

Ethical Leadership Strategies of School Principals: Fostering a Harmonious and Productive Teacher Work Environment

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ABSTRACT

A harmonious work environment is essential in educational institutions, and ethical leadership plays a crucial role in fostering such an atmosphere. This study analyzes the ethical leadership strategies employed by a principal to promote a positive work environment in an Islamic school in East Lombok. This qualitative study used a case study approach. Data were collected through interviews with the principal and teachers, as well as documentation analysis. The data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative methods to identify key ethical leadership strategies. The findings reveal three primary ethical leadership strategies implemented by the principal: (1) serving as a role model through ethical behavior, (2) effectively managing ethical conflicts within the school, and (3) fostering the development of positive character among staff and students. These strategies contributed to creating a supportive and ethical work environment. The study highlights the importance of ethical leadership in educational settings, emphasizing the principal's role in maintaining professional integrity and encouraging moral behavior. However, the study is limited in scope, as it does not explore other potential factors influencing a positive work environment. Ethical leadership is essential in shaping a positive school culture. Future research should expand to public schools and broader geographical areas to gain a more comprehensive understanding of ethical leadership practices in different educational contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The work environment of teachers plays a crucial role in determining their teaching effectiveness and overall well-being (Muhtadi, Murthada, & Bunyamin, 2023). A supportive work environment, both physically and emotionally, can significantly enhance motivation, productivity, and the quality of teacher-student interactions (Pianda, 2018). However, many teachers face challenges such as heavy workloads, inadequate facilities, and limited administrative support, which can negatively impact their performance and job satisfaction. These issues raise concerns about how suboptimal work conditions

can influence both the quality of education and the mental health of educators (Muspawi & Nadila Putri, 2023).

A positive and conducive work environment is essential for teachers to perform at their best (Cui, 2022). Key factors contributing to a harmonious work environment include mutual respect, fostering a culture of greeting, and ethical conduct. Furthermore, school leaders who exemplify strong moral leadership positively influence the work culture (Uy et al., 2024). In this regard, ethical leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping a productive and harmonious environment.

Ethical leadership refers to a leadership approach that emphasizes moral values in decision-making and interactions with organizational members (Kurniawaty & Faiz, 2022). Such leaders prioritize not only the achievement of goals but also the ethical means by which they are achieved, ensuring that values like honesty, fairness, transparency, and respect are upheld (Rofiq, 2019; Cahyaningrum, Sirri, & Putris, 2023). Ethical leaders set an example for others, creating a fair and inclusive workplace that promotes ethical behavior across the organization (Rahmat & Seswandi, 2023). This type of leadership fosters trust and loyalty, strengthening organizational performance (Banks, Fischer, Gooty, & Stock, 2021).

In the context of Islamic education in Indonesia, ethical leadership plays a key role in shaping students' morals, particularly in religious institutions such as Islamic boarding schools and madrasahs. School leaders are expected to exemplify Islamic values, including justice and responsibility, which contribute to a conducive learning environment. Previous studies have shown that leadership based on ethical principles improves the quality of education (Mukhlisin, 2021), while others emphasize the importance of value-based leadership in managing religious schools (Muslim, Aziz, Nurahmayanti, & Hidayat, 2024).

Principals are central to creating a supportive work environment for teachers. By demonstrating ethical leadership and fostering effective communication, principals contribute to a culture of collaboration and mutual support (Khana, Zainudin, Fanani, & Mirochina, 2023). Effective leaders are able to manage conflicts, encourage innovation, and balance administrative demands with the welfare of teachers, ultimately enhancing their motivation and performance (Ritonga, 2020).

In Islamic schools, ethical leadership is particularly crucial. Principals who prioritize ethical conduct are highly respected both within the school environment and in the broader community (Na'im, 2022). These leaders are instrumental in addressing challenges within the school and promoting teacher development through specific programs (Gok et al., 2017). Ethical leadership serves as a foundation for the growth and improvement of both the school and its surrounding environment.

Given the central role of principals in school management and teacher welfare, this study is essential. It seeks to explore how principals, through ethical leadership, can address the challenges related to the teacher work environment and contribute to creating a productive (Devi, Sesmiarni, Syafitri, Simbolon, & Iswantir, 2023), harmonious climate (Mulyasa, 2022). By focusing on the strategies that principals employ, this research will provide valuable insights into how ethical leadership can positively influence teacher satisfaction and performance (Ariyanti & Prasetyo, 2021).

