

THE LEADERSHIP CONCEPT OF *KYAI* IN *PESANTREN*: A LITERATURE ANALYSIS BASED ON MODERN EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This study examines the leadership of *kyai* within the *pesantren* education system through a literature review grounded in modern educational leadership theories. While the role of the *kyai* has traditionally been analyzed from religious and normative standpoints, academic engagement with this leadership role through the lens of contemporary educational management remains limited. This article specifically explores the relevance of three modern leadership models, transformational leadership, servant leadership, and instructional leadership in understanding the multifaceted role of the *kyai* as both spiritual and educational leaders in *pesantren*. The findings indicate that the leadership characteristics of the *kyai* align closely with these models: as agents of change (transformational), as community servants (servant leadership), and as key drivers of educational quality (instructional leadership). This alignment suggests that integrating modern leadership theories can enhance the management and educational outcomes of *pesantren* without undermining their traditional values. The study concludes by recommending further empirical research to investigate the practical implementation of these leadership concepts in addressing contemporary challenges within Islamic boarding schools.

Keywords: Leadership of Kyai; Pesantren; Modern Leadership; Educational Management; Islamic Education

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren is known as the oldest Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, which continues to play a strategic role in building the character, religious, and social skills of students (Ichsan et al., 2021). Amid global progress and modernization of education, the role of *kyai* as a leader of Islamic boarding schools is becoming increasingly complex. *Kyai* are not only recognized as spiritual role models, but are also required to have managerial skills in managing educational institutions, while also responding to increasingly dynamic changes in the era (Yasid, 2020).

From the perspective of modern educational management, various leadership theories can be used as a framework to strengthen the role of leadership in Islamic boarding schools. Transformational leadership Theory emphasizes the importance of vision, motivation, and empowerment of organizational members in encouraging sustainable positive change (Lamirin et al., 2023). This approach is relevant for *kyais* as leaders of Islamic boarding schools who not only maintain tradition but also inspire innovation and adaptation to the dynamics of contemporary education.

In addition, the concept of servant leadership places leaders as servants who prioritize the interests of the community and individual development, thus building an inclusive and participatory organizational climate. Meanwhile, instructional leadership emphasizes the role of leaders in improving the quality of learning directly through supervision, teacher development, and the creation of a conducive learning environment. These three concepts are believed to be effectively adapted in the leadership of *kyai* in Islamic boarding schools to improve the quality of education and the sustainability of the institution (Hallinger, 2005).

The leadership of *kyai* in Islamic boarding schools is a central aspect that greatly influences the development and sustainability of this traditional Islamic educational institution. Various studies show that a *kyai* not only acts as a spiritual leader but also as a manager who has full authority in determining the policies and direction of the Islamic boarding school, both individually and collectively (Rojak et al., 2021). The leadership of *kyai* model is often charismatic and centralistic, with power centered on *kyai* figure as the main source of authority and blessings for the Islamic boarding school (Dhofier, 2008). However, there are variations in *kyais'* leadership style, ranging from authoritarian to

participatory democratic, where *kyai* involves students and administrators in decision-making based on religious and ethical values (Hidayah, 2023).

Based on this case, it can be seen that there is a research gap, namely the lack of studies that link the role of leadership of *kyai* with modern leadership theories such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, and instructional leadership, specifically in the context of Islamic boarding schools. Therefore, this study aims to explore the concept of leadership of *kyai* in Islamic boarding schools using the framework of the three leadership theories through a literature review. This study is important to contribute to strengthening Islamic boarding school governance in the modern era, so that Islamic boarding schools not only maintain the heritage of Islamic traditions and values, but are also able to adopt modern leadership principles in improving the quality of education and the competitiveness of institutions.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with a library research approach (Creswell, 2015). This approach was chosen because the main focus of the research is to examine the leadership concept of *kyai* in Islamic boarding schools through a review of various relevant modern leadership theories, especially transformational leadership, servant leadership, and instructional leadership.

