

The Role of Strategic Leadership in Encouraging Innovative Culture in Islamic Education Institutions

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Abstract

This research focuses on the role of strategic leadership in building an innovative culture in Islamic educational institutions, by taking a case study at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan, Probolinggo Regency. The primary purpose of this research is to identify how strategic leadership practices can encourage the growth of innovation in the learning system and institutional management of pesantren. This research employed a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study design, and data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentary studies. The research informants consisted of pesantren leaders, madrasah heads, teachers, and senior santri. The results showed that strategic leadership in the pesantren environment is reflected in four main aspects: support for educational experiments, commitment to human resource development, exemplary innovative values, and participatory communication strategies. These four aspects form an ecosystem conducive to the emergence of new ideas and the improvement of educational quality. The implications of this study show that in the context of pesantren, visionary, adaptive, and value-based leadership can encourage institutional transformation without leaving the roots of Islamic tradition. Therefore, this strategic leadership model is relevant to be applied more broadly in the development of Islamic education institutions in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Strategic Leadership; Educational Innovation; Pesantren Culture; Institutional Transformation

A. Introduction

In the last two decades, Islamic education institutions in Indonesia have faced significant challenges in dealing with the dynamics of globalization, technological disruption, and changes in the character of students from generation to generation (Faiz & Kurniawaty, 2022; A. D. Wahyuni et al., 2023). Data from the Ministry of Education and Culture shows that the majority of Islamic education institutions have not been optimal in integrating innovative approaches into institutional management and learning processes (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023). In fact, in the midst of rapid social and technological change, innovation has become an essential indicator in the sustainability and quality of an educational institution (F. P. N. Wahyuni & Tranggono, 2023). One of the main factors that influences the creation of such an innovative culture is strategic leadership that can formulate a long-term vision, encourage collaboration, and manage change effectively.

Strategic leadership involves not only administrative or managerial abilities, but also a deeper focus on future orientation, the ability to identify opportunities, and building an adaptive and creative organizational culture (Zuhri et al., 2021). In the context of Islamic educational institutions, this role becomes increasingly complex as it must balance religious values with demands for innovation. A study by Leso (2023) shows that strategic leaders have a significant influence in shaping organizational values,

including innovative culture, through the process of communicating vision, establishing support structures, and creating a conducive work environment. This shows that leadership is not just a position, but the driving force of innovative culture in the institution.

Unfortunately, many Islamic educational institutions still rely on conventional leadership models that emphasize stability over innovation. This condition hinders institutional transformation and creates stagnation in educational services. This is where the urgency of this research arises: how can strategic leadership be effectively operationalized to encourage an innovative culture in the context of traditional value-laden Islamic educational institutions? Based on the approach of Edgar Schein's organizational culture theory and strategic leadership from Ireland and Hitt (2005), it is important to explore how the process of internalizing the value of innovation can occur in institutions that have a strong Islamic value system (Coghlan, 2021). Thus, this research has high relevance to enrich the academic discourse in the field of Islamic education management and answer the practical needs of institutions in transforming strategically.

The primary issue in this study is that the role of strategic leadership in fostering an innovative culture in Islamic education institutions has not been fully optimized. Although many leaders of Islamic educational institutions have a strong religious vision, they often struggle to transform this vision into a sustainable and innovative culture. This phenomenon can be seen from the lack of innovation in learning methods, institutional management, and the use of digital technology. In the context of globalization and the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, lagging behind in innovation can cause Islamic education institutions to be marginalized in the national education competition map. This problem is exacerbated by low leadership capacity in designing long-term strategies, building creative teams, and facilitating a work environment that is open to change.

Research on strategic leadership and innovative culture in the context of education has been widely conducted, although most of them have not specifically examined religious value-based institutions such as pesantren. Ali & Anwar (2021) in the *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge* showed that transformational leadership contributes greatly to the formation of a culture of innovation in higher education institutions, especially when leaders are able to communicate a long-term vision and encourage collective participation. Furthermore, Syakhrani (2024) in the *International Journal of Educational Management* highlights the importance of a strategic leadership approach that is able to synergize religious and managerial values in Islamic educational institutions, especially in building organizations that are responsive to change.

