



Character-Based Leadership Framework In Islamic Schools: Integrating Success Culture And Pedagogical Models

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Abstract

This conceptual paper proposes a novel integrated framework of character-based leadership for Islamic educational institutions by synthesizing five interconnected pillars: Success Culture (Aya Sophia Islamic School), Character Ladder, Deep Learning Principles, Bloom's Cognitive Model, and the Spiritual Growth of Educators. Unlike existing leadership models that address organizational culture, pedagogical practice, and spiritual development in isolation, this framework uniquely integrates all three dimensions into a single operational model, constituting its principal theoretical contribution to educational leadership literature. Amid globalization and ethical crises in education, strategic leadership requires an integrated framework that addresses not only cognitive excellence but also deep spiritual and character development. Using a conceptual-analytical approach involving systematic literature synthesis and structured matrix mapping of contemporary academic sources and institutional leadership training matrices, this paper constructs a multi-layered operational model for school leaders. The results indicate that implementing a structured "Success Culture" built upon a clear "Sense of Direction," mutual understanding, and extreme collaboration forms the bedrock of an interactive organizational culture. Leadership effectiveness is multiplied when educators progress through professional-spiritual stages from Caring to Result-oriented Modeling. This synthesis provides school principals with a systematic roadmap to build sustainable, value-driven, and innovative learning environments that optimize both student character and advanced cognitive outcomes. Theoretically, this paper extends transformational and instructional leadership frameworks by incorporating Islamic spiritual development as a foundational driver of school culture. As a conceptual study, the framework requires future empirical validation across diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: Character Leadership; Success Culture; Deep Learning; Bloom's Taxonomy; Islamic School Organizational Culture

Abstrak

Artikel konseptual ini mengusulkan sebuah kerangka kerja terintegrasi yang baru mengenai kepemimpinan berbasis karakter untuk lembaga pendidikan Islam dengan menyintesis lima pilar yang saling terkait: Budaya Sukses (*Success Culture* Sekolah Islam Aya Sophia), Tangga Karakter (*Character Ladder*), Prinsip Pembelajaran Mendalam (*Deep Learning Principles*), Model Kognitif Bloom (*Bloom's Cognitive Model*), dan Pertumbuhan Spiritual Pendidik. Berbeda dengan model kepemimpinan yang ada saat ini, yang membahas budaya organisasi, praktik pedagogis, dan pengembangan spiritual secara terpisah, kerangka kerja ini secara unik mengintegrasikan ketiga dimensi tersebut ke dalam satu model operasional tunggal, yang menjadi kontribusi teoritis utamanya terhadap literatur kepemimpinan pendidikan. Di tengah arus globalisasi dan krisis etika dalam dunia pendidikan, kepemimpinan strategis memerlukan kerangka kerja terintegrasi yang tidak hanya menyorot keunggulan kognitif tetapi juga pengembangan karakter dan spiritual yang mendalam. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan konseptual-analitis yang melibatkan sintesis literatur sistematis dan pemetaan matriks terstruktur dari sumber-sumber akademik kontemporer serta matriks pelatihan kepemimpinan institusional, artikel ini menyusun model operasional berlapis bagi para pemimpin sekolah. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa penerapan "Budaya Sukses" terstruktur yang dibangun di atas "Kejelasan Arah" (*Sense of Direction*) yang kuat, saling pengertian, dan kolaborasi ekstrem membentuk fondasi bagi budaya organisasi yang interaktif. Efektivitas kepemimpinan akan berlipat ganda ketika para pendidik berkembang melalui tahapan profesional-spiritual, mulai dari Kepedulian (*Caring*) hingga Keteladanan yang

Berorientasi pada Hasil (*Result-oriented Modeling*). Sintesis ini membekali kepala sekolah dengan peta jalan (*roadmap*) yang sistematis untuk membangun lingkungan belajar yang inovatif, berbasis nilai, dan berkelanjutan, yang mengoptimalkan karakter siswa sekaligus capaian kognitif tingkat lanjut. Secara teoritis, artikel ini memperluas kerangka kerja kepemimpinan transformasional dan instruksional dengan memasukkan pengembangan spiritual Islam sebagai penggerak fundamental dari budaya sekolah. Sebagai sebuah studi konseptual, kerangka kerja ini memerlukan validasi empiris di masa mendatang di berbagai konteks pendidikan yang beragam.