The data sources in this study were obtained from various primary and secondary scientific references related to the leadership topic of *kyai*, pesantren management, and modern leadership Theory. The literature used includes scientific books, national and international journal articles, previous research results, education policy documents, and scientific articles published in the last three years to ensure that the study remains contextual and up-to-date (Sugiyono, 2016)

The data collection process was carried out through reference searches from various trusted sources such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, Garuda, and other national journal portals. In addition, official documents from government agencies such as the Ministry of Religion and the National Education Standards Agency were also used as supporting references in this study. The collected data were analyzed descriptively-qualitatively with several stages, namely: (1) Selecting literature that is by the focus of the study; (2) Grouping literature based on the theme of leadership of *kyai* and modern leadership Theory; (3)

Conducting a critical analysis of the relationship between leadership of *kyai* practices in Islamic boarding schools and the principles of modern leadership; and (4) Formulating conclusions based on the results of the literature study synthesis (Rijali, 2018).

RESULTS

Leadership of *Kyai* and Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is one of the modern leadership concepts. This model emphasizes that ideal leaders should not only direct and control, but also be able to inspire, motivate, and transform individuals and organizations towards sustainable positive change. In the context of education, including in Islamic boarding schools, transformational leadership is relevant to be applied, considering that educational institutions are always facing complex changes and challenges (Fathiyah & Khusna, 2024).

Kyai in the Indonesian pesantren tradition is known not only as a religious figure, but also as a figure who has social authority and leadership. Recent studies show that the leadership of *kyai* is not limited to spiritual care, but also plays a role in driving innovation and change within the pesantren. *Kyai* often becomes the driving force for curriculum development, improving facilities and infrastructure, and renewing more contextual learning patterns according to the needs of the times (Saputra, 2018).

One important aspect of transformational leadership is the ability of the leader to build a strong vision and inspire all members of the organization. *Kyai* generally have a big vision in developing Islamic boarding schools, both in terms of academic aspects and the formation of the character of the students (Ichsan, 2019). This vision is often inherited from previous generations and is continuously updated according to social demands, technology, and the needs of contemporary Muslims.

In addition, transformational leadership requires attention to individual development within the organization (Harsoyo, 2022). In the context of Islamic boarding schools, *kyai* facilitate the development of students' potential not only through the transfer of knowledge but also through spiritual guidance, moral examples, and the formation of leadership mentality among senior students. *Kyai* often identify potential students to be developed into future leaders, both in Islamic boarding schools and in society (Kasful, 2015). Another component of transformational leadership is the empowerment of

organizational members to be actively involved in change. In Islamic boarding schools, *kyai* generally encourage the participation of students, ustadz, and the surrounding community in the process of developing the institution. For example, in routine deliberations, formulation of religious programs, or social activities involving Islamic boarding schools. This pattern shows a dynamic and egalitarian division of responsibilities as emphasized in transformational leadership (Bustomi & Umam, 2017).

Transformational leadership is also marked by the leader's efforts in creating innovation. In a number of modern Islamic boarding schools, *kyai* pioneered the integration of the Islamic boarding school curriculum with general education, strengthening digital literacy, and even developing student entrepreneurship. These efforts reflect how *kyai* act as agents of change who keep Islamic boarding schools relevant amidst the flow of globalization and technological developments.

Leadership of *Kyai* and Servant Leadership

The concept of servant leadership was first introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970, which positions the leader as a servant, not just a governing authority. The core of this model is the drive to serve, empower, and facilitate the needs of members of the organization. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, the characteristics of leadership of *kyai* are closely related to these principles (Dian et al., 2024). Islamic boarding schools, as religious-based educational institutions, have a social structure that is thick with family values, where *kyai* are seen as figures who care for, guide, and protect students. It is in line with the concept of servant leadership, which emphasizes the role of leaders as servants who protect and ensure that individual development needs are met. *Kyai* are not only transmitters of knowledge, but also central figures who fulfill the spiritual, emotional, and social needs of students through direct guidance, teaching classical books, and providing life advice, reflecting the basic philosophy of servant leadership (Muttaqin, 2020).

