



# Servant Leadership in Religious Boarding School Leaders: A Case Study

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## Highlights

- The implementation of servant leadership often correlates with enhanced team performance and significantly affects company culture. Research in the area of education is currently in limited availability.
- The study provides an overview of the implementation of servant leadership in religious-based boarding schools.

## Abstract

The role of a boarding school leader is complex as they serve as managers, educators, administrators, entrepreneurs, as well as substitute parental figures. The servant leader is one of the leadership styles that is considered appropriate in fulfilling the complexity of the role. This study aims to describe the uniqueness of applying servant leadership among religious-based boarding school leaders. An explanatory single-case study design was chosen, with data collected through directed group discussions and in-depth interviews. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis stages proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). The research participants consisted of three individuals, including one principal, one vice principal, and one dormitory head, all of whom had more than three years of experience and were local residents (Mean Age = 32, Female = 0.33%, Male = 0.67%). Thematic analysis yielded the following results regarding the implementation of servant leadership in religious-based boarding schools: (1) Characteristics of Servant Leadership, (2) Driving Factors, (3) Implementation Methods, (4) Impact of Implementation, and (5) Implementation Challenges. The complexity of implementing servant leadership among servant leaders demonstrates significant outcomes for the development of the school community, including students, teachers, staff, and parents. The findings from the results of this study provide information that encourages future research related to the application of servant leadership in the world of education as a supporting factor for achieving educational goals and developing the role of a leader in fulfilling the complexity of their tasks.

Keywords: Leadership; Servant Leadership; Boarding School; Case Study

## INTRODUCTION

Religion-based education has become one of the approaches in education. According to Sutrisno et al (2021) religion-based education has a positive impact on the formation of the character and spirituality of youth, seen from the behavior displayed in the family and social environment. One form of religion-based education is carried out in the form of boarding schools (Hogan & Bettinger, 2018). It is expected that by instilling religious values, there will be an influence not only on academic achievement but also on character formation and instilling obedience among members of the boarding school community (Dickson, 2019). One crucial resource in shaping the character and spirituality of students is the leaders, in this case, the school principal and vice-principal (Perdana et al., 2018, Araneda, 2022).

Leaders play a crucial role in managing and fostering change in a boarding school environment. Effective leadership and management strategies have an impact on bringing about effective changes to create a conducive school environment for character development of students (Hogan & Bettinger, 2018; Sutrisno, 2021). One form of effective leadership in leading and managing religion-based boarding schools is servant leadership. Greenleaf (2002) explains that servant leadership focuses on serving others rather than prioritizing self-interest. As a leader, they strive to set an example, empower, and prepare students to become dependable leaders in the future (Robert, 2016; Tropmpenaars & Voerman, 2010). Research on the role of servant leadership shows that leaders can be relied upon, provide support, prioritize humanity, are trustworthy, courageous, and communicative (Khatri & Dutta, 2018; Swart et al., 2021). In the field of education, it has been demonstrated that servant leaders have a significant positive impact on students, especially in their learning processes (Angel & Ricky, 2022; Mumuh & Nugraha, 2023).

A significant difference in boarding schools at SMAK Pandhega Jaya and regular schools is that students live in dormitories with school leaders. All activities are conducted according to predetermined schedules, and all students must participate in all activities according to agreed terms and student access to discuss with leaders is not restricted. Because of this, often the leaders are quite overwhelmed because sometimes during their recess, students ask for time to discuss learning difficulties or about personal matters. Leaders besides carrying out their duties as teachers, managers of the learning process, they are also involved as leaders of spiritual groups, dormitory managers and as surrogate figures for parents for students, so that related to students' needs, for example needing special treatment in hospitals, financial difficulties, experiencing difficulties in adjustment themselves or psychological conditions that require special attention, leaders must be prepared to provide services for all of that. Because of this, they sometimes experience physical and mental fatigue in carrying out their duties and responsibilities. Because of their awareness, namely understanding their responsibilities as teachers, educators and substitute parents for students, they continue to strive for the best service as a leader. Despite the great complexity of the role, they will continue to carry out the concept of serving leaders with a commitment to live it, one of which is due to the drive and focus on the goals to be achieved (Dierendonck & Patterson, 2018; Khatri & Dutta, 2018).