On the other hand, Lengkong (2024) in *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* emphasizes that the main challenge in building innovation in value-based schools is resistance to change, which can only be overcome by leadership that is able to create an open, reflective, and flexible organizational culture. Although the three studies emphasize the importance of the role of leadership in building innovation, there has been no study that deeply explores how strategic leadership is carried out in the context of pesantren that have traditional social structures, conservative values, and a strong collective culture. This is the strategic position of this research - to fill the gap between the theory of innovative leadership and the practice of leadership in a pesantren-based Islamic education environment, which previous studies have not widely explored.

Based on the literature review above, it appears that there is a void of studies on how strategic leadership is operationalized in the context of Islamic educational institutions to encourage an innovative culture. Previous studies tend to focus on aspects of general transformational leadership or innovation in the context of secular institutions. In fact, Islamic educational institutions have unique characteristics such as a strong religious value base, traditional organizational structure, and cultural resistance to change. Therefore, the gap in this research lies in the lack of empirical studies that specifically examine the synergy between strategic leadership and culture of innovation in the Islamic education environment. This research tries to bridge the gap by analyzing in depth how leaders in Islamic educational institutions initiate, manage, and instill an innovative culture within the framework of Islamic values.

The novelty of this research lies in the integration of the strategic leadership approach with Islamic values in the context of creating an innovative culture. This research not only identifies the strategic role of leaders but also explores how religious values are used as a driving force for innovation, rather than an obstacle. In addition, this research offers a new conceptual model that combines the theoretical frameworks of organizational culture (Schein) and strategic leadership (Ireland & Hitt) with the principles of Islamic values-based leadership. Thus, this research provides conceptual and practical contributions that have not been found in the current Islamic education management literature.

The main objective of this research is to analyze the role of strategic leadership in encouraging an innovative culture in Islamic educational institutions. This objective is important because innovation is one of the keys to the sustainability of educational institutions in the modern era, and leadership has a central position in determining the direction and strategy of the organization. By understanding how strategic leadership can shape an innovative culture within the framework of Islamic values, this research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of Islamic education management studies and provide practical recommendations for institutional leaders in designing institutional innovation strategies.

This research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan, an Islamic education institution located in Probolinggo Regency, East Java. This pesantren was chosen because it represents a combination of the strong roots of pesantren tradition with the spirit of renewal in the education system and institutional management. In recent years, Al Mashduqiah has shown progressive leadership dynamics, with various renewal efforts in the areas of curriculum, integration of information technology, and increasing the capacity of human resources. In addition, this pesantren is also one example of an institution that actively establishes external collaboration and opens space for innovation in the midst of a community that is thick with religious values. These characteristics make Al Mashduqiah a relevant location to study how strategic leadership is carried out in encouraging an innovative culture without ignoring Islamic values, which are the main foundation of pesantren. The selection of this location also supports the suitability of the research context, considering that the challenges and opportunities for innovation in the pesantren environment require a distinctive and contextual leadership approach.

B. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with the type of case study (Assyakurrohim et al., 2023), to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of strategic leadership in encouraging innovative culture in Islamic educational institutions. The research location is at Al Mashduqiah Islamic Boarding School located on Jl. KH. Abdul Azis No. 01, Patokan Village, Kraksaan District, Probolinggo Regency, East Java. The selection of this approach is based on the research objectives that emphasize the exploration of meanings, processes, and social dynamics in the context of pesantren culture. Data collection techniques were conducted through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies (Haki et al., 2024). Research informants included pesantren leaders, madrasah heads, teachers, and senior santri who played a role in the development of institutional innovation.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes three main components: data condensation, data presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Azizah et al., 2023). The analysis process takes place simultaneously and iteratively, starting from the initial stage of data collection to the conclusion drawing. The data that have been collected are categorized, summarized, and presented in the form of thematic narratives or matrices, then analyzed reflectively to find deep meaning to the role of strategic leadership in building an innovative culture in the pesantren environment.

