

Strategic Leadership as the Primary Force of Islamic Boarding School for Sustainability

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Abstract

With a predominantly Muslim population, Indonesia is developing a type of educational institution called Islamic boarding school (IBS). Along with the increasing needs of the community for the existence of these institutions, IBS leaders face the challenge of surviving in conditions of hypercompetition. IBS leaders are encouraged to be able to think strategically to be able to maintain develop the institution forward. This research was conducted to explore the strategic leadership activities of leader from an IBS, to make institution survive and develop rapidly in just 10 years. Through a qualitative approach, the results of the study found four strategic steps that the leader took in an effort: (1) create and communicate a vision; (2) core competencies building; (3) culture-structure management effectively; (4) Community bonding.

Key words: Strategic leadership, Islamic boarding school, school management, community building

INTRODUCTION

As a country with a majority Muslim population, Indonesia has various types of Islamic educational institutions at the secondary level. One of them is the Islamic Boarding School (IBS). This type of institution is currently growing both in terms of the number of institutions and the number of applicants, in line with the increasing public demand for religion-based schools. the goal is to shape children's character according to religious teachings (Dahari and Ya, 2011), and increase their focus and motivation to learn (Ningias, 2013).

The secondary education sector has become highly competitive due to the significant



growth in the number of institutions. New educational institutions grow 3 percent per year (Kemdikbud, 2020), including the IBS type. Demands for reforms in the field of education such as privatization, internationalization, decentralization, and structural changes also direct education to an increasingly competitive environment (Nicolescu, 2009). As a result, every institution must compete to build a brand to be the best, so that it can be recognized at the international level (Valitov, 2014). Following Evans' theory of education demand and supply, every institution must be able to offer the best service for their consumers (Evans, 1995:12). It is because buyers will judge to choose educational institutions that meet their wants and needs. Privatization and decentralization at the secondary education level has the consequence that the survival of institutions now depends on funding from the community and the number of applicants.

Education is in a hypercompetitive environment (Kotler, 2003:xi). This condition enforces IBS leaders to think strategically. They must be able to become strategic leaders. A strategic leader is one who is able to anticipate, foresee, maintain the flexibility to adapt to change, and work together to achieve the future success of the organization (Ireland and Hitt, 1999). For newly established institutions, a strategic leader is a necessity, especially in building trust so that the institution can survive in the long term.

Daarul Ukhuwwah Boarding School (DUBS) is one of the IBS in Indonesia in the East Java region which seems to be able to survive and develop rapidly, because the founders and leaders are able to think strategically. Since its establishment, within 10 years, this institution has been able to attract people's choices and has grown to have three branches throughout Indonesia, even with inadequate financial resources. starting from 40 local students, now DUBS is able to accommodate 1400 students (Redaksi, 2020). This phenomenon is interesting to gain knowledge about how strategic leadership steps are carried out so that the institution can maintain its sustainability.

Research becomes urgent, especially in the increasingly competitive context of secondary education. Scholars have indeed made explicit efforts to provide guidance on the concept of strategic leadership needed in today's dynamic context (Hitt, Ireland, and Rowe, 2005:19). Academics have also discussed the importance of strategic leadership, although more at the higher education level (Howard et al., 2011); (Rosser, Johnsrud, and Heck, 2003). To further enrich the concept of strategic leadership in the context of newly developing educational institutions at secondary level, research is feasible to carry out.

METHODOLOGY





The research uses a qualitative approach to study the environment, experiences, perspectives and history of the phenomenon (Snape and Spencer, 2003:4), so that concepts and theories from the main research themes can be developed (Scott and Morrison, 2005:185). The aim of this research is to explore how strategic leadership activities in an IBS can survive and sustain in a hypercompetitive environment. The research was conducted at Daarul Ukhuwwah Boarding School (DUBS), located in Malang City, Indonesia.

Data collection was carried out through: (1) in-depth interviews with: the leaders, the head of public relations and the head of the madrasa at DUBS; (2) participatory observation by visiting and observing activities at the institution and (3) documentation of various news relevant to DUBS and the need for research data from the website.