From an organizational perspective, a considerable amount of research has been conducted on servant leaders, but there has been limited research specifically focusing on leaders in religious-based boarding schools, regarding the complexity of their roles, the responsibilities they must be fulfilled, and their calling as servant leaders. Researchers have visited this boarding school several times and observed significant differences, particularly in terms of the relationship between the leaders and all members of the school community. In daily life, the leaders are easily

accessible to the school members, especially when they require cooperation or guidance from the leaders. The leaders actively engage and display a cooperative attitude towards all members of the school. It is often observed that the leaders work on tasks late into the night, even utilizing breaks to fulfill their duties and responsibilities. Much of the information gathered by the researchers relates to changes in the attitudes of certain students as a result of the leaders' influence. This has prompted the researchers to dig deeper into the concept of servant leadership in religious based boarding schools, employing a qualitative research approach that focuses on the role of servant leadership.

Using the case study method will enable researchers to gather more comprehensive data through interviews and focus group discussions that specifically focus on implementation of servant leadership. The findings from this study are expected to offer more profound insights into the role of servant leadership in religious-based boarding schools.

## **METHOD**

### *Study design*

Qualitative research methods aim to collect in-depth and detailed data that can provide insight into the meaning, interpretation, and social context of research topics, used to explore complex and subjective aspects of human experience, perception, and behavior. (Bowen, 2009; Crarwell, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, Hancock et al., 2009, Nathan, 2014). The research was conducted on April 18 & 19 followed by April 23 & 24 2023.

### *Participant and Procedures*

The researcher contacted the foundation and submitted a proposal to conduct research related to the leaders serving at this school. The foundation gave permission and expressed hope that the research results could provide significant information, especially for leaders as a source of information on improving the quality of roles and services in the school and dormitory environment. The leaders consisted of school principals, vice principals and dormitory heads, and gave informed consent to each individual involved in the research. The criteria are: (1) more than three years working as a leader at SMAK Pandhega Jaya, Kupang, (2) living in a dormitory, (3) are local residents who come from the same province because they have the same cultural background. Researchers used data collection techniques, namely in-depth interviews, which were conducted for 45-60 minutes for each leader and focus group discussions for 60-75 minutes were conducted after each leader had finished being interviewed. Interviews and focus group discussions are conducted online.

### *Instruments*

Researchers used a guide form of questions to be asked in interviews and focus group discussions, some of the questions asked were:

- In the interview: (1) What do you know about servant leadership? (2) tell about the application of servant leadership in PJ schools? Tell me the obstacles that often occur in the implementation of servant leadership in PJ? How to solve it?
- In the FGD: (1) The purpose of implementing servant leadership in PJ. (2) Opinions regarding the impact of implementing servant leadership from leaders in PJ. (3) The most memorable experience in implementing servant leadership as a leader in PJ.

### *Data Analysis*

Analysis research based on Braun and Clarke (2006) in reflective thematic analysis techniques. The interviews were recorded verbatim, then the transcripts of the interview results were compared with the recordings to ensure the modified data adequately represented the participant's words, and then the participant's identity was deleted to protect the participant's anonymity. After that, the transcripts were entered into a qualitative data management and analysis program.

- Research questions: (1) How is Servant Leadership implemented in religion-based boarding schools? (2) What are the unique aspects of its implementation?
- Triangulation:

The research source triangulation, namely the school director and one of the teachers who is an alumni of SMAK Pandhega Jaya (Akutey & Tiimub, 2021).

## **RESULT**

### *Participant's characteristics*

The participants are leaders who reside in the boarding school and have held complex leadership roles for a minimum of three years. All three of them are local residents, and according to the school director, they face higher task complexities compared to other teachers or staff members.

