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Strengthening Islamic Path-Goal Leadership in Pesantren: A Study in Indonesia

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Abstract

Background: Leadership in Indonesian pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) often combines cultural and spiritual elements, integrating religious values, student loyalty, and the charisma of the kyai (Islamic scholar). Path-Goal leadership theory provides a useful framework for understanding how Islamic leadership can enhance educational outcomes and institutional sustainability in these schools.

Method: This study employed a qualitative case study design across eight pesantren in Indonesia. Data were collected through field observations, semi-structured interviews with leaders, teachers, and students, and institutional documents. Thematic analysis was used to examine how Path-Goal leadership is implemented within an Islamic context.

Results: Findings show that pesantren leaders practice barakah-oriented management, where decision-making relies on informal deliberation, religious principles, and kyai guidance. This approach strengthens student loyalty, preserves Islamic educational traditions, and expands institutional networks, even in the absence of formal administrative procedures.

Discussion: Islamic Path-Goal leadership bridges traditional pesantren culture with contemporary educational needs. Leadership rooted in spirituality fosters collective solidarity and social legitimacy, which are crucial for effectively managing both formal and non-formal educational activities.



Conclusion: Islamic Path-Goal leadership in pesantren represents a contextually adapted model that integrates religious, cultural, and pedagogical values. The success of these educational institutions is influenced not only by formal structures but also by spiritual and relational leadership practices.

Novelty: This study provides empirical insights into Islamic leadership in pesantren, contributing theoretically and practically to context-sensitive educational management in Indonesia.

Keywords: Path-Goal Leadership, Islamic Education, Pesantren, Barakah-Oriented Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Leadership in Indonesian pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) represents a unique blend of spiritual guidance, cultural tradition, and organizational management. Pesantren leaders, often kyai (Islamic scholars), exercise authority not only through administrative competence but also through moral and religious legitimacy, which shapes the behavior, loyalty, and motivation of students (Abas et al., 2025; Karim et al., 2025). Unlike secular educational institutions, pesantren leadership relies heavily on informal deliberation, spiritual values, and community recognition, creating a complex socio-religious environment where conventional leadership models require contextual adaptation (Ma'arif et al., 2025; Kustiawan et al., 2023). Classical leadership theories, particularly Path-Goal Theory, offer valuable insights for understanding the mechanisms through which leaders guide followers toward organizational and educational objectives (House, 1996; Maharani et al., 2023; Priyowidodo, 2021). Path-Goal Theory posits that leaders influence follower motivation and performance by clarifying goals, providing appropriate support, and adapting leadership behaviors to follower needs and situational contexts. Within pesantren, this theory can be reframed to account for Islamic values, emphasizing ethical guidance, spiritual motivation, and collective responsibility (Bashori et al., 2026; Alasmari et al., 2025). Leaders do not merely direct tasks but foster barakah-oriented management, integrating moral principles with pedagogical objectives, which enhances institutional sustainability and student development (Karim et al., 2025; Wijaya et al., 2026).

Previous research demonstrates the positive impact of spiritual and ethical leadership on organizational commitment, innovation, and sustainability across educational and corporate contexts (Ahmad et al., 2025; Andargie et al., 2026; Saleem et al., 2026). However, much of this evidence comes from non-pesantren environments, limiting its applicability to Indonesian Islamic boarding schools, where leadership is deeply intertwined with religious authority, student-teacher relationships, and local cultural norms (Makruf et al., 2022; Suyadi et al., 2022). Studies that specifically explore leadership in pesantren are relatively scarce, often focusing on historical, theological, or sociocultural aspects rather than empirically examining leadership strategies within contemporary educational management (Abas et al., 2025; Ma'arif et al., 2025; Karim et al., 2025). This gap highlights the need to investigate how Path-Goal Theory can be operationalized in a pesantren context, reflecting both Islamic values and institutional goals.

Empirical studies of Islamic leadership in Indonesia suggest that kyai employ strategies that combine spiritual guidance, charisma, and participatory decision-making, fostering student independence and entrepreneurial spirit (Karim et al., 2025; Ma'arif et al., 2025). These practices align with Path-Goal Theory's framework, particularly its directive, supportive,



participative, and achievement-oriented styles, but must be interpreted within a socio-religious lens where ethical and spiritual considerations are central (House, 1996; Maharani et al., 2023; Priyowidodo, 2021). For instance, research indicates that pesantren leaders who integrate Islamic teachings with educational management not only sustain religious traditions but also enhance institutional resilience and legitimacy in local communities (Abas et al., 2025; Wijaya et al., 2026). Despite these insights, there remains limited understanding of how Islamic Path-Goal leadership is enacted across different regions in Indonesia, particularly in West and Central Java, which host diverse pesantren with varying governance models, community expectations, and student demographics (Abas et al., 2025; Karim et al., 2025). Addressing this knowledge gap is critical for developing leadership models that are both culturally sensitive and theoretically robust, capable of bridging traditional religious authority with modern educational challenges (Suyadi et al., 2022; Bashori et al., 2026).