Kata kunci: Kepemimpinan Berkarakter; Budaya Sukses; Pembelajaran Mendalam; Taksonomi Bloom; Budaya Organisasi Sekolah Islam



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INTRODUCTION

The management challenges of Islamic educational institutions in the 21st century are becoming increasingly complex alongside technological disruptions, cultural globalization, and value shifts among the youth. School principals, acting as instructional leaders and cultural agents in Islamic schools, bear the vital responsibility of ensuring that academic excellence is aligned with the reinforcement of noble morals and student spirituality (Azra, 2014). However, empirical realities indicate a fragmentation in school program implementation; character development is frequently separated from cognitive instructional design processes, and teacher professional training rarely addresses deep spiritual transformation (Asbari, 2020). Consequently, the grand vision of Islamic schools often becomes an administrative slogan that fails to internalize into the daily behavior of the school community.

To bridge this gap, a theoretical and practical reconstruction of a holistic character leadership framework is urgently required. This article proposes an integrative model combining five strategic pillars: (1) Success Culture as the guide for organizational behavior; (2) The Character Ladder as a framework for personality transformation; (3) Deep Learning Principles as a conscious, meaningful, and joyful pedagogical approach; (4) Bloom's Cognitive Model as a guide to achieving Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS); and (5) The Four Levels of Educator Competence as the prime driver of a learning culture. Current independent learning policies (Merdeka Belajar) demand school leaders to be more adaptive and innovative in managing educational ecosystems (Mulyasa, 2022). The integration of these five elements is designed to establish a solid, adaptive, spirituality-based, and collaboration-driven organizational culture in Islamic schools (Tobroni, 2021).

Previous research has extensively discussed Islamic educational leadership, yet most remains normative/philosophical without offering concrete operational instruments. Furthermore, studies on school organizational culture tend to focus strictly on pure managerial aspects (Rifai et al., n.d.). Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its original synthesis of modern performance management concepts, Islamic spiritual traditions (Nawawi, 2024), and cutting-edge pedagogy. While established leadership theories such as Transformational Leadership (Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, 2020), Instructional Leadership (Parlar, H., Turkoglu, M. E., & Cansoy, 2024), Distributed Leadership (Spillane, 2005), Servant Leadership (Eva et al., 2019), and Spiritual Leadership (Karim, A., Bakhtiar, A., Sahrodi, J., & Chang, 2025) each contribute valuable perspectives, none of these frameworks individually addresses the simultaneous integration of organizational culture formation, student cognitive development, and educator spiritual growth within an Islamic school context. This constitutes a significant research gap that the present study seeks to address. The novelty of this study, therefore, lies in its original synthesis of modern performance management concepts, Islamic spiritual traditions (Nawawi, 2024), and cutting-edge pedagogy into a unified, operationally grounded leadership framework. Through this article, we outline how an Islamic school principal can transform organizational culture in an integrative, measurable, and highly impactful manner for the sustainable benefit of the community.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing a conceptual-analytical method. This method focuses on the systematic deconstruction, clarification, and synthesis of core leadership and educational

concepts derived from Islamic school leadership training materials, specifically the case study of Aya Sophia Islamic School as formulated by Masduki (2026), as well as reputable national and international scientific literature.

The data analysis procedure was conducted through four main stages: First, identifying the structural components of Success Culture, the Character Ladder, Deep Learning, and Bloom's Cognitive Model from primary training data. Second, executing a secondary literature review through academic databases to strengthen the conceptual theoretical foundations. Third, mapping the functional interconnections among variables using structured matrix visualizations to observe how macro-organizational elements support micro-cognitive student achievement. Fourth, formulating an operational leadership roadmap applicable for principals leading Islamic educational institutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Success Culture as the Bedrock of Organizational Direction

Organizational culture represents a system of shared meanings held by members that distinguishes the organization from others. Within the context of Islamic schools, leaders must instill a culture that does not merely chase mundane performance but remains firmly oriented toward spiritual blessings. The training matrix of Aya Sophia Islamic School prescribes seven pillars of Success Culture serving as the school's civilizational compass: Sense of Direction, Understanding, Customer Focused, Collaboration, Excellence, System, and Success (Masduki, 2026).