**Table 1.**

*Overview of participants*

<b>Subyek</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Work Since</b>	<b>Being Leader</b>	<b>Education</b>
S	Male	Kepala Sekolah	2012	2018	S1
J	Male	Wakasek	2014	2018	S1
E	Female	Kepala Asrama	2018	2018	S1
D	Female	Direktur	2012	2012	S2
N	Male	Guru	2021	-	S1

### *Data analysis*

The process of processing data begins with transcribing the interview results, followed by open coding. In open coding, the main ideas are identified from the interview transcripts, and keywords are assigned to each interview result, as exemplified in Table 2. By focusing on the primary concepts, the process of conceptualization aims to clarify and develop the scope of these main ideas.

**Table 2**  
Finding key words

Verbatim	Main Ideas	Key Words
"I asked them, Miss, how far has the progress reached? Oh Mister, it's like this, Mister. I'm facing difficulties with this, Mister. In that case, let's sit down and discuss. So, Miss, it's like this, like this. Is there anything else, Miss, that you don't understand yet? So far, I can handle it, Mister. That's how it is. That's what I implement in my work."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiating conversations</li> <li>• Engaging in discussions</li> <li>• Active communication</li> <li>• Providing guidance</li> <li>• Caring about team development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiative</li> <li>• Being a discussion partner</li> <li>• Providing professional encouragement</li> <li>• Team evaluation</li> </ul>

Based on the keywords, they were further refined into 15 categories and then distilled into 5 themes, as shown in Table 3. The discussion will delve into these themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

These themes provide an overview of the key categories and can be further elaborated upon in the discussion.

**Table 3**  
Transitioning from keywords to the core theme

Keywords	Category	Theme
Application of religious values; Time management; Self-management	Role Model	Servant Leadership Character:
Providing assistance; partner for discussion; Putting Others' Interests First	Service	
Initiative; Empathy; Listening; Self and group evaluation	Collaboration:	
Encouraging individual/group development, opportunities for self-improvement	Empowerment	
Exemplary spiritual leaders; Support from foundation leaders	Support from leader	Supportive Factors
Spiritual and professional reinforcement	Community	
Religious values in the family; Family expectations and support	Family	
Application of religious values and leadership in the boarding house	Group Mentoring	Implementation Methods
Discussions and implementation related to individual development	Personal Discussion	
Discussions on learning activities	School Activity	
Increased self-confidence; Discipline; Leadership skills; Spiritual development	Impact on Student	Impact of Impementation
Spiritual development; Cooperation; Initiative; Creativity	Impact on Teacher/ Staf	
Positive assessment of student changes; Recommendations to others about the school	Impact on student's parent	
Differences in individual targets and characteristics	Internal Challenges	Implementation Challenges
Complexity of leadership roles; Communication constraints between teachers and students	External Challenges	

## DISCUSSION

This research focuses on understanding the implementation of servant leadership in religious-based boarding schools, with the participation of key leaders who have complex tasks and a sense of professionalism and religiosity. Through this research, it is hoped to discover factors that significantly impact the school organization as a whole and individuals involved in the field of education specifically.

The themes of implementing servant leadership in the religious-based boarding school, SMAK Pandhega Jaya, Kupang, include the first theme of servant leadership characteristics, which are setting an example, serving others, collaboration, and empowerment. These themes are applied to the leaders in the school and boarding environment for all members of the school community, so that teachers, students, and parents can assess these characteristics in the school leaders. The key principle in the implementation of servant leadership is being an example for everyone, especially for the students. Leaders function as role models for others in all situations. They consistently embody the values and principles of servant leadership, reflecting themselves as agents of positive change that bring goodness to many people. Their actions and behaviors inspire and influence others to follow in their footsteps (Mahdi et al., 2014; Greasley & Bocarnea, 2014; Luo & Zhang, 2018; Tarrant, 2014; Vlok, 2012; Rosha, 2014).