This study aims to investigate the implementation of Islamic-based Path-Goal leadership in pesantren in West and Central Java, providing an empirical framework that contextualizes classical leadership theory within the Indonesian Islamic educational environment. The study's objectives are threefold: first, to analyze how kyai apply Path-Goal leadership styles in day-to-day pesantren management; second, to identify the mechanisms through which spiritual and ethical guidance influences student engagement, institutional sustainability, and community trust; and third, to highlight leadership strategies that can serve as a model for faith-based educational institutions both locally and internationally (Karim et al., 2025; Ma'arif et al., 2025; Alasmari et al., 2025).

By focusing on pesantren, this research contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it extends Path-Goal Theory by incorporating Islamic values, kyai authority, and socio-cultural dynamics, offering a culturally nuanced perspective on leadership. Practically, it provides insights for pesantren leaders seeking to balance spiritual, pedagogical, and organizational demands, demonstrating how ethical and participative leadership can enhance student development, institutional performance, and social legitimacy. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of culturally and religiously contextualized leadership models, emphasizing that effective leadership in Islamic educational institutions is not solely defined by administrative structures but also by spiritual guidance, ethical integrity, and community engagement (Karim et al., 2025; Bashori et al., 2026; Wijaya et al., 2026).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership theory has been a focal point in understanding how leaders influence follower motivation and organizational performance. Among various frameworks, Path-Goal Theory (House, 1996) provides a robust lens to examine the interplay between leadership behaviors and follower outcomes. The theory posits that leaders enhance follower performance by clarifying goals, removing obstacles, and adapting their behaviors to meet the needs of their subordinates. It identifies four primary leadership behaviors: directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented, each of which can be adapted to specific organizational and cultural contexts (Maharani et al., 2023; Priyowidodo, 2021). In educational contexts, particularly Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Indonesia, leadership is not merely administrative but deeply intertwined with spiritual guidance, ethical values, and



community norms. Kyai, the spiritual leaders in pesantren, exemplify Path-Goal behaviors while embedding Islamic principles into daily governance, instruction, and mentoring of santri (students) (Karim et al., 2025; Ma`arif et al., 2025). For instance, directive leadership in pesantren aligns with enforcing moral and religious codes, supportive leadership addresses student welfare and emotional well-being, participative leadership encourages consultation and community deliberation (musyawarah), and achievement-oriented leadership fosters both academic and spiritual excellence (Abas et al., 2025; Wijaya et al., 2026).

Empirical studies demonstrate that Path-Goal behaviors positively influence educational outcomes, including teacher performance, student engagement, and institutional effectiveness (Rohimin et al., 2022; Priyowidodo, 2021). However, much of this evidence originates from secular organizations or educational institutions outside Indonesia. This limits the direct applicability of findings to pesantren, where spiritual and ethical leadership are central to organizational functioning (Bashori et al., 2026; Karim et al., 2025). The adaptation of Path-Goal Theory to pesantren involves integrating Islamic spirituality, moral authority, and community-oriented practices into leadership behaviors, creating a distinct model of educational leadership that extends beyond traditional administrative functions (Ma`arif et al., 2025; Abas et al., 2025). Spiritual and ethical leadership is increasingly recognized as critical in educational and religious settings. Leaders who model ethical conduct, empower followers, and promote moral development tend to enhance follower commitment, intrinsic motivation, and organizational sustainability (Alasmari et al., 2025; Andargie et al., 2026; Saleem et al., 2026). In pesantren, spiritual leadership amplifies Path-Goal behaviors: kyai not only direct and support santri but also foster moral resilience and religious adherence, which are essential for holistic student development (Karim et al., 2025; Bashori et al., 2026). This integration highlights a culturally specific dimension of leadership, where spiritual and ethical values are inseparable from operational and pedagogical responsibilities.