In addition, servant leadership emphasizes community strengthening and the development of a healthy social environment. *Kyai* in Islamic boarding schools not only lead institutions internally, but are also active in the social life of the surrounding community through social activities, preaching, and community advocacy, demonstrating a leadership orientation based on sustainable social service (Hafidloh et al., 2025). *Kyai*'s concern for the welfare of students, especially those who are economically disadvantaged,

is manifested through the provision of scholarships and facilitation of Islamic boarding school economic activities, which is a real implementation of the principle of empathy in servant leadership (Ihwan, 2025). Furthermore, *kyai* are known as exemplary figures in ethics, integrity, and moral exemplars, who build trust and loyalty among students and the community. Thus, the leadership pattern of *kyai* in Islamic boarding schools has substantively implemented the principle of servant leadership, although it has not been studied formally in modern leadership Theory, so that the integration of this analysis provides a more systematic scientific perspective in understanding the typical leadership of Islamic boarding schools.

Leadership of *Kyai* and Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is a leadership concept that places improving the quality of the learning process as the main focus of the educational leader's duties (Hasra et al., 2024). This concept includes the leader's efforts in establishing an academic vision, monitoring the learning process, and creating a conducive environment for improving the quality of education. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, *a kyai* holds great responsibility not only in the spiritual aspect but also in maintaining the quality of learning. *Kyai* plays a role in determining the curriculum, choosing the books taught, and ensuring that teachers have adequate competence (Sari et al., 2025). This pattern shows that *kyai* has practically carried out the role of instructional leader, even though this term has not been explicitly used in the pesantren environment.

The effectiveness of education in Islamic boarding schools is greatly influenced by the active involvement of *kyai* in the learning process. *Kyai* who pay great attention to improving the competence of teachers, renewing learning methods, and evaluating the achievements of students tend to succeed in improving the quality of education in Islamic boarding schools as a whole. In addition, *kyai* also set clear academic standards, both in mastering religious knowledge, memorizing books, and forming morals, so that the learning process becomes directed and measurable according to the principles of instructional leadership. Direct supervision through routine evaluations and informal interactions with students and ustadz is part of the culture of Islamic boarding school education that guarantees the quality of learning.

The implementation of instructional leadership in Islamic boarding schools is also reflected in *kyai's* initiative in developing learning innovations. Several Islamic boarding schools have begun to adopt more interactive learning methods, integrating religious knowledge with general knowledge, and utilizing simple technology to support the learning process. It shows that *kyai* not only plays a role as a spiritual leader, but also as a progressive and adaptive instructional leader to the demands of modern education (Najib & Khaudli, 2025). Therefore, the leadership of *kyai* in Islamic boarding schools has reflected the principles of instructional leadership in a contextual manner, which can be an important strategy in improving the quality of education and the competitiveness of Islamic boarding schools in the global era.

DISCUSSION

Leadership of *Kyai* from the Perspective of Transformational Leadership in the Framework of Modern Educational Management

Transformational leadership is a contemporary approach that is widely adopted in the world of modern education because of its ability to encourage positive systemic change. Bass and Avolio (1994) emphasize that transformational leaders not only carry out administrative tasks but are also able to mobilize the entire potential of organizational members towards a greater shared vision. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, the results of the study show that the leadership of *kyai* is not merely rooted in traditional charisma but has developed in line with the principles of transformational leadership as described in modern educational management Theory. *Kyai* as leaders of Islamic boarding schools, not only maintain the continuity of tradition, but also actively transform institutions to be adaptive to the demands of the times through curriculum innovation, human resource capacity development, and improving institutional governance.

The individualized consideration pattern that is an important part of transformational leadership is seen in *kyai's* attention to the development of the santri's potential, indicating the internalization of the concept of individual empowerment in the tradition of pesantren leadership. In addition, *kyai* plays a role as a driving force for building trust, loyalty, and active participation in the pesantren environment according to the characteristics of idealized influence in transformational leadership. This study also found innovative practices in pesantren management, such as the integration of general and

religious curriculum, strengthening santri entrepreneurship, and utilizing simple technology in learning, which shows the application of transformational leadership principles contextually (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Thus, the leadership of *kyai* is not only based on traditional norms, but also adopts modern leadership values based on change, empowerment, and innovation, bridging the pesantren tradition with contemporary educational management Theory.