To maintain the validity and validity of the data, this study applied source and method triangulation techniques (Mekarisce, 2020). Source triangulation is done by comparing data from various informants who have different positions and perspectives in the pesantren environment. Meanwhile, method triangulation was carried out by combining the results of interviews, direct observation, and written documentation related to innovation programs and strategic leadership

practices. This process aims to ensure that the findings obtained are credible, reliable, and reflect the actual conditions at Al Mashduqiah Islamic Boarding School.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

The findings at Al-Mashduqiyah Islamic Boarding School show that strategic leadership plays an important role in building an innovative culture in the Islamic education environment. This role is reflected through various initiatives and strategies carried out by the leadership of the institution, which includes preparing a vision for curriculum development to optimizing the potential of human resources on an ongoing basis. Further elaboration of the findings is presented in the following points:

a) Full Support from Leaders for Educational Experiments

Full support from leaders for educational experimentation is a form of active and open willingness from a leader to provide space for innovation and experimentation with learning methods that have never been applied before (Reid et al., 2025; Zulfqar et al., 2021). This support is not only in the form of formal permission, but also includes resource allocation, mentoring, and appreciation for teachers and educators who dare to try new approaches to answer the needs of students and the times (Daheri et al., 2022; Ihya et al., 2024). The results of an interview with one of the senior ustadz at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan revealed that the kyai, as the leader of the pesantren, always gave full encouragement to teaching staff who wanted to make changes in learning methods. He explained that the kyai not only gave permission, but also actively monitored and gave positive feedback regarding the teaching patterns being tried. This attitude makes teachers feel more confident to innovate, and even dare to utilize technology and creative methods to improve the quality of learning for students in pesantren (FH; 2025).

Researchers also summarized observational data on three key aspects that indicate the application of strategic leadership roles in encouraging the growth of a culture of innovation at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan:

Table 1. Application of Strategic Leadership in Building Innovation

Aspects Observed	Description of Observation Results
Leader Attitude Providing Support	Leaders actively provide direction and appreciation for teaching staff who propose new learning methods.
Facilities for Learning Innovation	Leaders provide technology and discussion rooms to facilitate the development of adaptive teaching methods.
Communication Pattern with teaching staff	Leaders establish open and reflective communication with teaching staff to evaluate and improve their learning practices.

These three aspects of observation show that the work patterns of leaders at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan have a significant impact on the formation of a culture of innovation. Active support from leaders, ranging from giving permission for teaching staff to be creative to facilitating technology needs and discussion venues, creates a work atmosphere conducive to the development of learning methods. Open and reflective communication patterns also allow teaching staff to evaluate each other's experiences and optimize the application of more adaptive learning approaches. Overall, this work pattern shows that the quality and work patterns of leaders can be a catalyst for the growth and development of innovative mindsets in the pesantren context.

The attitude of leaders who give full support to educational experiments at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan reflects a strategic role in building an innovative culture in the pesantren environment. Leaders not only function as policy directors but also as facilitators who create a favorable climate for the birth of creative ideas in learning. This approach is in line with the findings

of Wang (2022), which emphasizes that supportive leadership is able to motivate educators to explore new strategies. In addition, the results of research by Reinforce that leadership based on religious values, as well as visionary, is effective in fostering teachers' courage to innovate. In the context of pesantren, the presence of leaders as protectors and mentors of new initiatives has proven to be important to foster an adaptive learning culture, in line with the needs of the times, and still grounded in Islamic values.