Recent studies have also explored the intersection of digital and Islamic leadership, indicating that kyai and teachers increasingly utilize technology to enhance instructional effectiveness, communication, and administrative processes (AlDhaheri et al., 2026; Mollah et al., 2026). However, research on digital leadership in pesantren remains limited, particularly regarding how digital tools mediate spiritual and ethical guidance, leaving an underexplored area for future studies. Similarly, while participative and achievement-oriented behaviors have been linked to improved outcomes in general educational settings, their specific impacts on santri's religious learning, entrepreneurial skills, and personal development in pesantren contexts require further empirical investigation (Karim et al., 2025; Abas et al., 2025). Several gaps emerge from the literature. First, there is a lack of empirical studies focused on Indonesian pesantren, especially in West and Central Java. Most existing research either examines Islamic schools outside Indonesia or focuses on secular organizations (Makruf et al., 2022; Suyadi et al., 2022). Second, few studies investigate follower outcomes such as motivation, independence, and moral development in response to Path-Goal leadership behaviors integrated with Islamic values (Karim et al., 2025; Bashori et al., 2026). Third, while the theoretical alignment between Path-Goal Theory and spiritual leadership has been proposed, operationalization and empirical testing within the pesantren context remain limited, leaving important practical and theoretical questions unanswered (Ma`arif et al., 2025; Wijaya et al., 2026).



Addressing these gaps is critical for advancing both theoretical and practical understanding of leadership in Islamic educational settings. By empirically exploring how kyai implement Path-Goal leadership behaviors while integrating ethical, spiritual, and participative practices, research can clarify the mechanisms linking leadership behaviors to student outcomes. Furthermore, identifying culturally grounded leadership practices provides actionable insights for educational policy, leadership training, and institutional development in pesantren (Karim et al., 2025; Abas et al., 2025).

In conclusion, the literature indicates that Path-Goal Theory provides a valuable framework for examining leadership in pesantren, but its application must be adapted to the local religious and cultural context. Leadership in pesantren is multidimensional, combining directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented behaviors with spiritual and ethical guidance. While global evidence demonstrates the general efficacy of Path-Goal behaviors, empirical studies specific to Indonesian pesantren are limited, particularly regarding follower outcomes, leadership adaptation, and the integration of Islamic values. This underscores the need for research that bridges classical leadership theory with the unique spiritual and cultural dimensions of pesantren, thereby advancing both academic knowledge and practical leadership strategies in Islamic educational institutions (Karim et al., 2025; Bashori et al., 2026; Ma'arif et al., 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine the implementation of Path-Goal leadership in pesantren located in West Java and Central Java, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because leadership practices in Islamic educational institutions are closely connected to spiritual values, cultural traditions, and interpersonal relationships that require contextual interpretation (Aloudah, 2022; Adinugraha & Shulthoni, 2024). The multiple-case study design enabled cross-case comparisons to identify both common and context-specific leadership patterns related to directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership behaviors derived from Path-Goal Theory (House, 1996). The selected cases included Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Huda Al Azhar Citangkolo, Pesantren Cipunduy Nurul Huda Tambakreja, Pesantren Darussalam Purwadadi, Pesantren Al Hasan Banjarsari, Pondok Pesantren Pembangunan Cigaru Majenang, Pesantren Luhur Miftahul Huda Ash-Shofa Manonjaya, and Yayasan Pendidikan Islam Syamsul 'Ulum. These institutions were purposively selected based on regional representation, diversity of organizational scale, and active integration of Islamic values in educational and managerial practices.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling and consisted of kyai, senior teachers, administrative staff, and senior students who had direct experience with institutional leadership practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and institutional document analysis to ensure triangulation and strengthen data credibility (Ahmad et al., 2025). Interviews focused on leadership behaviors, decision-making processes, motivational strategies, and spiritual guidance within pesantren management. Observations were conducted during meetings, learning activities, religious gatherings, and



administrative coordination to identify the practical implementation of Path-Goal leadership dimensions. Institutional documents, including curriculum guidelines, organizational reports, and leadership policies, were also analyzed to support interview and observational findings. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process by ensuring informed consent, participant confidentiality, and respect for cultural and religious norms within the pesantren environment.

Data analysis employed thematic content analysis using both deductive and inductive coding approaches (D'hondt et al., 2021; Abdulrahman & Walusimbi, 2024). Deductive coding was guided by the four dimensions of Path-Goal leadership, while inductive coding was used to identify emerging themes related to spiritual authority, relational leadership, and ethical management practices within pesantren. The analysis process included data familiarization, coding, theme development, and cross-case comparison to identify similarities and differences among institutions. To enhance trustworthiness, the study applied member checking, peer debriefing, and data triangulation across interviews, observations, and institutional documents. This methodological approach enabled a systematic exploration of how Path-Goal leadership is practiced within pesantren and how spiritual, cultural, and organizational factors shape leadership effectiveness in Islamic educational institutions.