The data obtained was analyzed using the interaction model: data condensation, data display and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014:31). In order for the data obtained to be justifiable, there are five validation strategies that were implemented (Creswell, 2014): (1) Triangulation of sources, methods, and theories; (2) peer checking; (3) Referential adequacy (supporting data); (4) Negative case studies; and (5) Member checks. The use of this validation strategy is adjusted to the cost, time, and conditions of the research object.

FINDINGS / RESULTS

Daarul Ukhuwwah Boarding School (DUBS) was founded 10 years ago by someone who graduated from a well-known IBS in Indonesia: Gontor. His experience as a graduate of the well-known IBS apparently underlies his ability to think strategically in developing the IBS he founded. The results of the research found that there were four strategic steps that he carried out to maintain the development and sustainability of the institution: (1) create and communicate a vision; (2) core competencies building; (3) culture and structure management effectively; (4) Community bonding (Figure 1).



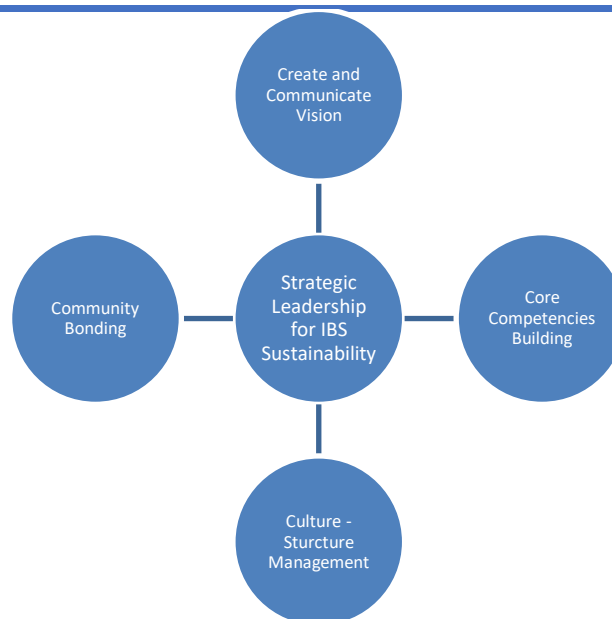


Figure 1. Model of Strategic Leadership for IBS Sustainability

Create and Communicate Vision

The founders of DUBS have created a vision that is shared and communicated intensively not only to all internal members of the organization, but also to external stakeholders. So, all parties who connected with DUBS can feel and want this dream get achieved. The vision of DUBS is to produce thousands of 'fighting scholars'. A fighting scholar means a qualified expert in knowledge and worship who has a deep understanding of Islamic teachings. Producing fighting scholars is actually directed at efforts to provide educational services that teach Islamic sciences, whose main source is in Arabic. For this reason, IBS directs Arabic-based learning both in the books used and in daily conversation, as well as strengthening the memorization of the Koran as the main source of Islamic teachings. With this vision, DUBS determines that the main graduates product offered is scholars who have competence in Arabic and memorize the Al-Qur'an.

The founder's efforts to create an inspiring vision for the organization demonstrate his role as a strategic leader. As stated by House and Aditya (1997), the focus of strategic leadership is on creating meaning and purpose for the organization, where this will be created when the vision of the organization has been able to inspire all members of the organization. The importance of defining the vision, mission or goals of the organization has been emphasized by



Hooley et al. (2008:31), especially in the effort to formulate competitive strategies. The vision, mission and goals of the organization have been stated in an easy statement so that it can be communicated to all members of the organization, and can serve as a guide for the organization to make various policies and allocate appropriate resources. The vision of 'producing fighting scholars' has been shared and communicated intensively and consistently by the founders of DUBS on various occasions. In line with Hamel & Prahalad's advice, this vision is not one that promotes competition, but one that seeks to achieve quality graduates (Hamel and Prahalad, 1989). For IBS, it would be better if the vision leads to efforts to achieve a series of social goals or community welfare goals (Chapra, 2001:3). This means that the existence of Islamic educational institutions should be able to provide good and welfare for mankind.

Core Competencies Building

In an effort to achieve the vision, Leaders of DUBS took a strategic step by building core competencies within the institution in line with the production of graduates who have proficiency in Arabic and memorize the Al-Qur'an. This main competency appears to be used as a competitive advantage offered to public. It is interesting that the decision to make Arabic language proficiency competency is based on the competence of founders and leaders who are proficient in Arabic. This shows that the founders carried out strategic steps where the main advantages offered were based on the competence of internal resources.

