions and experience of senior executives are imprinted on the strategic choices a firm makes and the results it obtains, a view recently revisited for strategic leadership in Kenya's poultry sector (Mohamed, Muathe & Kilika, 2026b). On this footing, strategic leaders are the actors who fix direction, work through complexity and gather the organization around a common purpose, and their conduct can be observed through the dimensions of direction-setting, competence-building, culture-building and networking (Finkelstein et al., 2009; Mistarihi, 2021). Because the theory says comparatively little about the unobservable behavioural mechanics of leadership, the study reinforces it with the resource-based and dynamic-capability perspectives.

The resource-based view, originating with Penrose (1959) and developed by Wernerfelt (1984) and Barney, Wright and Ketchen (2001), holds that resources which are valuable, rare, hard to imitate and without close substitutes underpin durable advantage. Within this study strategic leadership is treated as one such intangible resource, and the way a firm configures its resources is taken to yield capabilities, a higher-order class of resource. The view thus grounds

both the resource framing of leadership and the expectation that an intermediate capability will emerge once the resource is put to work.

The dynamic capability theory, introduced by Teece and Pisano (1994) as a development of the resource-based view, centres on a firm's ability to sense, seize and reconfigure its resource base as conditions change, thereby maintaining fitness to its environment (Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997; Kaleka & Morgan, 2019). It explains how organizations in fast-moving markets keep renewing their configurations in the face of shifting technology and demand. Here it anchors the agility construct, supplying the logic for representing strategic agility through decision-making speed, crisis-response time and scenario planning, and for regarding it as the capability that deployment of leadership is expected to bring forth.

Conceptual Review and Hypothesis Development

Strategic Leadership as a Deployable Strategic Resource

There is broad agreement that strategic leadership shapes what organizations achieve, in that it lifts efficiency and effectiveness and keeps a firm moving towards its strategic goals (Idris, Adekalu & Genty, 2014; Nahak & Ellitan, 2022). Support at the level of individual dimensions is extensive. Positive effects of direction-setting appear in manufacturing, education and church-based bodies (Atthirawong, Bunnoiko & Panprung, 2020; Luo et al., 2020; Munyao, Chiroma & Ongeti, 2020); competence-building lifts results in smaller enterprises (Ng et al., 2019; Makhloufi et al., 2021); culture is associated with excellence and advantage (Kassem et al., 2019; Azeem et al., 2021); and networking carries gains in innovation and sustainability (Vătămănescu et al., 2020; Alkahtani, Nordin & Khan, 2020; Korir & Kilika, 2023). Consolidating this body of work, Daritsu et al. (2025) report a consistent positive contribution of strategic leadership to organizational outcomes across sectors. What this record establishes is that leadership, deployed as a resource, sets other resources in motion; what it leaves unexamined is the intermediate capability through which that motion runs.

Strategic Agility as an Emergent Dynamic Capability

Strategic agility is the ability of an organization to detect movement in its environment and to answer it quickly by recombining its competencies, processes and strategies (Arokodare & Asikhia, 2020; Shahzad et al., 2020). A firm possessing it can prosper in a demanding market by combining flexibility, speed, responsiveness and competence (Widjajani & Nurjaman, 2020; Shams et al., 2021). Operationalised as decision-making speed, crisis-response time and scenario planning, agility maps onto the sensing, seizing and reconfiguring that the dynamic

capability literature treats as the ground of evolutionary fitness in unstable contexts (Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997; Amer et al., 2013; Mizrak, 2024; Marinković et al., 2022). Understood this way, agility is not a standing attribute a firm simply has, but a capability that must be generated from some antecedent within the organization.