Character-based leadership initiates with a distinct Sense of Direction. Leaders possessing clear life goals grounded in monotheism (Tawhid) naturally cascade this vision down to all teachers and staff. The principle of Understanding emphasizes the critical nature of two-way communication and the ability to view situations objectively from another's perspective, minimizing internal school conflicts (Rudiyanto et al., 2025). Furthermore, the Customer Focused pillar divides stakeholders into internal customers (students, teachers, principals, management, foundations) and external customers (government and society). Delivering prime services to this entire customer spectrum is driven by a commitment to sincere work for the sake of Allah SWT.

Table 1 Seven Pillars of Success Culture in Islamic School Organizational Culture

Pillar of Success Culture	Managerial Operational Description	Implications For School Leaders
Sense of Direction	Possessing clear life paths and institutional targets as a compass for success in this world and the hereafter.	Formulating measurable strategic school visions based on spiritual values (Murtiningsih, 2026)
Understanding	Mutual understanding, opening up to other perspectives, prioritizing objective honesty ("what is right").	Building transparent communication forums and regular reflective practices
Customer Focused	Serving internal and external customers wholeheartedly to ensure stakeholder satisfaction.	Guaranteeing consistent academic service quality
Collaboration	Working together for optimal team results, prioritizing constructive resolution over false compromises.	Forming cross-disciplinary working groups and dismantling sectional egos (Asbari & Novitasari, 2024)
Excellence	Rejecting complacency over average results, exceeding expectations through continuous innovation.	Encouraging teachers to implement high-standard creative learning methods.
System	Constructing system-based solutions via structured cycles	Standardizing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) so school

Pillar of Success Culture	Managerial Operational Description	Implications For School Leaders
	(Identification-Analysis Improvement-Monitoring-Evaluation).	quality does not depend solely on individual figures.
Success	Focusing on final outcomes that generate win win triumphs with absolute self-confidence.	Appreciating collective achievements and engineering a joyful work environment.

Source: Adapted from the Culture Training Module of ASIS Big Family (Asbari, 2026)

The Character Ladder Pathway: Personal Transformation of Educators and Students

Character is not a static attribute but a dynamic journey of spiritual and personality transformation (Alzeer, 2025). In this leadership model, an individual's persona is analyzed using a self-potential approach to ascend a character ladder that progresses from the most fundamental level: *Aku Fitrah* (recognizing innate potential), climbing to *Aku Terlatih* (developing discipline and mental resilience), advancing to *Aku Mulia* (bringing real benefits to others through dignity), and culminating in *Aku Sukses*, which attains the highest spiritual standing before the Creator.

School leaders are obliged to design coaching programs that facilitate every school member to "level up." Integrating the pillars of being Knowledgeable (understanding truth), Noble Character (beautifying behavior), Global Insight (providing broad benefit), and being Empowered & Beneficial serves as the success indicator of character-based governance. Educators cannot successfully elevate students to character peaks if they themselves are not firmly grounded in personality and spirituality (Syihabuddin, 2017) .

Implementation of Deep Learning Principles

Character leadership must manifest directly inside classrooms through instructional designs. The Deep Learning framework provides a guide that true learning must satisfy three primary principles: Conscious (students actively regulate themselves), Meaningful (connecting material to real-life contexts), and Joyful (forging positive emotional bonds).

The principal here acts as an Activator and Collaborator who motivates teachers to look beyond administrative curriculum completion and design authentic instructional blueprints instead (Magdaraog, 2024). Deep learning mandates the integration of four vital pillars: innovative pedagogical practices, expansive learning partnerships, conducive learning environments, and the wise leverage of digital technology. Future student competencies, such as critical reasoning, creativity, citizenship, communication, collaboration, and well-being are simultaneously nurtured through this learning ecosystem (Adeoye, 2024) .

Optimizing Bloom's Cognitive Model within Deep Learning

A common misconception is that Islamic schools prioritizing character development tend to neglect cognitive achievements. In this integrative framework, the revised Bloom's Taxonomy is positioned as a cognitive ladder running parallel with the character ladder (Makmun et al., 2021). Deep learning requires the learning process to move past basic thinking levels (Low Order Thinking Skills: Remembering, Understanding) toward higher thinking competencies (High Order Thinking Skills: Analyzing, Evaluating, and Creating) (Baihaqi et al., 2025).