Development of main capabilities based on the strength of internal resources, in line with the concept of the resource-based view (Wernerfelt, 1995), which focuses on the organization's core competencies (Hamel and Prahalad, 1990). This approach suggests that organizational performance should be driven by the internal resources profile of the organization. as Hunt (2015:410) suggested, competitive advantage can be achieved if institutions are able to identify, seek, develop, strengthen, maintain and enhance the organization's core competencies that differentiate it from other organizations. The concept of resources based view appears to have been carried out by dubs leaders by developing product excellence based on the competence of leaders in the fields of Islam and Arabic.

As a strategic leader, the founders of DUBS appear to be very concerned about the institution's ability to serve. Leaders are able to ensure that their competent human resources are fully utilized. Referring to suggestions from Hooley et al. (1998), DUBS can base its competitive strategy by considering market needs and their ability to serve. The main products offered based on the strength of internal resources are the key to DUBS's success in competing with other institutions. In line with Cahill's opinion (Cahill, 2017:15), IBS has been able to involve





inner strength as a competitive advantage.

Culture- Structure Management Effectively

The next strategic step from the DUBS leadership to realize the vision of producing fighting scholar who excel in Arabic language proficiency and memorizing the Koran is to carry out effective cultural and coaching structures management in achieving targets. DUBS is very optimal in cultivating a culture of learning discipline and creating a coaching structure by carrying out an educational process that focuses on: arranging schedules, tiered mentoring structures, and maintaining learning discipline through reward and punishment.

Efforts so that students can speak Arabic proficiently are carried out through intensive coaching from a *musyrif* (main teacher), assisted in stages by senior students. They are made study groups and gather every day on a set schedule to be taught new vocabulary (*mufrodat*) every day. Furthermore, they will get used to and are required to practice the vocabulary they have learned in everyday conversations. As a support for success, a culture of discipline is implemented through a reward and punishment system.

Through cultural and structural management that effectively supports students to be disciplined in Arabic and memorize the Koran, DUBS is then able to realize the expected output. The students become proficient in the language and have memorization according to their abilities. In line with vision, candidates for fighting scholars can also be produced. To maintain optimal learning process results, evaluation activities are also a concern in management. Evaluation can maintain the quality of competence of the graduates produced.

IBS founders seem to have strategic thinking that cultural development is important in achieving the vision and goals of the institution. Lunenburg (2010) stated that every organization has a culture, whether that culture is desirable or not. Culture will be formed by itself, if not formed by management. Therefore, culture and structure should be managed to create a culture that supports the achievement of the vision, mission and goals of the organization. Through effective cultural-structural management, the founders and leaders of the organization can socialize and teach norms, values, assumptions, beliefs, philosophies, organizational habits to new members so as to influence the mindset, attitudes and behavior of members of the organization in serving consumers, and efforts to achieve goals (Goetsch and Davis, 1997).

The founders of DUBS realized that the main service for IBS is the teaching and learning process, to produce certain competencies for students. For this reason, it is necessary to pay attention to how the management of culture in learning is able to provide services that are in





accordance with the competencies offered (Drewes and Michael, 2006). In order to have a strong competitive position, IBS must be able to guarantee the implementation of a quality learning process, through cultural and structural management that can realize the expected output. Thus, society have confidence that the management of the institution has been carried out effectively and efficiently. Culture and structure that are aligned with the vision and goals of the institution will strengthen the position of IBS, because the institution is considered to have credibility in producing student competency products as expected.

Community Bonding

The next strategic step that DUBS leaders are working on is building bonds with the community. the members of the community built consist of parents of students from various regions in Indonesia. Communities are formed in various areas where parents of students come from. The community then used by institutions not only as a strengthener of relations but also as a means of communication network between the institution and its stakeholders. the community and communication network built seem to be the spearhead of success in introducing DUBS to the public. DUBS tries to build bonds with the community of parents from various regions, so that they can participate as marketing agents to recruit new students from their respective regions. Community ties seem to be built on the principle of kinship. Parents who already feel satisfied with the educational services at DUBS are encouraged to become communication agents and recommend other relatives or relatives to choose DUBS. DUBS then also prioritizes prospective students from families who are currently or have previously studied with IBS. Thus, prospective students can be better prepared to participate in education and learning at the IBS for six years. This condition facilitates the realization of the goal of forming fighting scholars.