The Effect of Strategic Leadership on Strategic Agility

Bringing the two constructs together, the study reasons that the antecedent from which agility is generated is strategic leadership itself. When leadership is deployed in a turbulent context, it does more than steer; it installs the systems, cultures and habits of learning through which situation-specific knowledge accumulates and rapid strategic responses become possible. Direction-setting supplies the reading of the environment that sensing requires, competence-building furnishes the capabilities that seizing draws on, an adaptive culture lowers the cost of reconfiguring, and networking channels the outside information on which timely adjustment depends. On this reasoning, a firm that has deployed strategic leadership to a high level should exhibit a correspondingly high capacity for agility. Najmi, Kadir and Kadir (2018) lend indirect support, having found dynamic capability to operate as an intermediate mechanism in leadership-related relationships. The study therefore proposed:

H1: The deployment of strategic leadership has a significant effect on the strategic agility of poultry farming enterprises in Nairobi City County, Kenya.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The enquiry was quantitative and positivist, treating the constructs as variables to be operationalised, measured and tested through hypotheses. It combined a descriptive and an explanatory design, both applied cross-sectionally: the descriptive design fixed the prevailing level of each construct as it stood in the firms, and the explanatory design established the causal relationship between them. The pairing was chosen because neither design is adequate alone, each supplying what the other lacks (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2011).

Study Context and Population

The study was carried out among the poultry firms registered as participants in the poultry farming value chain of Nairobi City County, Kenya. Food and Agriculture Organization records list nineteen such firms, each engaged in one or more of the value-adding activities of the industry; this is the same population and dataset examined in the authors' related study of the sector (Mohamed, Muathe & Kilika, 2026a). The firm was the unit of analysis, while

observation was directed at the strategic-management levels responsible for deploying leadership, namely the top echelon and the business-unit level. The firms were grouped into three strata by their position in the value chain. Because the question is a firm-level one, all nineteen firms were included as a census; at the level of observation, a proportionate stratified random sample of 209 respondents was drawn using the Yamane (1967) formula. Table 1 sets out the population and the sample by stratum.

Table 1: Population Distribution and Sampling

Strata	Firms	Top echelon (obs.)	Business unit (obs.)	Sample (top)	Sample (unit)
Slaughterhouses	5	17	106	8	51
Hatcheries	5	11	126	5	60
Feed manufacturers	9	20	157	10	75
Total	19	48	389	23	186

Instrumentation

Two constructs were measured, strategic leadership and strategic agility, each operationalised from the conceptual and theoretical literature into indicators suitable for empirical use. The indicators were assembled into an original questionnaire scored on a five-point Likert scale, capturing the extent to which leadership activities had been adopted and the extent to which agility had been realised; the development and validation of this instrument are reported more fully in the authors' related study (Mohamed et al., 2026a). Content and construct validity were established through expert review and factor analysis, and internal consistency, tested on pilot data with Cronbach's alpha, cleared the 0.7 threshold on every scale. Table 2 summarises the measurement of the two constructs.

Table 2: Variable Measurement

Construct	Source	Indicators	Reliability
Strategic leadership	Daritsu et al. (2025)	Setting strategic direction; Building core competencies; Building organizational culture; Networking	0.902; 0.855; 0.882; 0.764
Strategic agility	Teece, Pisano & Shuen (1997); Arokodare & Asikhia (2020)	Decision-making speed; Crisis-response time; Scenario planning	0.856

Administration used online and in-person methods. Research authorization was first secured from the National Commission on Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and then consent from each of the nineteen firms; respondent contacts came from the firms' human-resource offices, and each respondent chose the mode of participation they preferred. In all, 209 questionnaires were distributed, with follow-up by telephone, email and site visits until fieldwork closed.

Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 31). Respondent attributes were summarised with frequencies and percentages, and the constructs with means and standard deviations.

Before inferential work, the data were screened against the assumptions of ordinary least squares regression: the Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed normal residuals, with skewness and kurtosis inside -1 and $+1$; Pearson correlations confirmed positive linear relationships ($r = 0.516\text{--}0.609$; $p < 0.05$); Variance Inflation Factors between 2.567 and 3.526, with tolerance above 0.1, indicated no harmful multicollinearity; and the Levene statistic (significance ≥ 0.05) confirmed homogeneity of variance. Composite indices were then formed for each construct, and the hypothesis was tested by regressing strategic agility on strategic leadership at a 95 percent confidence level, the null being rejected where the coefficient reached significance at $p \leq 0.05$. The fitted model was $SA = \beta_0 + \beta SL + \epsilon$, where SA is strategic agility and SL the composite index of strategic leadership.