Based on the results of the explanation presented above, it shows that the role of strategic leadership at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan has a significant impact on the growth of a culture of innovation in the learning process. Active support from pesantren leaders is not only manifested in the form of formal permission, but also seen in the willingness to provide direction, facilitate the needs of educators, and build communication patterns that are conducive to the development of teaching methods. This kind of leadership characteristic encourages teaching staff to dare to get out of conventional patterns and try new approaches that are more relevant to the needs of students and the times. This condition has a positive impact on improving the quality of learning, the adaptability of educators, and the readiness of students in facing various changes. With the foundation of religious values and an open work structure, this leadership pattern allows pesantren to grow as adaptive and relevant learning institutions. This conclusion emphasizes that the quality of leaders acts as a catalyst for the realization of constructive change and the sustainability of Islamic education institutions in the contemporary era.

b) Leader's Commitment to Human Resource Development

Leader commitment to human resource development as a catalyst for innovation refers to the seriousness of leaders in providing attention, support, and strategic investment in increasing the capacity of individuals in the organization (Maulana et al., 2022; Riyadi & Huseini, 2019). This commitment is not only demonstrated through training programs, but also through the creation of a work environment that encourages competency growth, continuous learning, and active participation in institutional innovation processes (Farla et al., 2021; Ristianey et al., 2021). In line with this, data obtained from researcher interviews with two senior teachers at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan, it is known that the leadership of the pesantren shows serious attention to the capacity building of teachers and staff. One informant said that the kyai routinely facilitates training and internal discussions to improve the competence of educators, especially in the use of modern learning methods (UQJ; 2025). Another informant added that leaders do not just give instructions but are also directly involved in the coaching process. This attitude creates a sense of collective responsibility and motivation to contribute to the development of innovation in the pesantren environment (UH;2025).



Figure 1. Leaders' Commitment to Human Resource Development

The chart illustrates the four primary forms of commitment of pesantren leaders in encouraging the development of human resources as the basis for innovation. These four aspects include: the provision of internal training, direct involvement in coaching, the creation of a work environment that supports innovation, and increasing motivation and a sense of collective responsibility. This data is compiled based on the results of interviews with two key informants, which

show that the success of innovation in the pesantren environment is strongly influenced by the attention and active support of the leadership towards increasing the capacity of all elements of the institution.

The findings at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan show that the leader's commitment to human resource development has a significant impact on the growth of an innovative culture in the pesantren environment. The form of support includes training facilitation, involvement in coaching, and the creation of a work atmosphere that supports collaboration. Chen & Wu (2022) emphasized that human resource development facilitated directly by leaders has an impact on the readiness of institutions to respond to external challenges. Thus, strengthening individual capacity through participatory leadership contributes to sustainable and adaptive institutional transformation to changing times without ignoring Islamic values.

From the explanation that has been described, it can be seen that the role of leaders in encouraging human resource development has strategic implications for institutional transformation. Through structured involvement, leaders not only carry out supervisory functions but also act as facilitators of change that support the process of scientific growth and professionalism of educators. The work environment formed due to this commitment indirectly fosters a culture of mutual support and encourages the optimal utilization of individual potential. In this framework, the leader is not only a policy director but also a driving force for the growth of value-based innovation. Strengthening the capacity of human resources has proven to be an effective way to respond to the challenges of contemporary education without neglecting the Islamic principles that form the institutional basis. Therefore, an adaptive, participatory, and visionary leadership approach is the main need in strengthening the competitiveness of Islamic education institutions amid the complexity of the modern era.

c) Exemplary Leaders Creating an Innovative Organizational Culture

Exemplary leaders in creating an innovative organizational culture refer to the real behavior shown by leaders in carrying out the values of innovation, creativity, and openness to change (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021; Wijethilake et al., 2023). This exemplary is not just symbolic, but is manifested in consistent actions that become role models for all members of the organization (Arifin et al., 2024; Sulpakar et al., 2022). Through this example, a work environment is formed that supports initiative, collaboration, and the courage to try new approaches on an ongoing basis. Based on the results of interviews with two informants, namely the head of the madrasah and senior teachers at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan, it is known that the leader of the pesantren consistently shows an open attitude towards renewal. Informants stated that leaders not only give instructions to innovate, but are also actively involved in development activities, such as curriculum discussions and training on the use of technology. According to them, leaders often set an example in using new methods when teaching or delivering materials to santri, so that teachers and staff are encouraged to follow suit in improving the quality of learning and institutional governance (UK;2025).