One of the goals of this school is to produce future leaders who are willing to return and rebuild their communities. Therefore, everyone is committed to implementing the concept of servant leadership so that students can emulate and apply it in the future, even after they have left the school (Russell, 2022; Spears, 2010; Swart, 2021). Another factor that motivates the leaders to consistently apply servant leadership is their strong relationship with God, which solidifies their religious concept. As a result, everything they do is focused on their religious beliefs (Roberts, 2015; Rosha, 2014).

*"...when talking about servant leadership, what I know is that it becomes our identity. If we are Christians, then serving is our identity..."* (J, 32 years old).

*"...well, the foundation here is that these are children who have already believed in God, so I personally stay motivated, and these children need discipleship, to serve as God exemplified..."* (S, 37 years old).

*"...so as children of God, we should be like that, we are different from others, so we should serve not as leaders who should be served, but first and foremost, we serve"* (E, 27 years old).

Hence, when they feel tired, confused, or have the desire to leave, in addition to discussing with the leaders, they also strengthen their communication from a religious perspective. They strive to consistently apply the teachings of their faith. They see themselves as instruments of God's work and emphasize the importance of serving others (Araneda & Rodriguez, 2022). Religion plays a significant role in shaping the mindset and behavior of leaders. They instill a sense of responsibility and selflessness (Krise et al., 2023) and a commitment to serving others guided by their religious beliefs and values (Roberts, 2015; Smith, 2005; Spears, 2002). As servant leaders, they deeply understand the importance of collaboration and mutual support, thereby strengthening the sense of community within the school. By fostering collaboration, leaders create an environment that allows the principles of servant leadership to

flourish and have a positive impact on the school community (Mahdi et al., 2014; Urrila, 2022; Rosha, 2014; Cruickshank, 2017). They no longer focus on their own desires but prioritize the application of religious values. Being willing to sacrifice their own interests for the sake of others is a crucial part of this implementation (Krise et al., 2023). They understand that the higher the position given by the foundation, the greater the responsibility to serve and prioritize the interests of others over their own (Khan et al., 2023).

In the implementation, the second theme is the driving factors. The Director emphasizes the importance of the leaders' relationship with God and their recognition of God as the guiding principle. The leaders strive to apply servant leadership values because they first witnessed the example set by their own leaders, which motivates them to do the same despite facing numerous challenges and obstacles (Greenleaf, 2002; Russell & Stone, 2002; Trompenaars & Voerman, 2010). The foundation leaders and religious leaders live out the principles they teach the school leaders, thereby encouraging them to consistently practice servant leadership, particularly with an emphasis on religious concepts. Therefore, their faith in God and His teachings plays a fundamental role in shaping their commitment to servant leadership (Dierendonck, 2018; Greenleaf, 2002; Roberts, 2015). Essentially, the solid religious concept within each leader, reinforced by the examples and support from their own leaders, motivates and strengthens them to remain consistent in applying servant leadership (Gougas & Malinova, 2020; Yozgat & Sahin, 2013; Eva et al., 2019). They no longer view this as merely a professional duty and responsibility but see it as part of their religious and professional commitment.

*"...leadership is not just about words. Here, as a leader, I see my leaders willing to serve us. Whatever they command, they do it, so I am also motivated to do the same. Miss D and Mister S are always willing to help me when I face difficulties or confusion in my work..."* (E, 27 years old).

*"...leaders also understand our situation, they provide motivation, teachings. When they come here, we discuss the difficulties we face and then discuss the best solutions..."* (E, 32 years old).

*"...as a leader, I also have a leader, Miss D, for example. If there are things that need to be discussed, I communicate with her. Later, Miss D or the foundation provides time for discussion, and their response is supportive."* (S, 37 years old).

External support plays a significant role in sustaining leaders' commitment to servant leadership. It provides encouragement, validation, and a sense of ownership, strengthening their dedication to serving others in their role as school leaders (Sarkus, 2022). Leader support, particularly in the form of affirmation and appreciation for their efforts, as well as providing guidance in facing challenges, reinforces their commitment to applying servant leadership. They internalize the understanding that they are not alone in facing the difficulties of their tasks and roles and that support extends beyond their professional responsibilities to their individual well-being (Chang et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2023; Rosha, 2014; Sarkus, 2022; Swart, 2021).