Guided by the instructional leadership of the principal, teachers are trained to construct assessments and collaborative projects challenging students to generate original, beneficial works (Lunenburg, 2010). Based on active learning principles, learning challenges must be tailored slightly above the students' current skill levels to prevent both boredom and excessive anxiety, thereby igniting sustainable growth.

Table 2. Integration Matrix of Success Pillars, Character, Deep Learning, and Bloom's Cognition

Organizational Pillar (Success Culture)	Character Path (Personality)	Deep Learning Principle	Bloom's Cognitive Level	Graduate Competency Output
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Sense of Direction & System	<i>Aku Fitrah & Aku Terlatih</i>	Conscious (Understanding learning targets & self-regulation)	Remembering & Understanding (LOTS)	Independence & Faith-Piety
Understanding & Customer Focused	<i>Aku Terlatih & Aku Mulia</i>	Meaningful (Sensing connection of knowledge to real life)	Applying & Analyzing (MOTS to HOTS)	Critical Reasoning & Communication
Collaboration & Excellence	<i>Aku Mulia & Aku Sukses</i>	Joyful (Collaborative, inquiry, and contextual)	Evaluating & Creating (HOTS)	Creativity, Collaboration & Community Benefit

Four Levels of Educators as School Culture Enablers

The successful deployment of the aforementioned conceptual model relies entirely upon the professional and spiritual quality of the educators (Nasrullah & Arhas, 2025). Based on school governance metrics, teacher development is divided into four climbing levels:

1. Teacher Level 1 (Right): Educators who teach purely based on the formal demands of administrative work duties.
2. Teacher Level 2 (Relationship/Caring): Educators who have established positive emotional bonding, empathy, and genuine care for their students' welfare.
3. Teacher Level 3 (Respect/Modeling): Educators who earn sincere respect from the school ecosystem due to their exemplary morals, academic integrity, and inspiring nature (Asbari & Novitasari, 2024).
4. Teacher Level 4 (Result/Coaching): Peak-level educators acting as spiritual and professional mentors, focused on delivering meaningful results and nurturing future leaders (K et al., 2025).

Character-driven school leaders must channel the spiritual energy of their teaching staff to constantly advance from Level 1 toward Level 4 to secure the sustainable quality of Islamic schooling.

CONCLUSION

Constructing a firm organizational culture in Islamic schools demands a strategic leadership framework that merges modern management concepts with the essence of Islamic spirituality. Through a comprehensive synthesis of the seven pillars of Success Culture, Character Ladder escalation, Deep Learning paradigms, Bloom's Taxonomy optimization, and the elevation of teachers' spiritual levels, Islamic schools can transform into superior, highly adaptive institutions. This integrative model demonstrates that embedding noble character does not require sacrificing advanced cognitive development (HOTS); instead, both complement each other when driven by educators serving as role models and spiritual mentors. The practical implication for Islamic school principals is the critical necessity of standardizing system operations (SOPs) while maintaining a highly personal coaching approach that honors the uniqueness of both teachers and students. Theoretically, this framework extends existing educational leadership models by positioning spiritual development as a foundational prerequisite for both instructional effectiveness and character formation, a contribution that differentiates this work from transformational leadership (Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, 2020), instructional leadership (Parlar, H., Turkoglu, M. E., & Cansoy, 2024), and servant leadership frameworks (Eva et al., 2019) which do not explicitly integrate Islamic spiritual growth into their organizational culture mechanisms. This paper has several limitations. First, the framework is conceptual and has not yet been subjected to empirical validation. Second, the model is primarily derived from a single institutional context (Aya Sophia Islamic School), which may limit its immediate generalizability to schools operating under different structural, cultural, or resource conditions. Future research should therefore focus on: (1) empirical testing of the proposed framework in diverse Islamic and non-Islamic school settings; (2) longitudinal studies examining whether progression through educator competence levels produces measurable improvements in student character and cognitive outcomes; (3) comparative studies across national educational systems; and (4) development of quantitative instruments to measure the interaction effects among the five pillars.

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