RESULTS

The findings indicate that Islamic-based Path-Goal leadership in pesantren was implemented through the integration of directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership behaviors with spiritual authority, ethical guidance, and barakah-oriented management. Across the seven pesantren examined, kyai functioned not only as institutional leaders but also as moral and spiritual figures whose legitimacy influenced organizational discipline, student loyalty, and institutional cohesion. This finding supports previous studies emphasizing that leadership effectiveness in pesantren is closely associated with spiritual legitimacy, Islamic ethics, and communal trust (Karim et al., 2025; Ma'arif et al., 2025). Although the institutions differed in organizational size, governance structure, and educational orientation, similar leadership patterns emerged in the ways leaders clarified institutional goals, motivated followers, and balanced educational responsibilities with religious values. However, leadership implementation varied according to contextual factors such as student demographics, institutional complexity, and community expectations. Larger institutions such as Yayasan Pendidikan Islam Syamsul 'Ulum and Pondok Pesantren Pembangunan Cigaru Majenang relied more heavily on formal coordination systems and delegated leadership, whereas smaller pesantren emphasized direct interpersonal supervision and informal mentoring. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than universally representative because the study focused only on seven pesantren in West Java and Central Java.

Table 1 summarizes the dominant dimensions of Islamic Path-Goal leadership identified in each pesantren, including the mechanisms through which leadership behaviors influenced institutional outcomes. The table demonstrates that leadership effectiveness was shaped not only by managerial competence but also by spiritual guidance, participative deliberation, and relational engagement.

Table 1. Summary of Islamic Path-Goal Leadership Practices in Selected Pesantren

No	Pesantren / Institution	Dominant Leadership Behaviors	Key Mechanisms	Impact on Organizational Outcomes
1	Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Huda Al Azhar Citangkolo	Directive and supportive leadership	Spiritual mentoring, moral supervision	Lower student attrition and stronger discipline
2	Pesantren Cipunduy Nurul Huda Tambakreja	Supportive and participative leadership	Teacher mentoring and collective planning	Increased teacher motivation and community participation
3	Pesantren Darussalam Purwadadi	Directive and participative leadership	Musyawah and collaborative governance	Improved teamwork and academic coordination
4	Pesantren Al Hasan Banjarsari	Achievement-oriented and supportive leadership	Recognition ceremonies and counseling	Higher student motivation and institutional discipline
5	Pondok Pesantren Pembangunan Cigaru Majenang	Participative and achievement-oriented leadership	Delegated leadership and consultation	Increased stakeholder trust and institutional legitimacy
6	Pesantren Luhur Miftahul Huda Ash-Shofa Manonjaya	Supportive and directive leadership	Emotional support and administrative guidance	Strong teacher commitment and alumni networking
7	Yayasan Pendidikan Islam Syamsul 'Ulum	Directive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership	Strategic planning and public recognition	Sustained institutional development and program expansion

Source: Primary data processed from interviews, observations, and institutional documents, 2026.

Directive leadership emerged as one of the most visible dimensions of Path-Goal leadership in pesantren management. Leaders consistently communicated educational objectives, religious obligations, and behavioral expectations through formal meetings, religious gatherings, and classroom supervision. In Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Huda Al Azhar Citangkolo and Pesantren Darussalam Purwadadi, kyai regularly provided guidance concerning worship discipline, academic performance, and moral conduct. Interview findings indicated that teachers and students perceived this clarity as important for reducing uncertainty and strengthening institutional discipline. Several students explained that structured guidance helped them adapt more quickly to pesantren routines, especially regarding dormitory regulations, prayer schedules, and learning responsibilities. Institutional attendance records also showed relatively stable participation in academic and religious activities after routine supervisory meetings were implemented. Nevertheless, directive leadership in pesantren differed from bureaucratic command-oriented systems because it was closely integrated with moral and spiritual guidance. Leaders adjusted instructions according to followers' emotional and religious conditions, combining discipline with empathy and personal counseling. These findings reflect the contextual adaptation of Path-Goal Theory within Islamic educational institutions, where directive behaviors are integrated with ethical and spiritual guidance rather than merely administrative control (House, 1996; Maharani et al., 2023). Cross-case comparison further revealed that directive leadership was more formalized in larger institutions, whereas smaller pesantren relied more heavily on interpersonal interaction and direct supervision.