The third theme is the methods employed by the leaders in implementing servant leadership, which include mentoring systems, personal discussions, and school activities. The mentoring process is carried out as part of the spiritual concept known as "pemuridan" (spiritual mentoring). In this activity, each student is placed in a group called a cell group, consisting of 9-10 students from grades 10-12, led by a teacher or staff member. Each cell group leader also participates in a mentoring group led by school leaders or foundation leaders. When school leaders

serve as mentors to students or teachers, they are also guided by higher-level leaders such as the director or leaders of the foundation. This strengthens the consistent implementation of servant leadership, ensuring that everyone receives the same guidance and mentoring (Greenleaf, 1998).

As mentors, the leaders also provide support through individual discussions, which are not limited to students, teachers, and staff members, but are also open to parents who may need it. Since most parents live off the island, discussions often take place through telephone communication. Greenleaf (1998) emphasizes the importance of interpersonal interaction in fulfilling the role of a servant leader, as it fosters a trusting relationship that supports the achievement of targeted outcomes.

*"We assess the students based on their individual strengths, provide guidance when they face difficulties because we must keep moving forward, evaluate the students, remind them of their journal entries, and complete their mentoring forms. There are certain times when each mentor must meet with at least one student per month. We must not neglect them, and if we find the process effective, it is considered good; otherwise, we evaluate it."* (S, 37 years old).

*"A mentor should be reliable, establish a connection with the students, and provide a clear understanding of their tasks so that the students are not confused by our words, but can understand and comprehend them."* (E, 27 years old).

*"As a mentor, I treat each individual equally. I make sure that I can be an example for them. I see mentoring as a lifelong process, opening oneself up so that the students can be influenced positively by me."* (J, 32 years old).

As leaders, they also fulfill roles as teachers and administrators. Therefore, when students face difficulties in understanding the material during the learning process, the leaders allocate time to discuss their challenges individually or in groups. These three leaders communicate through these methods in implementing servant leadership, enabling them to have a more comprehensive understanding of students as learners, developing individuals, and members of the community. They agree that ultimately, in implementing servant leadership, the leaders themselves experience positive impacts from the responses of students, teachers, staff, and even parents (Khan et al., 2023).

The fourth theme is the impact of implementing servant leadership. They tangibly observe significant changes in students, teachers, staff, and parents. They believe that when good things start with an understanding of the interests of others, the relationships formed often become more positive (Greenleaf, 1998; Wallace, 2012). These challenges focus on the ongoing commitment and sacrifices made by servant leaders in their efforts to create positive impacts on the lives of others (Shao et al., 2022). They notice significant changes in 12th-grade students compared to when they were in 10th grade. Students become more confident and easily directed, and discipline issues decrease in 11th and 12th grades. Students become more adaptable to meet academic demands because of the open and supportive attitudes of the leaders, who provide guidance when they face difficulties (Khan et al., 2022; Krise, 2023). In fact, some alumni inform them that they still practice some of the habits they learned in the boarding school, such as waking up early, taking initiatives, speaking confidently in front of the class, and engaging in spiritual activities.

Greenleaf (1998) explains that when leaders actively contribute, positive changes occur in the people around them. For teachers and staff, the tangible changes are seen in their creativity in teaching. They become more confident in expressing their creative ideas. Leaders who are willing to engage in discussions and provide supportive trust motivate teachers to take creative initiatives (Chang et al., 2016).

*"Some students have difficulty making decisions. After discussing with me, I encourage them to make decisions on their own. Sometimes they are still afraid, but I motivate them until they finally make decisions themselves and experience the results of those decisions. As a result, they become more confident in making decisions on their own in the future."* (S, 37 years old).

*"I've seen some students who initially came across as indifferent to their classmates, but after repeated reminders and training, they are willing to change. It was tiring at first because we had to keep reminding them, but gradually, they change. Now they greet each other, take turns in taking care of cleanliness, and no longer litter carelessly."* (E, 27 years old).

