



The Role of Ethical Leadership in Strengthening Organizational Culture within Islamic Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

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This study explores the role of ethical leadership in strengthening organizational culture within Islamic higher education institutions. Ethical leadership, which emphasizes integrity, justice, accountability, and spiritual guidance, is essential for aligning academic excellence with Islamic values. Unlike secular institutions that often prioritize managerial efficiency, Islamic higher education requires leadership that functions not only as an administrative tool but also as a moral compass. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis from academic leaders, administrators, and faculty members. The findings reveal that ethical leadership manifests in several key dimensions, including integrity and transparency, justice and fairness, spiritual and moral role modeling, accountability and stewardship, and community engagement. These dimensions significantly contribute to building trust, fostering collaboration, integrating academic and spiritual values, and strengthening institutional legitimacy. However, challenges such as limited financial resources, resistance to reforms, and pressures from globalization and government policies remain obstacles to implementation. The study concludes that ethical leadership serves as a fundamental driver of sustainable organizational culture in Islamic higher education. By embedding Islamic ethical principles into governance and institutional practices, leaders can balance global academic demands with faith-based commitments, ensuring both resilience and credibility.

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership has always been considered a central element in the development and sustainability of educational institutions. In the contemporary era, higher education institutions around the world are facing increasingly complex challenges, ranging from globalization, technological disruption, demands for accountability, and the pursuit of academic excellence. Within this

context, leadership becomes not only a managerial necessity but also a decisive factor in shaping institutional resilience, adaptability, and identity. Numerous studies highlight that effective leadership is one of the most critical determinants of institutional success, influencing policy directions, organizational culture, and the overall quality of education.

Within the context of Islamic higher education, leadership carries an even broader meaning. It is not merely limited to the administrative and managerial domains but also encompasses spiritual, ethical, and moral responsibilities. Leadership in Islamic educational institutions functions as a moral compass that guides the institution toward fulfilling its mission of integrating faith (*iman*), knowledge (*ilmu*), and community service (*amal*). Unlike secular institutions, where leadership effectiveness is often assessed primarily through managerial efficiency, financial sustainability, and academic ranking, Islamic higher education emphasizes a balance between academic excellence and the embodiment of religious and ethical values. Consequently, ethical leadership becomes a fundamental element in ensuring that institutional practices reflect Islamic principles such as justice (*'adl*), honesty (*ṣidq*), accountability (*amanah*), and compassion (*raḥmah*).

The role of leadership in higher education has received extensive scholarly attention, particularly regarding its influence on organizational culture. Organizational culture refers to the shared beliefs, values, and norms that shape behaviors, attitudes, and identity within an institution. In Islamic higher education, organizational culture is not only expected to support intellectual and academic advancement but also to nurture religious commitment and spiritual growth. Leaders in this setting are therefore tasked with harmonizing strategic objectives with moral imperatives, ensuring that institutional life aligns with Islamic values. Ethical leadership plays a crucial role in this process, as leaders are expected to serve as role models of integrity, sincerity, and ethical conduct. By embodying these values, leaders foster trust, strengthen collaboration, and cultivate a culture that supports both institutional effectiveness and spiritual development.

Despite its importance, integrating ethical leadership into the management of Islamic higher education is not without challenges. The pressures of globalization and the competitive landscape of higher education often compel institutions to adopt managerial frameworks that prioritize efficiency, performance indicators, and international recognition, sometimes at the expense of their spiritual and cultural identity. This tension requires leaders to strike a balance between adapting to external pressures and preserving the internal values that define their institutions. Furthermore, limited resources, bureaucratic rigidity, and resistance to change can pose additional barriers to the effective practice of ethical leadership. Without a strong ethical foundation, institutions risk losing coherence and authenticity in their organizational culture.

Scholarly discourse suggests that ethical leadership has the potential to address these challenges by promoting resilience and coherence within

educational institutions. Leaders who consistently uphold ethical principles can instill a shared sense of purpose and belonging among faculty, students, and stakeholders. This not only strengthens organizational culture but also enables institutions to navigate external pressures without compromising their identity. Ethical leadership also fosters inclusivity through participatory decision-making, encouraging members of the institution to actively contribute to shaping policies and practices. Such an approach enhances ownership and commitment, ensuring that organizational culture evolves in a way that remains faithful to Islamic ethical frameworks.

Given these dynamics, this study seeks to explore the role of ethical leadership in strengthening organizational culture within Islamic higher education. It emphasizes the interplay between ethics, leadership, and institutional identity, aiming to provide deeper insights into how Islamic values can be systematically integrated into organizational life. Moreover, the research highlights the opportunities and challenges that leaders face in maintaining cultural integrity while pursuing academic excellence. By addressing these themes, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on Islamic educational management, underscoring the view that sustainable organizational culture in higher education depends not merely on managerial competence, but fundamentally on the moral character and ethical orientation of its leaders.