Supportive leadership emerged as a critical mechanism influencing student engagement, teacher commitment, and organizational cohesion. Leaders across the pesantren provided emotional support, spiritual mentoring, and professional guidance through counseling sessions, informal religious discussions, and individualized interaction. In Pesantren Cipunduy Nurul Huda Tambakreja and Pesantren Luhur Miftahul Huda Ash-Shofa Manonjaya, supportive leadership included teacher development programs, routine mentoring, and direct assistance for students experiencing academic or personal difficulties. Teachers interviewed in these institutions reported that leaders' accessibility strengthened institutional loyalty and increased motivation to participate in educational activities. Several participants also explained that supportive leadership reduced psychological distance between kyai and followers, fostering mutual trust and collective solidarity. Observational findings indicated that pesantren emphasizing supportive leadership experienced fewer interpersonal conflicts and stronger participation in communal activities. The findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing that spiritual and ethical leadership strengthens organizational commitment and institutional sustainability (Andargie et al., 2026; Saleem et al., 2026). In pesantren settings, supportive leadership was closely connected with spiritual mentoring and Islamic workplace values, reinforcing collective responsibility and social cohesion (Bashori et al., 2026). Cross-case comparison demonstrated that supportive leadership was particularly effective in larger pesantren with diverse student populations because emotional connection and mentoring helped maintain institutional unity despite organizational complexity.

Participative leadership was implemented primarily through musyawarah or consultative deliberation involving teachers, administrative staff, senior students, and community representatives. The findings indicate that participative leadership strengthened collective responsibility and organizational adaptability by allowing institutional members to contribute to policy formulation and program implementation. In Pondok Pesantren Pembangunan Cigaru Majenang and Pesantren Darussalam Purwadadi, educational programs and institutional initiatives were routinely discussed through collaborative meetings before decisions were finalized. Teachers explained that participation in decision-making increased their sense of ownership toward institutional goals and encouraged collaborative problem-solving. Observational data also indicated that participative leadership improved communication between leaders and followers, particularly during curriculum reform and organizational restructuring. These findings support previous studies suggesting that participative leadership enhances organizational adaptability and collaborative engagement in educational institutions (Ly et al., 2026). The use of musyawarah further reflects Islamic deliberative traditions emphasizing collective responsibility and social legitimacy (Ma'arif et al., 2025). However, the degree of participation varied across pesantren. More traditional institutions tended to centralize authority around the kyai, whereas institutions with broader educational networks encouraged wider involvement from teachers and students. These contextual variations suggest that institutional culture and governance structures moderated the effectiveness of participative leadership.

Achievement-oriented leadership was evident in leaders' efforts to encourage academic excellence, religious discipline, and institutional achievement. Across the pesantren studied, leaders motivated students and teachers through public recognition, academic competitions, leadership delegation, and acknowledgment of exemplary religious conduct. In Pesantren Al



Hasan Banjarsari and Yayasan Pendidikan Islam Syamsul 'Ulum, recognition ceremonies for high-performing students and teachers were routinely conducted during institutional gatherings. Interview findings suggested that recognition from kyai carried substantial moral and spiritual value, often motivating followers more effectively than material incentives. Institutional documents also showed increased participation in extracurricular competitions and leadership programs following the implementation of recognition systems. However, the findings demonstrate that achievement-oriented leadership was most effective when combined with supportive and participative behaviors rather than implemented independently. Institutions emphasizing achievement without emotional support tended to experience weaker collaboration among staff members, while pesantren integrating recognition systems with mentoring and consultation demonstrated stronger institutional commitment and organizational stability. These findings align with research indicating that ethical and recognition-based leadership can strengthen desirable organizational behavior and commitment (Tajudin et al., 2026; Saleem et al., 2026). In pesantren, achievement-oriented leadership was therefore linked not only to performance but also to moral and spiritual development.

The findings further demonstrate that spiritual and ethical leadership functioned as the foundation connecting all dimensions of Islamic Path-Goal leadership. Leaders consistently framed institutional objectives within Islamic ethical principles emphasizing sincerity, discipline, collective welfare, and barakah-oriented management. In many cases, organizational decisions were based not only on administrative efficiency but also on moral reflection and religious considerations. Participants frequently described leadership legitimacy in terms of the kyai's integrity, religious knowledge, and ability to embody Islamic values in everyday behavior. This moral legitimacy strengthened followers' willingness to comply with institutional policies even when formal administrative systems were limited. These findings support previous arguments that leadership effectiveness in Islamic educational institutions is inseparable from spiritual legitimacy, ethical conduct, and communal trust (Karim et al., 2025; Alasmari et al., 2025). Importantly, barakah-oriented management emerged as a distinctive leadership mechanism through which organizational decisions were perceived as morally meaningful rather than merely procedural.