Previous studies have established a strong link between ethical leadership and teachers' job satisfaction, highlighting its influence on their performance and daily responsibilities (Syarifuddin, 2020; Alwis & Hendriani, 2024). Building on this foundation, this study specifically examines the principal's ethical leadership strategies in fostering a harmonious work environment for teachers. By exploring how these strategies contribute to job satisfaction and a positive school climate, this research aims to provide deeper insights into the role of ethical leadership in shaping an effective and supportive educational setting (Freire & Bettencourt, 2020). Understanding these strategies can provide valuable insights for school leaders in creating a more ethical, supportive, and productive educational environment.

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore, describe, and understand how different individuals perceive the role of ethical leadership in creating a harmonious teacher work environment. Qualitative research, as described by Lichtman (2023), allows researchers to investigate the social and human aspects of the phenomenon by collecting and interpreting data. In this study, the researcher serves as the primary instrument, gathering data and analyzing it to gain deeper insights (Hatch, 2023).

The research design employed is a case study, focusing on how a principal's ethical leadership strategies contribute to creating a positive and supportive work environment for teachers. A flow diagram illustrating the research process is presented in Figure 1, outlining the key steps of the study.

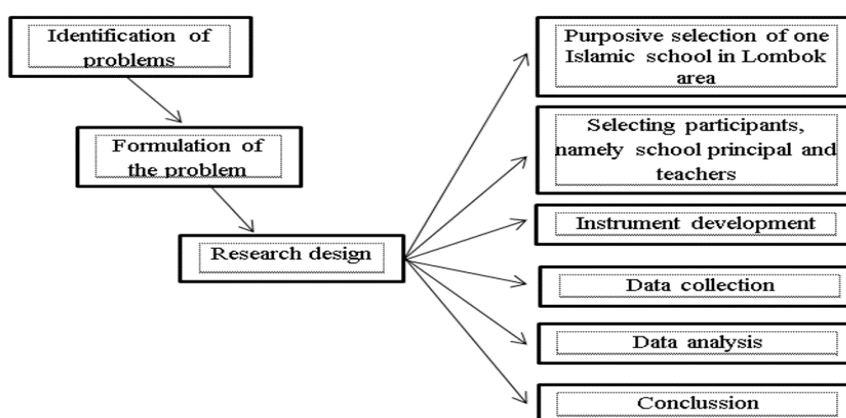


Figure 1. Research steps

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for this study (Llewellyn, Sullivan, & Minichiello, 2004). This technique allows the researcher to choose participants who meet specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Kalu, 2019). Four teachers and one principal from an Islamic school in East Lombok participated in this study. The criteria for selecting participants included having at least three years of experience in their current role and a minimum of five years of overall teaching experience. Demographic factors such as age, gender, educational background, and years of service at the school were considered to ensure diverse perspectives. The participants were aged between 30 and 50, with three to seven years of experience at the school.

The selection of both the principal and teachers was intentional, aiming to capture both leadership strategies and the teachers' experiences. This diversity in roles and experiences provided a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Data was collected through documentation studies and semi-structured interviews. According to Nasser, (2020), data collection involves systematic procedures to gather relevant information. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both teachers and the principal. Each interview, lasting between 10 to 15 minutes, was digitally recorded and conducted over one month. The interviews followed an interview guide based on transformational leadership literature to ensure consistency across the sessions. The data was transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes and patterns.

Data analysis followed the interactive analysis approach by Miles and Huberman, which includes three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Roscoe, 2022). In the first stage, data reduction, irrelevant or redundant information was removed from the interview transcripts. This helped focus on the most significant information related to the principal's ethical leadership and its impact on the teacher work environment. In the second stage, data presentation, the reduced data was organized and displayed in a structured format. Key themes and patterns were identified, with

emphasis on the principal's ethical leadership strategies and the teachers' perceptions of the work environment.