FINDINGS

Response Rate and Respondent Profile

Two hundred of the 209 distributed questionnaires were completed and returned, giving a response rate of 95.69 percent; the remaining nine, 4.31 percent, were either not returned or too incomplete to use, leaving a return well clear of the level normally treated as sufficient for analysis (Sataloff & Vontela, 2021). The respondents divided 52 percent male to 48 percent female, a reasonably even balance. Their ages clustered in the middle brackets, the single largest group, at 27 percent, being aged between 35 and 44, and their service was substantial, the largest block, at 22.5 percent, having spent seven to ten years with their firm. The profile is therefore one of experienced managers well acquainted with the sector.

Level of Strategic Leadership Deployed

The four leadership dimensions were rated for the extent to which the related activities had been emphasised and put into practice. As Table 3 shows, all four sat in the high band, with an aggregate mean near 3.99. Setting strategic direction was the most strongly emphasised, and building core competencies, though still high, the least. The pattern indicates that the firms have deployed strategic leadership to a high degree, positioning them to pursue their missions from a strategically aligned base.

Table 3: Extent of Strategic Leadership Deployed

Dimension	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
Setting strategic direction	4.09	1.123
Building core competencies	3.81	1.205
Building organizational culture	4.07	1.017
Networking	3.98	1.007
Aggregate	3.99	1.088

Level of Strategic Agility Generated

Strategic agility, assessed through decision-making speed, crisis-response time and scenario planning, returned an aggregate mean of 3.898 with a standard deviation of 1.028, placing it, like leadership, in the high band. As Table 4 records, the firms were strongest at putting in place measures to manage unpredictability, at thriving in a competitive market and at turning their competencies to market advantage, while the ability to adapt to change at speed and to respond to crises, though still rated high, sat a little lower, below a mean of four. The overall reading is of firms that have built a substantial, though uneven, capacity for agility.

Table 4: Level of Strategic Agility Generated

Firm gained the ability to:	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
Implement measures to manage unpredictability	4.11	1.056
Thrive in a highly competitive market	4.04	1.058
Utilize firm competencies to gain market advantage	4.00	1.198
Adapt to change	3.98	0.924
Respond quickly and effectively to any crisis	3.60	1.031
Aggregate	3.898	1.028

Effect of Strategic Leadership on Strategic Agility

The hypothesis was tested by regressing strategic agility on the composite index of strategic leadership. As Table 5 reports, the model was significant ($F = 136.331$; $p < 0.001$) and strategic leadership accounted for about 35 percent of the variation in strategic agility ($R^2 = 0.353$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.350$). The coefficient on strategic leadership was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.304$; $p < 0.001$), so that each unit gain in deployed leadership was associated with a 0.304 rise in agility. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected: the deployment of strategic leadership exerts a significant effect on the strategic agility of the poultry firms, confirming that the capability is, in substantial part, generated by the leadership the firms put in place.

Table 5: Regression of Strategic Agility on Strategic Leadership

Statistic	Value
R Square	0.353
Adjusted R Square	0.350
F value	136.331***
β Constant	2.481***
β Strategic Leadership	0.304***
Decision on H_1	Supported

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The finding that strategic leadership significantly raises strategic agility gives empirical shape to an argument that has, until now, been made mostly in principle. The two descriptive results frame it. Leadership was deployed at a high level ($M = 3.99$) and agility stood almost as high ($M = 3.90$), and the near-equivalence is itself telling: as the firms invested in leadership, a matching capacity for agility appeared alongside it. That co-movement is what the regression then formalises, with leadership explaining about 35 percent of the variation in agility. Read together, the descriptive and inferential results describe leadership not merely accompanying agility but generating it.