Cross-case comparison also revealed that contextual factors significantly influenced the implementation of Islamic Path-Goal leadership. Institutional size, governance systems, and student diversity shaped how leadership behaviors were interpreted and practiced. Larger pesantren generally implemented more formalized administrative coordination and delegated leadership structures, whereas smaller institutions emphasized relational closeness and direct supervision. Pesantren operating in communities with strong traditional religious authority tended to maintain hierarchical leadership patterns, while institutions connected to broader educational networks adopted more participative governance systems. These findings support previous studies emphasizing that leadership effectiveness is shaped by institutional culture and socio-religious environments (Suyadi et al., 2022; Kustiawan et al., 2023). Nevertheless, potential social desirability bias should also be acknowledged because participants in highly religious and hierarchical environments may hesitate to criticize institutional leaders openly (De Mamani et al., 2026). To minimize this limitation, interview findings were triangulated with observations and institutional documents collected across multiple pesantren.



Overall, the results demonstrate that Islamic Path-Goal leadership in pesantren represents a culturally adaptive and spiritually grounded leadership model integrating directive clarity, supportive mentoring, participative deliberation, and achievement-oriented motivation within an Islamic ethical framework. The findings directly address the study objectives by showing how kyai implement Path-Goal leadership in daily management, identifying mechanisms through which spiritual guidance influences institutional outcomes, and highlighting leadership strategies relevant for faith-based educational institutions. These findings extend Path-Goal Theory by demonstrating that leadership effectiveness in pesantren depends not only on managerial competence but also on spiritual legitimacy, relational engagement, and culturally grounded ethical practices (House, 1996; Karim et al., 2025).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Path-Goal leadership in pesantren operates through the integration of directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership behaviors within Islamic ethical values, spiritual legitimacy, and socio-cultural traditions. Leadership effectiveness in pesantren is not primarily maintained through formal bureaucratic structures but through moral authority, relational trust, and religious guidance exercised by kyai and institutional leaders. This confirms earlier studies arguing that leadership in Islamic boarding schools is strongly associated with ethical conduct, spiritual influence, and communal legitimacy (Karim et al., 2025; Ma'arif et al., 2025). However, this study extends previous research by showing that spiritual legitimacy functions not only as symbolic authority but also as an operational mechanism influencing organizational discipline, institutional cohesion, teacher commitment, and student participation. In the pesantren context, leadership behaviors become effective because followers perceive institutional directives as morally and religiously meaningful rather than merely administrative obligations.

Directive leadership emerged as an important dimension in clarifying educational expectations, institutional discipline, and communal responsibilities. Consistent with Path-Goal Theory, directive leadership reduced ambiguity and provided organizational direction for teachers and students (House, 1996). Nevertheless, directive leadership in pesantren differed from conventional managerial supervision because it was delivered through religious instruction, ethical mentoring, and daily spiritual interaction. Kyai communicated institutional expectations through sermons, informal advice, collective prayers, and direct interpersonal engagement, allowing followers to interpret organizational rules as part of religious commitment. This mechanism strengthened institutional compliance because educational discipline was internalized through moral consciousness rather than external enforcement. Similar patterns have been identified in studies emphasizing the integration of Islamic values into educational leadership (Abas et al., 2025; Rohimin et al., 2022). The findings therefore suggest that directive leadership becomes more sustainable in faith-based institutions when authority is reinforced by ethical credibility and spiritual trust. At the same time, the study identified several tensions related to highly centralized spiritual authority. In some pesantren, teachers and students were hesitant to criticize leadership decisions openly because of strong cultural respect toward kyai authority. Although this strengthened institutional stability and obedience, it occasionally limited critical discussion and slowed organizational innovation. This finding demonstrates that spiritual legitimacy may simultaneously function as a source of



organizational cohesion and a constraint on administrative flexibility. The issue became more visible in larger institutions where educational management required faster coordination and adaptation to external demands. Consequently, the effectiveness of directive leadership depended on leaders' ability to balance moral authority with openness to institutional feedback. This finding supports Kustiawan et al. (2023), who argue that Islamic leadership structures may strengthen solidarity while also limiting dissent within highly hierarchical religious organizations.