*"I believe that when students see that even leaders are willing to serve, why shouldn't they? It makes them hesitate. Some students become more confident in speaking in public, and their self-esteem grows. Without being asked, they compete to volunteer for activities."* (E, 32 years old).

The next theme is the challenges in implementing servant leadership in a religious based boarding school, both internal and external. Leaders, with the complexity of their tasks in the school and boarding house, face various obligations and needs in the field, often experiencing challenges due to the complexity of their roles. Therefore, they are highly expected to effectively manage their time, as this will help them carry out their tasks more proportionally. The implementation of time management reflects the leaders' commitment to serve while recognizing the importance of self-care and maintaining a healthy work-life balance (Angela, 2022; Dierendonck, 2018; Eva, 2019; Krise et al., 2023; Nsiah & Walker, 2013).

Another challenge arises when there is lack of communication, especially when each party holds onto their own understanding. In this case, leaders use discussions as a mediator to clarify the direction and target of communication (Dierendonck & Patterson, 2018). An internal challenge occurs when leaders have different individual targets. Some leaders focus on comprehensive attitude change, even if it may not be consistent. Other leaders prioritize consistent attitude change, even if it is not comprehensive. This can lead to differences of opinion. In such situations, leaders require support and guidance from the foundation or spiritual leaders to overcome these challenges and prevent prolonged conflicts (Araned & Rodriguez, 2022; Nsiah & Walker, 2013; Sarkus, 2022).

The implementation of servant leadership in h boarding school demonstrates unique dynamics, characterized by the strong embedding of religious values at the foundation level, which is then transferred to the school leaders and further instilled in the school leaders and their colleagues (Shao et al., 2022). The understanding of being a servant leader goes beyond a mere slogan but drives them to become role models for others, and this commitment is embraced by the entire school community. However, it is acknowledged that these same core values also

present challenges, particularly in terms of time allocation and task complexity. The limited number of staff members is disproportionate to the number of students and teachers they need to serve, causing difficulties in effectively managing their time. Although servant leaders have the right to allocate time for themselves, the principle of prioritizing the interests of others still needs to be pursued, especially concerning the physical and mental well-being of the leaders (Angella, 2022; Gaugas, 2021; Roberts, 2016). Ultimately, all state that servant leadership is about setting an example and having a positive impact on everyone around them (Greenleaf, 1998).

*"..servant leadership speaks of exemplification. The work is not a demand but a service. But it's your identity. I mean, serving is part of my professionalism. (J, 32 years old)"*

*"..servant leadership is about exemplification. A leader is not judged by their words. What we speak is what we do, and what we do is who we are. So, through our actions, people see that we are not just empty words. (E, 27 years old).*

*..servant leadership is about exemplification. So, exemplification is more powerful than words. We provide the right role model to the children until they eventually follow that example. (S, 37 years old).*

Despite these challenges, the commitment to servant leadership remains strong, driven by the belief in the transformative power of serving others and the strong cultivation of religiosity. By navigating this complexity and finding a balance, servant leaders can continue to have a positive impact on the school community (Araneda, 2022; Gaugas, 2021; Greenleaf, 2002; Rosha, 2014; Sarkus, 2022; Swart, 2021, Wallace, 2012).

## **CONCLUSION**

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the uniqueness of implementing servant leadership in religious-based boarding schools is that it has a significant impact on students, teachers, staff, parents, and even the leaders themselves. Prioritizing the interests of others above self-interest serves as a good example for adolescent students, contributing to their character formation and strengthening the inculcation of religious values. The implementation of servant leadership has the potential to create long-term impacts on both the individuals themselves and the community.

Researchers encourage further studies on the application of servant leadership in educational settings, involving participants such as teachers in religious-based boarding schools, teachers in general education settings, and students at vulnerable stages of their education where rule violations may occur. Such research can provide further insights into the effectiveness and relevance of servant leadership in the educational context, as well as a deeper understanding of how religious values can be applied and integrated into leadership in educational environments.

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