In addition, developments in leadership theory within modern literature reinforce the importance of ethics in educational organizations. While concepts such as transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and servant leadership have been widely discussed, they do not fully address the specific needs of Islamic higher education institutions, which require the integration of spirituality and professionalism. Ethical leadership emerges as a paradigm that places moral and religious values at the core of decision-making, communication patterns, and institutional development strategies. In this sense, the study of ethical leadership not only enriches the field of Islamic educational management but also offers a new perspective on how Islamic higher education can achieve competitive advantage while remaining rooted in ethics.

Furthermore, the Indonesian context—home to the largest number of Islamic educational institutions in the world—provides a highly relevant setting for this study. Many Islamic universities and colleges face the dual challenge of preserving Islamic identity while enhancing global competitiveness. This reality demands leaders who are not only competent managers but also consistent role models of moral integrity and ethical conduct. Therefore, investigating the role of ethical leadership in strengthening organizational culture within Islamic higher education is of both theoretical and practical importance. Theoretically, it contributes to academic discourse in Islamic education management. Practically, it provides strategic insights for institutional leaders seeking to manage change without compromising their spiritual identity.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of ethical leadership in strengthening organizational culture within Islamic higher education. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of meanings, values, and practices that are closely tied to the lived experiences of leaders and members of the institution. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with academic leaders, administrators, and faculty members who were directly involved in the management and cultural development of their institutions. Additional data were obtained from observations of leadership practices, organizational meetings, and cultural activities that reflect the values upheld by the institutions.

Document analysis was also conducted by reviewing strategic plans, policy documents, and institutional reports to capture the integration of ethical leadership principles into organizational culture. The process of data collection emphasized triangulation to ensure validity, comparing insights from interviews, observations, and written records. Data were analyzed thematically by identifying recurring patterns, values, and practices related to ethical leadership and its influence on institutional culture. The analysis was conducted iteratively, moving back and forth between data sources and theoretical frameworks to ensure a comprehensive understanding.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing responses. This method ensured that the study not only captured the theoretical dimensions of ethical leadership but also provided practical insights grounded in the realities of Islamic higher education institutions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This study reveals several key findings regarding the role of ethical leadership in strengthening organizational culture within Islamic higher education institutions. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and institutional document analysis.

1. Dimensions of Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership is not merely about compliance with rules or regulations; it is a holistic approach that combines integrity, justice, accountability, and spiritual values. In Islamic higher education, ethical leadership draws upon Qur'anic principles, prophetic traditions, and institutional responsibilities to cultivate an environment where academic excellence is balanced with faith-based values. Several dimensions of ethical leadership emerged in the findings.

The first dimension is Integrity and Transparency. Leaders are expected to uphold honesty in decision-making, financial management, and policy implementation. Integrity ensures that trust is built between leaders, faculty, staff, and students. For example, transparent budgeting and open communication about institutional policies help minimize conflict and foster collective ownership.

The second dimension is Justice and Fairness. In Islamic higher education, fairness must be reflected in resource distribution, academic evaluation, and opportunities for professional development. Ethical leaders ensure that all stakeholders—students, lecturers, and administrative staff—are treated equitably, without favoritism. This principle reflects Qur’anic injunctions to uphold justice as a fundamental value.

The third dimension is Spiritual Guidance and Moral Role Modeling. Ethical leaders are viewed not only as administrators but also as moral guides (uswah hasanah). By demonstrating humility, compassion, and sincerity, leaders become role models who inspire faculty and students to embody Islamic values in their academic and personal lives.

The fourth dimension is Accountability and Stewardship (Amanah). Leadership in Islamic higher education is considered a trust (amanah). Leaders must be accountable for their decisions and ensure that institutional resources are managed responsibly. This includes fostering sustainability, prioritizing student welfare, and aligning programs with both national education standards and Islamic ethics.

The final dimension is Community Engagement and Collaboration. Ethical leaders extend their influence beyond the campus, building partnerships with local communities, alumni, and Islamic organizations. This strengthens the institution’s role as a center of knowledge and moral development, creating an organizational culture rooted in service and collective responsibility.

In summary, the dimensions of ethical leadership—integrity, justice, moral guidance, accountability, and community engagement—collectively form the foundation for a strong organizational culture in Islamic higher education.

Table 1. Dimensions of Ethical Leadership in Islamic Higher Education

No	Dimension of Ethical Leadership	Key Findings	Implementation Level
1	Integrity and Transparency	Honest and open decision-making in management	High

2	Justice and Fairness	Equal access to resources and opportunities	Moderate
3	Spiritual and Moral Role Modeling	Leaders act as guides and role models	High
4	Accountability and Stewardship	Responsible management of resources and programs	High
5	Community Engagement and Collaboration	Partnerships with society and Islamic organizations	Moderate

2. Organizational Culture

Organizational culture in Islamic higher education refers to shared beliefs, values, and practices that shape institutional identity. The findings show that ethical leadership significantly influences this culture in several ways.