IBS leaders should be able to see the important role of community bonds and relationships as strategic points in institutional development. as Hunt and Morgan (1995) explained that ties and relationships with other parties can be an asset for an organization in creating and developing excellence. Relational assets in the context of IBS mean assets that reflect the bond between the institution and its stakeholders (Srivastava, Fahey, and Christensen, 2001), where students and parents are the main external stakeholders (Sallis 2005). In fact, relational relations with stakeholders are an important part and a key success factor for DUBS to be able to develop and maintain its sustainability to become the people's choice. The community bonds built by DUBS have proven to be beneficial for the institution in supporting the achievement of educational goals and spreading the excellence of the institution





to other parties.

DISCUSSION

The four strategic steps to be implemented by the founder and leaders of DUBS seems to align with activities that are often associated with the concept of strategic leadership. As drafted by House & Aditya (1997), leaders must be able to carry out strategic steps including: to be able to communicate the vision of the future; develop the main competencies and capabilities of the organization; developing organizational structures, processes, and controls; managing the community; and maintaining an effective organizational culture. IBS leaders must be able to anticipate, foresee, maintain flexibility to adapt to change, think through strategies, and work together to initiate change aimed at future organizational success (Hitt et al., 2005). Leaders must be able to create meaning and purpose for the organization, by creating an organizational vision that can inspire all members of the organization. Strategic leadership is characterized by a concentration on the evolution of the organization as a whole, including changes in goals and capabilities.

Effective strategic leadership can help organizations improve their performance and become a source of competitive advantage in facing the highly complex and challenging era of competition in the 21st century (Ireland and Hitt, 1999). When IBS faces an increasingly hypercompetitive environment, Boal and Hooijberg (2000) suggest that organizations can create and maintain three capabilities as the heart of strategic leadership: absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity; and managerial wisdom. The ability of DUBS to survive and develop in a relatively short time shows that leader have this abilities. It is proved that leaders are able to absorb people's aspirations to adapt them to the organization, and are able to take the right steps at important moments.

As strategic leaders, the founders and leaders of DUBS have been able to focus their work on the resources that are likely to make a difference and lead to sustainable future success. Consistent with Hitt and Duane's (2002) view, DUBS' strategic leadership appears to focus on developing human and social capital. They are able to build great teams as the most important organizational resource, and are able to build alliances with the community. McCallum and O'Connell (2009) recognize that human and social capital are not completely independent of one another. Both are a reflection of the ability and competence of the leader. It has become the most important task for strategic leaders is to manage organizational resources effectively. The strategic leader manages IBS resources by organizing them into capabilities, structuring the organization so that they can use, develop and implement these capabilities as a strategy to





achieve competitive advantage (Sirmon, Hitt, and Ireland 2007). Thus it can be said that the strategic leader is the primary force of IBS in maintaining the sustainability of the organization.

CONCLUSION

Research produces a strategic leadership model for IBS managers and similar institutions. This model consists of four strategic steps for leaders to develop and survive in the long term. The four strategic steps are: (1) create and communicate a vision; (2) core competencies building; (3) culture-structure management effectively; (4) Community bonding. These findings can be a guide for managers of new educational institutions to determine the best priority steps when they face competitive conditions, where they must be able to get students in the midst of competition.

This concept enriches the previous, especially in the context of leadership in educational institutions, even in secondary education institutions that are required and funded by the government. Strategic leadership is needed in the management of educational institutions not to direct institutions to commercial goals, but an educational institution requires students to keep running as they should.

Recommendations

From the results of this study, I recommend that future researchers dig deeper into the four points resulting from this study by measuring them quantitatively, to see to what extent these four components have a significant effect on the sustainability of the institution. The researcher sees that the four hard efforts made by management in developing their institution have been able to make the institution exist and develop rapidly today. Therefore, by looking in more detail quantitatively, which factor is the most dominant of the four elements, will make a significant contribution to the development of educational institutions.

Limitations

This study has many limitations, including the selection of research locations which are only single case, so the results are limited. Therefore, it would be better if the next research was developed at several institutions that have different characteristics with multiple case studies or multiple sites.

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