Finally, in the conclusion-drawing stage, the presented data was analyzed to identify the main insights and answers to the research questions. The conclusions were based on the analysis of the data, highlighting the role of ethical leadership in improving the teacher work environment.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the interview results, the study will present the results of the interviews that have been conducted. The results can be seen in the following table 1:

Table 1. Interview results

Question	Interview results
What strategies do you use to emphasize to teachers that a good working environment is the hope of all teachers or employees?	<p>{Principal}"There are several things that I have done, considering that some of these things may be very important because the work environment will increase productivity at school. First, I do my best for the school in my way, such as being an example in religious activities and if in making decisions I always ask for opinions and transparency."</p> <p>{Principal}" The second thing is that I prioritize tolerance and respect such as continuing to try to solve problems in the best possible way, such as an emotional approach to the teacher concerned. I try to give input in a way that is accepted."</p> <p>{Principal}"Third, I encourage teachers to develop their abilities through the existing curriculum, in this way and some of the things I mentioned earlier can be reasons and guidelines for teachers to be comfortable in their work."</p>

Based on the results of the interview and research findings. Researchers can attach the results of the strategies carried out by the principals to foster a harmonious and good work environment. The following will be explained in this picture:

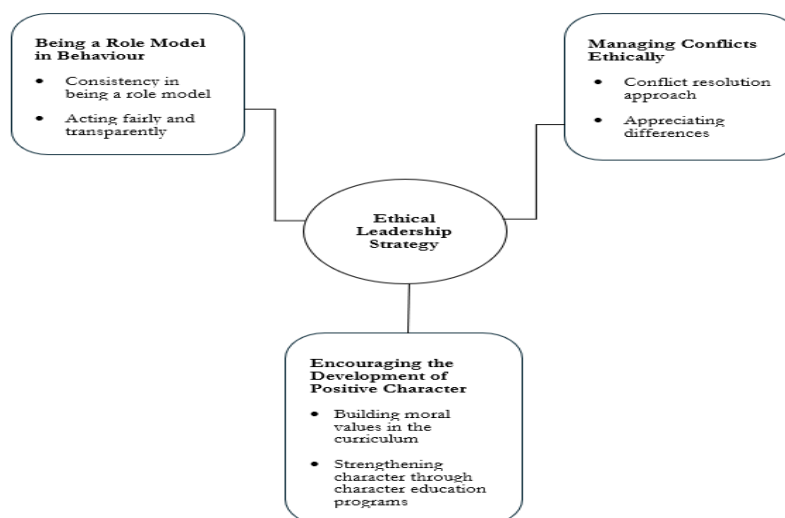


Figure 2. Principal' strategy in ethical leadership

3.1 The school principal serves as a role model in behavior

3.1.1 Leadership through Exemplary Behavior (Role Model)

The principal's leadership plays a crucial role in shaping a positive school culture. By exemplifying discipline, honesty, responsibility, and a strong work ethic, school leaders set the foundation for a professional and supportive environment (Eranil & Özbilen, 2017). As one principal stated:

"I try to do my best for the staff and school community as a form of love and to be able to realize shared hopes, so that I remain focused on continuing to work for the community." (KS/10/24)

This statement reflects the basic principles of ethical leadership that emphasize the importance of integrity and concern for the common good in every action of the leader. According to Banks et al., (2021), ethical leaders must lead by setting a good example, which is clearly visible in the daily practice of the principal. The principal creates an environment that supports the professional growth of teachers and staff, as well as the character development of students (Ikhwan & Rabbani, 2024). A principal who consistently implements these values not only increases the trust and respect of the school community, but also strengthens the commitment of everyone to work together to achieve educational goals (Uy et al., 2024). In addition, the principal's integrity can influence daily behavior, creating a safe, fair, and transparent learning environment, which ultimately contributes to better academic achievement.

Furthermore, the leadership of a principal with integrity can encourage the creation of harmonious relationships between various parties in the school (Anggorowati, Komariah, Permana, Nurdin, & Prihatin, 2021), including parents and the surrounding community. A principal who can facilitate open and transparent communication will create an atmosphere of closer cooperation, so that problems can be resolved more effectively and the participation of the school community in decision-making increases (Bens, 2017). In addition, the professional attitude shown by the principal can motivate teachers to continue to improve their competence, thus having a direct impact on the quality of learning in the classroom (Khan, Bauman, & Javed, 2020). Thus, the role of the principal as a role model is not only limited to the aspect of work ethics, but also plays a strategic role in encouraging innovation and improving the quality of education.

3.1.2 Behave Fairly and Transparently

In decision-making, the principal must demonstrate fairness and transparency, ensuring that decisions are made based on facts and principles of fairness, not because of favouritism or pressure. Fairness and transparency in decision-making are key to building trust and respect among teachers, staff, students, and parents (Crews, 2015). One of the teachers said that

"to make us work objectively is that there is a sense of justice carried out by the principal. This may be simple, but not everyone is able to do it". (UST/11/24)

This statement emphasizes the importance of transparency in leadership as a key factor in creating a climate that supports the active involvement of all members of the school community. The ethical leadership theory proposed by Wong, Wang, Wang, & Tjosvold, (2020) emphasizes that fair and transparent decision-making will strengthen mutual trust and respect among all parties in the school.