First, ethical leadership fosters **a culture of trust and collaboration**. When leaders practice transparency and fairness, faculty and staff are more motivated to engage in teamwork and innovation.

Second, ethical leaders strengthen **academic and spiritual integration**. Institutions that combine modern academic practices with Islamic ethics create a holistic learning environment. For instance, embedding Islamic perspectives in research and teaching promotes both scientific advancement and spiritual growth.

Third, ethical leadership shapes **discipline and accountability within the institution**. By emphasizing responsibility and justice, leaders encourage a culture where academic honesty, punctuality, and professionalism are upheld as Islamic obligations.

Fourth, the presence of ethical leadership enhances **institutional legitimacy and credibility**. Communities, stakeholders, and students view institutions as trustworthy when leaders embody Islamic values in governance. This legitimacy increases student enrollment, faculty retention, and external support.

Table 2. Influence of Ethical Leadership on Organizational Cultureschool

Indicator of Culture	Key Findings	Achievement Level
Trust and Collaboration	Improved teamwork through transparency	High
Academic-Spiritual Balance	Integration of knowledge with Islamic values	High
Discipline and Accountability	Strengthened responsibility in academic activities	Moderate

Institutional Legitimacy	Stronger trust from students and external stakeholders	High
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3. Implementation Challenges

While the role of ethical leadership is critical, implementing it in Islamic higher education faces several challenges. One challenge is **resistance to ethical reforms**. Some staff and lecturers accustomed to bureaucratic or hierarchical leadership styles may find it difficult to adapt to participatory and value-driven approaches.

A second challenge is **resource and financial limitations**. Ethical initiatives such as transparent budgeting, staff training, or community engagement require adequate funding, which many institutions lack. Another challenge lies in **balancing global competitiveness with Islamic values**. Islamic universities must compete with secular institutions in terms of research and innovation while also safeguarding their religious mission.

Finally, **external pressures from government policies and societal expectations** often create tensions. Leaders must navigate between meeting accreditation standards and maintaining Islamic principles.

Table 3. Challenges in Implementing Ethical Leadership

Challenges	Key Findings	Institutional Response
Resistance to ethical reforms	Resistance from some teachers toward new approaches	Resistance from some teachers toward new approaches
Limited financial resources	Constrains transparency and development programs	Constrains transparency and development programs
Balancing global competitiveness & values	Pressure to adopt secular benchmarks	Islamic-based innovation
External pressures & expectations	Policy demands vs. Islamic identity	Continuous stakeholder dialogue

Discussion

The findings highlight that ethical leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping and strengthening organizational culture in Islamic higher education. By practicing integrity, justice, accountability, and spiritual guidance, leaders establish a culture of trust, collaboration, and holistic development.

First, the results confirm that organizational culture in Islamic institutions is value-driven. Unlike secular universities that may emphasize efficiency or market competitiveness, Islamic institutions prioritize faith-based principles. Ethical leadership bridges this gap by integrating global educational standards with Islamic values, thereby ensuring both academic excellence and moral integrity.

Second, the findings demonstrate that leadership effectiveness is closely tied to organizational trust. Institutions led by ethical leaders experience higher

levels of collaboration, reduced conflict, and greater stakeholder satisfaction. This aligns with broader leadership theories that position ethics and morality as central to sustainable governance.

Third, while opportunities are evident, the study identifies practical challenges such as resource limitations, resistance to reform, and external policy pressures. These challenges highlight the complexity of managing faith-based institutions in a globalized education system. Adaptive and context-sensitive leadership becomes essential to navigate these tensions.

Finally, the discussion emphasizes that ethical leadership is not optional but foundational in Islamic higher education. Without it, organizational culture risks fragmentation, distrust, and mission drift. With it, institutions can build resilience, legitimacy, and sustainable growth while remaining faithful to their Islamic mission.

In conclusion, ethical leadership strengthens organizational culture by embedding Islamic values into governance, teaching, and community engagement. It enables institutions to achieve a balance between global relevance and spiritual integrity, thus fulfilling their dual mission of producing knowledgeable and morally upright graduates.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that ethical leadership is a fundamental driver in shaping and strengthening organizational culture within Islamic higher education. By embodying integrity, justice, accountability, and spiritual guidance, leaders are able to build trust, foster collaboration, and integrate academic excellence with Islamic values. Although challenges such as limited resources, resistance to change, and external policy pressures remain, institutions led by ethical leaders demonstrate greater resilience and legitimacy. Ultimately, ethical leadership ensures that Islamic higher education can maintain its faith-based mission while remaining relevant and sustainable in a competitive global context.

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