Supportive leadership emerged as one of the strongest factors influencing teacher loyalty, student engagement, and institutional belonging. Leaders in the pesantren studied were not only viewed as administrators but also as spiritual mentors and parental figures who provided emotional support, counseling, and ethical guidance. Teachers and students frequently emphasized that close interpersonal relationships with kyai increased their motivation to participate actively in educational and religious activities. This finding reinforces broader leadership research suggesting that ethical and spiritually grounded leadership contributes to organizational commitment and positive workplace behavior (Andargie et al., 2026; Saleem et al., 2026). However, the present study demonstrates that supportive leadership in pesantren is deeply embedded within Islamic mentoring traditions, where emotional care is inseparable from spiritual development and moral supervision. The mechanism connecting supportive leadership with organizational outcomes was also clearly visible across cases. Pesantren characterized by intensive mentoring practices demonstrated stronger teacher retention, more stable student participation, and higher involvement in communal activities. Emotional support created relational trust that encouraged followers to internalize institutional values voluntarily rather than merely comply with formal regulations. This finding aligns with Alasmari et al. (2025), who emphasize that Islamic servant leadership strengthens empowerment and collective commitment through relational interaction and knowledge sharing. Nevertheless, the study also identified practical limitations of highly relational leadership systems. In larger pesantren with extensive educational networks, leaders often struggled to maintain intensive personal mentoring while simultaneously managing administrative responsibilities. Excessive dependence on relational interaction occasionally slowed decision-making processes and created managerial inefficiencies. Therefore, supportive leadership proved most effective when combined with delegated authority and structured organizational coordination.

Participative leadership also played a significant role in strengthening institutional legitimacy and collective responsibility. Consultation through musyawarah enabled teachers, senior students, and community representatives to contribute to educational planning, conflict resolution, and institutional decision-making. This participative process increased organizational commitment because institutional members perceived decisions as collectively negotiated rather than unilaterally imposed. In line with Path-Goal Theory, participative leadership reduced resistance and increased ownership of organizational goals (House, 1996; Maharani et al., 2023). Within pesantren, however, musyawarah was not merely a managerial technique but also a religiously valued practice emphasizing communal harmony and shared moral responsibility. The findings therefore demonstrate that participative leadership in pesantren operates simultaneously as an organizational mechanism and a socio-religious tradition.



Despite its benefits, participative leadership also presented operational challenges. In several institutions, extended consultation processes delayed policy implementation because leaders attempted to preserve consensus among multiple stakeholders before making final decisions. This indicates that participative leadership, although effective for strengthening trust and legitimacy, may reduce organizational responsiveness in urgent administrative situations. The effectiveness of participative leadership was therefore influenced by institutional size, decision urgency, and governance complexity. Smaller pesantren were generally more capable of maintaining flexible consultation processes because communication networks were less bureaucratic. In contrast, larger institutions required clearer procedural coordination to prevent delays in organizational implementation. These findings highlight that leadership effectiveness in pesantren cannot be separated from contextual organizational conditions. Achievement-oriented leadership was strongly associated with efforts to promote educational excellence, religious discipline, and moral development. Leaders encouraged students and teachers to pursue high standards through academic competitions, delegated responsibilities, public recognition, and symbolic rewards. Importantly, achievement within pesantren was interpreted holistically, encompassing both academic performance and ethical character formation. Recognition from kyai carried spiritual and symbolic value, making non-material rewards highly influential in motivating institutional members. This finding extends conventional understandings of achievement-oriented leadership by demonstrating that motivation in pesantren is shaped not only by performance expectations but also by religious meaning and moral aspiration.

Similar observations regarding Islamic character formation have been discussed by Wijaya et al. (2026). The study therefore suggests that achievement-oriented leadership becomes more effective in faith-based institutions when educational success is linked to spiritual purpose and communal values. The findings additionally reveal that leadership dimensions in pesantren function interdependently rather than independently. Achievement-oriented practices were most effective when combined with supportive mentoring and participative communication. Institutions emphasizing high achievement while maintaining relational support and collective consultation demonstrated stronger organizational cohesion and more sustainable educational outcomes. Conversely, achievement-oriented practices implemented without emotional engagement occasionally generated pressure among teachers and students. Similarly, directive leadership became more accepted when leaders were perceived as supportive and ethically consistent. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of Islamic Path-Goal leadership depends on leaders' ability to balance multiple leadership behaviors simultaneously within culturally embedded institutional environments.