The findings at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan indicate that exemplary leadership in implementing innovative values has a tangible impact on the spirit of change among educators. When leaders not only instruct innovation but are directly involved in the implementation of new methods, teachers feel more confident to try different approaches. This pattern shows that teachers' courage to break out of old habits does not emerge spontaneously, but is shaped through real examples from respected figures. This creates a kind of moral legitimacy to educational experimentation. In line with that, Ulfah (2022) states that the behavior of leaders forms the dominant value in the organization. In this context, exemplary behavior is the key to the realization of a culture of innovation that grows organically and sustainably in the pesantren environment.

The results showed that exemplary leaders in encouraging innovation have an important role in creating a progressive organizational culture in the Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan Islamic Boarding School. When leaders carry out real practices that reflect the values of renewal, then members of the

institution more easily accept change as something positive and necessary. Such actions not only give symbolic influence but also create a safe space for educators to innovate in learning methods. This kind of example strengthens the credibility of the leadership and increases the internal motivation of the teaching staff. Institutionally, it forms a work pattern that is open to new approaches, while maintaining the integrity of the basic values of the pesantren. The alignment between the vision, actions, and attitudes of leaders is the main driver of the creation of a work atmosphere that supports the growth of educational quality. Thus, the role of the leader determines the direction and success of the reform that is carried out consistently and continuously.

d) Leader Communication Strategy in Disseminating Innovative Values

Leader communication strategy is a planned approach used to effectively convey messages, vision, and institutional values in order to form an adaptive organizational culture (Isya et al., 2021; Wulandari et al., 2022). In the context of spreading innovative values, this strategy includes persuasive delivery of ideas, open dialogue, and symbolic exemplification aimed at instilling a spirit of renewal in all elements of the institution, thus creating a shared understanding of the importance of transformation and sustainable development (Muslimin, 2023; Perkasa & Aditia, 2023). Based on interviews with three informants, namely one institutional leader and two senior teachers at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan, it is known that the Pondok leader consistently uses persuasive and participatory communication in conveying change ideas (UQJ; 2025). Teachers explained that leaders do not only give one-way instructions, but often hold joint forums to discuss the importance of innovation in learning (UH;2025). Through this approach, teachers feel valued and involved, so that innovative values are more easily accepted and thoroughly implemented in the educational process that takes place in the pesantren environment.



Figure 2. Leader Communication Strategy

The communication approach taken by the leader of Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan shows a strategy that is in line with collaborative and transformative principles in building a culture of innovation. The use of dialogue forums and active participation from educators creates an organizational climate that is open to change. This method allows the spread of innovative values to take place naturally, because it is accompanied by emotional involvement and collective understanding. This is in line with the findings of Istighfara & Zaki (2022), who emphasized the importance of strategic communication in facilitating the acceptance of innovation in a value-based school environment. In addition, it also shows that the effectiveness of leadership in instilling innovative values is highly dependent on the leader's ability to build communicative relationships that are inclusive and contextual.

The findings in this study confirm that the success of the spread of innovative values in the Islamic education environment is strongly influenced by the quality of communication strategies implemented by institutional leaders. In the context of Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan, an

open, involving, and contextual communication approach is proven to be able to build cohesion between innovative ideas and message recipients, thus enabling the creation of collective awareness of the importance of transformation. This approach also shows that effective communication is not only about conveying instructions, but also shaping shared meanings that strengthen the institution's commitment to change. Thus, the communication strategy carried out by leaders is not only a medium for socializing values, but also a medium for forming an innovative culture based on trust, active participation, and future orientation. This makes an important contribution in enriching the academic discourse on the relationship between leadership, strategic communication, and Islamic value-based institutional development.

2. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that strategic leadership at Pondok Pesantren Al Mashduqiah Kraksaan plays a central role in encouraging the growth of an innovative culture through real support for educational experiments, strengthening human resources, and exemplifying renewal values. In this context, leaders not only function as policy makers but also as cultural actors who instill the spirit of transformation through direct involvement and participatory communication. This finding is in line with the study of Ng et al. (2020), which highlighted that transformative leaders in educational institutions can create spaces that support creativity through empowering educators and strengthening a shared vision. However, this study expands the context by showing that the success of innovation in pesantren is strongly influenced by the integration of Islamic values into leadership practices, making it more organic and contextual compared to conventional educational institutions that tend to rely on bureaucratic approaches.

Furthermore, the findings regarding the leader's example as a driving factor for innovation are strengthened by the interview results, which show that kyais and madrasah leaders actively set an example in applying new learning methods and the use of technology. This finding corroborates the results of Al-Husseini and Elbeltagi's research (2022) which asserts that the behavior of leaders who are consistent in demonstrating innovative values can form a creative mindset and courage to act among organizational members. In the context of pesantren, exemplary behavior is not only interpreted as a professional attitude, but also as a form of moral and religious responsibility that gives legitimacy to change initiatives. Thus, this study enriches the discourse on the role of exemplarity by showing that in value-based institutions such as pesantren, the credibility of leaders is determined by the congruence between words and actions, which has a direct impact on the courage of teachers to break out of traditional teaching patterns.

Finally, the strategic communication aspect carried out by leaders at Al Mashduqiah Islamic Boarding School shows that an open, dialogical, and inclusive communication model is a key element in instilling innovative values in a sustainable manner. This strengthens the findings of Arifin et al. (2023) who emphasize that the success of educational innovation in a value-based environment is highly dependent on the ability of leaders to create communication channels that strengthen a sense of belonging to change. In this study, communication strategies are not only a medium for conveying ideas, but also a tool for shaping shared meanings, where leaders and teachers share roles in shaping a more adaptive and progressive vision of education. Thus, strategic communication in pesantren leadership not only creates social cohesion, but also becomes the foundation for the birth of change that is firmly rooted in religious values, participation, and collective consciousness.

D. Conclusion

This study shows that strategic leadership plays an important role in creating an innovative ecosystem in the pesantren environment. One of the valuable lessons learned is that leader support is not limited to giving permission for change, but is realized through open communication, facilitation of facilities, and involvement in every stage of educational experiments. At Pondok Pesantren Al

Mashduqiah Kraksaan, participatory leadership practices have proven to be able to encourage teachers' courage to innovate. This is an important lesson that value-based institutional transformation cannot occur without the active involvement of leaders as the motor of change who understand the cultural context and the needs of the times.

Academically, this research makes a significant contribution to the study of Islamic educational leadership by combining strategic approaches and organizational culture perspectives. This research updates the perspective on the role of pesantren leaders, which has been mostly understood in a moral-spiritual context, by showing that the strategic role of leaders also includes the formation of systems that encourage innovation. In addition, the use of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) interactive analysis in processing qualitative data provides a comprehensive mapping of the relationship between leader communication, innovative values, and the formation of an adaptive work culture. This study also enriches the empirical literature by presenting a typical case study of an Islamic-based educational institution that has strong socio-religious characteristics but is open to renewal.

However, this study has limitations in the scope of the case which is only focused on one pesantren institution in the Probolinggo area, so the findings cannot be widely generalized to all pesantren with different social and cultural backgrounds. In addition, the qualitative approach used is descriptive, so it has not been able to quantitatively measure the relationship between variables explicitly. The age and experience of the informants are also limiting in reaching a diversity of perspectives. Therefore, it is recommended that further research be conducted using a mixed methods approach, involving more institutions with diverse characteristics, and examining the dimensions of strategic leadership over a longer period of time to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding.

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