A fair principal will ensure that every individual is treated equally and has an equal opportunity to participate in various school activities. By prioritizing openness, the principal also creates an environment where every decision is discussed clearly and the reasons behind the decision are understood by all parties (Smith, 2014). This not only reduces the potential for conflict, but also encourages the active involvement of the entire school community in creating innovative solutions and supporting the achievement of common goals. Transparency in this process helps increase accountability and strengthens an inclusive school culture that is oriented towards fair and equitable achievement (Wells & Walker, 2016).

In addition, fair and transparent decision-making by the principal also plays an important role in building an accountable and responsible organizational climate (Mailool, Kartowagiran, Retnowati, Wening, & Putranta, 2020). When the decision-making process involves participation and consultation from various parties, such as teachers, staff, and parents, the principal not only strengthens emotional attachment but also promotes a sense of shared ownership of the results achieved. This approach encourages a collaborative environment, where every member of the school community feels heard and valued (Davidson & Hughes, 2020). This can increase teacher motivation, productivity, and create a sense of security and comfort for students in learning. Ultimately, participatory and transparent decision-making has a direct impact on improving the quality of school management and achieving better educational goals. (Supriadi, Usman, & Jabar, 2021).

3.2 The principal manages conflict ethically

3.2.1 An Ethical Conflict Resolution Approach

Conflict in schools is inevitable, but principals must be able to manage it in a fair, tactful, and impartial manner. Using mediation and open dialogue can be a good way to resolve problems. An ethical approach to conflict resolution ensures that all parties involved feel heard and treated with respect (Jay & Hilton, 2024).

"The essence of problem solving is to be able to accept it together. So that the existing problems can be solved when we are willing to think that common welfare is better than individual desires alone, and I always emphasize that teachers can provide good examples to students."
(RT/11/24)

Principals should create a safe space for teachers, students, and staff to express their views, so that the conflict resolution process focuses not only on immediate resolution, but also on restoring relationships and preventing similar conflicts in the future (Alan, Gül, & Baykal, 2022). By practising neutral mediation and transparent dialogue, principals can help find win-win solutions that prioritize the common good without compromising the principles of fairness. In addition, an ethical approach to conflict management also plays a role in building a school culture that is open to communication, collaboration, and learning, where differences of opinion are seen as opportunities for growth, not threats (Wong et al., 2020). This can also create an atmosphere that supports the emotional well-being of all parties, contributing to the overall stability and effectiveness of the school environment.

Furthermore, principals who are able to manage conflict ethically will strengthen the sense of trust within the school community (Freire & Bettencourt, 2020). By ensuring that every decision made in the conflict resolution process is based on principles of fairness and openness, principals not only resolve issues that arise but also instill ethical values throughout the school community. This can create a culture that values differences, and promotes mutual respect and empathy among students, teachers, and staff. Conflict resolution that is carried out in a fair manner can also be a direct lesson for students about the importance of effective communication and healthy emotional management (Konak & Erdem, 2015). As a result, the school climate becomes more conducive to learning, with all parties feeling safe, valued, and supported, which ultimately has a positive impact on academic achievement and character development.

3.2.2 Appreciating Differences

Principals need to teach the importance of respecting differences of opinion and background, both among teachers and students. This will help create a more tolerant and harmonious atmosphere in the school.

"The principal appreciates the differences that exist and makes it a nuance in togetherness, so that we as teachers continue to try to see that mutual respect is an important strength in the work environment." (KS/11/24)

Respecting differences also means creating an inclusive environment where every individual, regardless of cultural background, religion, or belief, feels accepted and valued. Principals who are proactive in promoting diversity will encourage teachers and students to develop attitudes of empathy, tolerance, and mutual respect (Rahman & Zaenuri, 2023). By providing space for diverse views and experiences, principals help build a school community rich in new ideas and perspectives, which in turn enriches the learning process. In addition, through activities that support inclusivity and respect for differences, such as group discussions, collaborative projects, and cross-cultural programs, principals can develop students' ability to work together in a diverse environment (Lestari, Saefurridjal, Gustami, & Gumelar, 2023). This is important to prepare them for challenges outside the school environment, as well as to build a peaceful and harmonious school climate, where all parties feel valued and supported to develop optimally.