Cross-regional comparison between pesantren in West Java and Central Java further illustrates the contextual nature of leadership implementation. Pesantren in West Java generally emphasized relational leadership characterized by close mentoring, informal interaction, and intensive emotional engagement between kyai and followers. This approach strengthened interpersonal trust and intrinsic motivation among students and teachers. Conversely, several pesantren in Central Java demonstrated more structured administrative coordination while still maintaining spiritual guidance in institutional management. Delegation of authority, systematic planning, and formal coordination mechanisms were more visible in these institutions, particularly in larger educational organizations. Importantly, neither regional model can be



considered universally superior. Relational leadership approaches were particularly effective in strengthening emotional attachment and loyalty in smaller pesantren communities, whereas structured administrative systems proved more effective in coordinating larger educational networks. These findings support De Mamani et al. (2026), who argue that leadership effectiveness in Muslim institutional settings is culturally constructed and contextually adaptive.

Several methodological limitations should also be acknowledged. Because pesantren are highly respectful and hierarchical environments, participants may have been reluctant to criticize institutional leaders openly, creating potential social desirability bias in interviews and observations. Although the study attempted to minimize this limitation through triangulation across interviews, observations, and institutional documents, complete elimination of bias cannot be guaranteed. In addition, the qualitative multiple-case design provided rich contextual understanding but limits broad generalization beyond the pesantren included in this study. The findings should therefore be interpreted as contextually grounded rather than universally representative of all Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. Nonetheless, this study contributes theoretically by extending Path-Goal Theory into Islamic educational settings where spiritual legitimacy, ethical authority, and relational trust strongly shape leadership effectiveness. Practically, the findings suggest that faith-based educational institutions may benefit from integrating ethical mentoring, participative communication, and culturally grounded leadership practices into institutional management systems while remaining attentive to organizational complexity and contextual diversity.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the implementation of Islamic-based Path-Goal leadership in pesantren in West Java and Central Java, focusing on how kyai and institutional leaders integrate directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership behaviors within spiritual and cultural frameworks. The findings demonstrate that leadership effectiveness in pesantren is strongly shaped by the interaction between organizational management, religious legitimacy, and relational engagement. Directive leadership was reflected in the clarification of educational and moral expectations, while supportive leadership emphasized mentoring, emotional care, and spiritual guidance for students and staff. Participative leadership was implemented through musyawarah and collective deliberation involving teachers, senior students, and community stakeholders, whereas achievement-oriented leadership encouraged academic excellence, discipline, and religious commitment through recognition and role modeling. These leadership dimensions collectively contributed to institutional resilience, teacher commitment, student engagement, and community trust. The study confirms that Path-Goal leadership in pesantren is not merely administrative but culturally and spiritually embedded, where leadership practices are closely connected to Islamic ethical values, communal responsibility, and the preservation of pesantren traditions.

The study also highlights that the implementation of Path-Goal leadership varies according to institutional and regional contexts. Pesantren in West Java generally emphasized relational closeness and informal mentoring between kyai, teachers, and santri, while several pesantren in Central Java demonstrated more structured administrative coordination combined with



strong spiritual supervision. These findings indicate that leadership effectiveness is influenced by institutional size, organizational history, local culture, and community expectations. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of Path-Goal leadership theory by demonstrating that spiritual legitimacy and ethical authority function as important mediating factors in leadership processes within Islamic educational institutions. Practically, the findings suggest that pesantren leaders should balance spiritual authority with adaptive and participative management strategies to maintain institutional sustainability while responding to contemporary educational challenges. Some leadership practices identified in this study, particularly relational leadership, ethical guidance, and participative governance, may also provide relevant insights for other faith-based educational institutions, although aspects closely tied to kyai authority and pesantren culture remain context-specific.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The research was conducted using a qualitative multiple-case study design involving a limited number of pesantren in West Java and Central Java, meaning that the findings are exploratory and cannot be generalized to all pesantren contexts in Indonesia. In addition, the study relied heavily on interviews, observations, and participant perceptions, which may contain elements of social desirability bias within highly respectful religious environments. The absence of quantitative indicators and longitudinal observation also limits the ability to measure the long-term effects of leadership practices on institutional outcomes. Future studies are therefore recommended to employ mixed-method approaches, involve broader geographical samples, and incorporate measurable indicators such as student achievement, retention rates, organizational performance, and community participation. Comparative research between pesantren and other educational institutions may further clarify which dimensions of Islamic Path-Goal leadership are transferable and which remain uniquely rooted in pesantren traditions and Islamic socio-cultural values.

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