Interpreted through the study's theories, the result is coherent rather than surprising. From the resource-based view, strategic leadership is an intangible resource that, once deployed, sets in train a configuration of other resources; from the dynamic capability view, the agility that emerges is exactly the higher-order capability such a configuration is expected to yield, expressed in the firms' ability to sense unpredictability, seize market openings and

reconfigure quickly (Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997; Barney, Wright & Ketchen, 2001). Seen this way, strategic leadership serves a dual role. It performs a strategic-management function, embedding the strategic thinking through which a firm reads its environment and sets a long-term course, and it performs a leadership function, working through systems, cultures and people to convert that thinking into an organizational capacity for rapid response. The dimension-level descriptives are consistent with this: the strength of direction-setting and culture, the two most emphasised dimensions, is what one would expect of firms whose agility rests on a clear reading of the environment and a workforce disposed to adjust.

The uneven profile of agility sharpens the practical lesson. The firms scored highest on managing unpredictability and exploiting competencies but lower on adapting at speed and responding to crises, which locates the binding constraint not in whether agility exists but in its fastest-moving components. For managers, the implication is that leadership investment should be aimed deliberately at the mechanisms that compress response time, decision processes, early-warning information and rehearsed scenarios, rather than assumed to lift every facet of agility equally. More broadly, the result reframes what strategic leadership is for in a turbulent sector: it is less a lever pulled to improve results directly than a means of building the capability on which resilient results depend. This accords with prior evidence on agility's contribution to organizational outcomes (Reed, 2021; Kale et al., 2019; Adomako et al., 2022), while adding the antecedent those studies did not test, the leadership from which agility springs.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study set out to establish whether the strategic leadership deployed by poultry farming enterprises in Kenya generates strategic agility, and the evidence answers in the affirmative. The firms were found to deploy strategic leadership at a high level and to have built a comparably high level of agility, and the deployment of leadership was shown to have a positive and significant effect on that agility, explaining a substantial share of its variation. Strategic agility, in this setting, is an emergent capability of leadership rather than a free-standing trait, and the leadership that produces it works simultaneously as an instrument of strategic management and as a source of organizational influence.

The conclusions carry implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, the result reinforces the resource-based framing of strategic leadership and shows dynamic capability theory to be a productive complement, since the agility that emerged corresponds closely to the sensing, seizing and reconfiguring the theory describes; strategic leadership theory, the upper-

echelon school, the resource-based view and the dynamic capability theory thus prove mutually reinforcing rather than competing.

Given the applied nature of the study, however, its value rests chiefly in the practical implications. First, because agility was shown to be an outcome of leadership rather than a free-standing trait, the managers and boards of poultry and other agribusiness firms should treat the deliberate development of strategic leadership — not piecemeal operational fixes — as the primary route to responsiveness, investing in clear direction-setting, competence-building, an adaptive culture and external networks as the foundation on which agility is built. Second, because the firms proved agile in managing unpredictability and exploiting competencies yet weakest in adapting at speed and responding to crises, leadership effort should be aimed squarely at the fast-moving components that constrain responsiveness: shortening and decentralising decision chains so that unit managers can act without awaiting approval; installing early-warning systems that track disease outbreaks, feed-price and forex movements and shifting consumer demand in near-real time; and rehearsing scenario and contingency plans so that responses to shocks — disease, feed shortages, import surges — are practised rather than improvised. Third, the two most strongly deployed dimensions, direction-setting and organizational culture, should be used as the carriers of this agility, since a clearly communicated vision and a workforce culturally disposed to adjust are what turn fast information into fast action. Beyond the individual firm, industry associations, government agencies and development partners can lift sector-wide responsiveness by supporting leadership and management capacity-building among poultry enterprises and by investing in shared early-warning and market-intelligence infrastructure across the value chain. In extending the evidence on strategic leadership into an agribusiness value chain in an emerging economy — a context the literature has largely passed over — the study offers these enterprises a concrete, resource-light route to the resilience on which their survival increasingly depends.

Three limitations qualify the findings and mark out further work. Only four dimensions of strategic leadership were measured, so whether the remaining dimensions bear on agility in the same way is untested. The study did not measure environmental turbulence directly, even though its argument rests on a turbulent context, leaving the contingent role of turbulence for later enquiry. And the cross-sectional design captures the leadership-agility relationship at a single moment; a longitudinal design, analysed with panel methods, would show how agility accumulates from leadership over time and would give the relationship a firmer causal footing.

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