In addition, respect for differences not only improves interpersonal relationships but also enriches the overall quality of education. Principals who are able to build a culture of respect for diversity encourage the creation of an open mindset among students and teachers, thereby developing creativity, innovation, and critical thinking (Nurhasanah, Hayadi, Yusuf, Silawati, & Kusuma, 2024). Students are taught to think beyond their own boundaries and are able to understand different points of view, which are important in developing global thinking skills. On the other hand, for teachers, an environment that supports differences allows them to adapt teaching approaches that are more inclusive and responsive to diverse learning needs (Crews, 2015).

3.3 The principal encourages the development of positive character

3.3.1 Building Moral Values in the Curriculum

Principals can integrate character education into the curriculum and daily school activities. This helps students learn the importance of integrity, responsibility, and ethics in their lives (Muaddab & Nafisah, 2023).

"To maintain a good working environment, it is necessary to build moral values in the curriculum that is created. I really emphasize morals as the key to achieving goals." (KS/10/24)

By integrating character education into the curriculum, principals ensure that moral values are taught theoretically and applied in everyday practice (Chowdhury, 2018). Through classroom activities, collaborative projects, and practical experiences, students are given the opportunity to internalize and practice values such as integrity, responsibility, and ethics in contexts that are relevant to their lives.

Principals can also encourage parent and community involvement in supporting these efforts, by providing training and resources to discuss moral values at home. With this approach, character education becomes an integral part of the student learning experience, creating a consistent school atmosphere in teaching and applying moral principles (Sukataman, Soodiqoh, & Falaakhuddin, 2023). As a result, students not only understand the theory behind the values but also develop habits and behaviors that reflect good ethics (Singh, 2019), so that they are prepared to face life's challenges with integrity and responsibility.

Integrating moral values into the curriculum also helps create consistency between the teachings in the school and the expectations of the community (Burhanudin, 2020). Principals can work with teachers to design activities and assessments that facilitate the application of these values in a variety of situations, such as through simulations, case studies, or participation in community service projects. By engaging students in practical experiences that challenge them to apply moral principles to everyday decisions, they learn how to confront ethical dilemmas in constructive ways (Sagnak, 2017).

3.3.2 Conducting a Character Strengthening Program

Through programs such as counselling, student leadership training, and social activities, principals can reinforce ethical values within the school community (Suhifatullah, Thoyib, & Dahlan, 2020).

"Counselling is needed as a form of program for how the desired environment can be realized and continue to be committed together." (AR/10/24)

Character-building programs play a crucial role in helping students develop social and emotional skills while fostering the application of ethical values in their daily lives (Baharun, 2017). Counseling services support students in overcoming personal and academic challenges, building self-confidence, and instilling a sense of responsibility. Student leadership training offers hands-on experiences in ethical decision-making and integrity-based leadership, contributing to the development of strong character. Additionally, social activities such as community service projects and teamwork enable students to practice moral values in real-world settings, positively impacting their communities. According to Truong & Hallinger (2017), principals who implement these programs contribute to a school culture that nurtures and motivates students to become responsible and ethical individuals. By facilitating meaningful experiences that reinforce these values, school leaders help shape students who are not only academically successful but also possess strong personal and ethical foundations (Wulandari & Kristiawan, 2017).

For character-building programs to be effective, continuous evaluation and feedback are essential to ensure that character development goals are being met optimally. Principals can collaborate with teachers, counselors, and parents to monitor student progress and assess the program's impact on their character growth (Banks et al., 2021). Utilizing assessments based on observations, participant feedback, and self-evaluations allows for necessary adjustments, making the program more relevant and effective. By involving multiple stakeholders in the evaluation process, principals not only enhance existing programs but also ensure that approaches evolve to meet students' changing needs and challenges (Farida & Kamalia, 2020). This continuous improvement process strengthens character-building efforts, leading to a more profound and lasting impact on students' ethical values and personal development.

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights three key ethical leadership strategies employed by the principal: serving as a role model in behavior, managing ethical conflicts, and fostering the development of positive character. These strategies play a crucial role in creating a harmonious work environment, emphasizing the significance of ethical leadership in schools. However, this study has certain limitations, as it does not explore other potential factors that may contribute to a positive work environment. Additionally, the research is confined to a single Islamic school, limiting its generalizability. Future research should expand its scope to include public schools and a broader geographical area to gain a more comprehensive understanding of ethical leadership practices across diverse educational settings.

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