Leadership of *Kyai* from the Perspective of Servant Leadership in the Framework of Modern Educational Management

Servant leadership is a modern leadership concept that places the interests and welfare of community members as the main priority, where leaders act as servants who fulfill needs, empower, and build participatory communities (Gera et al., 2024). In the context of Islamic boarding schools, research shows that the leadership pattern of *kyai* is substantively in line with the principle of servant leadership, especially when associated with modern educational management. *Kyai* not only performs symbolic or authoritative functions, but is also present in the lives of students, both academically, morally, spiritually, and socially. This involvement confirms that the principles of service and listening, such as openness to the aspirations of students, have become part of the leadership culture in Islamic boarding schools, in line with the participatory approach in modern educational management.

In addition, empathy as a basic character of servant leadership is reflected in *kyai*'s attention to the welfare of students, especially those who are less fortunate, through the provision of scholarships, educational facilities, and social security. *Kyai* also play an important role in building the internal community of the pesantren and the surrounding community, strengthening social networks through the Theory of community empowerment-based educational management. The moral and spiritual example shown by *kyai* becomes the foundation of inspiring leadership, in line with the practice of ethical leadership and coaching-mentoring to build the character of students. The leadership of *kyai* in the pesantren has adopted the principle of servant leadership, which is a pillar in the Theory of modern educational leadership and management, while also showing the relevance of the pesantren tradition to the demands of humanistic and participatory management of academic institutions.

Leadership of *Kyai* in the Perspective of Instructional Leadership and Its Relation to Modern Educational Management

Instructional leadership is one of the main approaches in modern educational management, which places leaders as the driving force behind improving the quality of learning (Permatasari et al., 2023). In the context of Islamic boarding schools, a *kyai* not only plays a role as a spiritual symbol or religious figure but also as an instructional leader who is active in directing and improving the quality of learning, in line with the framework of contemporary educational management. *Kyai* has strategic authority in determining the curriculum, achievement standards, and learning methods in Islamic boarding schools (Suprihno & Rohmawati, 2024). This role shows that instructional leadership has become an integral part of the leadership of *kyai* model, which is integrated with a modern education management system based on improving academic quality. Supervision of the learning process, both through formal evaluation and informal observation, shows the existence of quality control that is in line with the principle of accountability in modern education management.

In addition, efforts to improve the capacity of teachers or ustadz through training, discussion, and competency development are also an important part of instructional leadership. This practice shows the integration of the leadership of *kyai* model with the principles of teacher professional development as theorized in modern educational management. The holistic evaluation carried out by *kyai* on the students, covering academic, character, and spiritual aspects, indicates that instructional leadership in Islamic boarding schools is not only oriented towards cognitive, but also towards personality formation, by the character-based education approach.

The academic culture built by *kyai* based on Islamic values, discipline, and exemplary behavior is the foundation for creating a conducive learning environment, in line with the concept of organizational culture in contemporary educational management (Wirayanti et al., 2024). Learning innovations implemented by *kyai*, such as integration of religious and general curriculum, active methods, and utilization of simple technology, prove that Islamic boarding schools can adapt to the demands of the modern education system. Therefore, the leadership pattern of *kyai* in Islamic boarding schools has been internalized in the practice of instructional leadership that is relevant to the framework of

modern education management, as well as being an answer to the challenge of improving the quality of Islamic boarding schools in the global era.

CONCLUSION

Based on literature review and analysis, this study confirms that leadership of *Kyai* in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools has developed from a normative-traditional pattern to a hybrid model that combines Islamic values and modern educational management principles, especially through the application of transformational, servant, and instructional leadership. *Kyai* now plays a role as an adaptive agent of change, a servant and empowerer of the community, and a learning leader who emphasizes innovation, quality, and accountability. These findings provide a foundation for the leadership development of *Kyai* training based on tradition and modern management, and open up opportunities for further research related to the effectiveness of implementing these principles in Islamic boarding schools.

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