

Situational Leadership as Adaptive Leadership in Faith-Based Science Education: A Qualitative Case Study of a High-Performing Islamic Boarding School

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

situational leadership;
adaptive school leadership;
faith-based education;
teacher readiness;
school effectiveness

Article history:

Received 2025-12-20

Revised 2026-02-06

Accepted 2026-06-28

ABSTRACT

Educational leadership in faith-based schools increasingly requires balance academic excellence, teacher development, and institutional values in dynamic educational contexts. While situational leadership has been widely studied, it is often viewed mainly as an interpersonal style rather than an adaptive institutional framework. This study addresses that gap by examining how situational leadership supports teacher performance and sustained excellence in a high-performing faith-based science school. This study employed a qualitative case study design at a high-performing Islamic boarding school integrating religious values with science education. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis involving 18 participants, including school leaders, teachers, achievement coordinators, and students. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña through iterative coding, thematic analysis, and triangulation. The findings indicate that situational leadership operates as an adaptive institutional framework rather than merely an interpersonal leadership style. Leaders dynamically adjusted directive, supportive, participative, and delegative behaviors according to teacher readiness, task complexity, and organizational stages. Leadership adaptation enhanced teacher professional growth, distributed responsibility, strengthened organizational capacity, and sustained institutional excellence. Faith-based values fostered trust, commitment, and collective responsibility, enabling adaptive leadership while maintaining innovation and high academic performance. This study extends situational leadership theory by reconceptualizing it as an adaptive institutional framework embedded in organizational processes. The findings provide theoretical insights into leadership adaptation in value-driven educational settings and offer practical guidance for school leaders seeking to balance faith-based values with sustained educational excellence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions across the globe are increasingly challenged to respond to rapid changes in knowledge production, technological advancement, and performance-based accountability systems. In this context, leadership has emerged as a decisive factor in determining institutional effectiveness, particularly in schools that seek to balance academic excellence, character education, and organizational sustainability (Harris & Jones, 2022). Contemporary educational leadership research emphasizes that successful school leaders are no longer those who merely enforce administrative control, but those who can adapt their leadership practices to complex and dynamic educational environments (Hallinger, 2020; Jones & Bryant, 2023). This adaptive capacity is especially critical in schools operating within distinctive cultural, religious, and pedagogical contexts, such as faith-based science education institutions.

Over the past two decades, leadership studies in education have shifted from trait-based and transactional models toward adaptive, transformational, and situational approaches. Scholars increasingly argue that no single leadership style is universally effective and that leadership effectiveness depends on the alignment between leadership behavior, follower readiness, and situational demands (Corrigan & Merry, 2022; Day & Sammons, 2021). Within this discourse, situational leadership theory remains influential due to its emphasis on flexibility, responsiveness, and leaders' diagnostic capacity. Situational leadership posits that leaders must adjust task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviors according to the competence and commitment levels of their followers, categorizing leadership behaviors into directive, supportive, participative, and delegative styles. Empirical studies across organizational and educational settings indicate that situational leadership can positively influence motivation, job satisfaction, and performance when applied in alignment with contextual demands (Harris & Jones, 2023; Tian et al., 2021). In educational settings, situational leadership has been associated with improved teacher performance, organizational commitment, and instructional quality.

The theoretical relevance of situational leadership lies in its explicit focus on leadership adaptability grounded in situational diagnosis rather than normative influence or structural role distribution. Unlike transformational leadership, which emphasizes vision and inspirational motivation, or distributed leadership, which focuses on the allocation of leadership roles, situational leadership foregrounds the dynamic alignment between leadership behavior, task complexity, and teacher readiness. This diagnostic logic renders situational leadership particularly relevant for complex school environments characterized by heterogeneous teacher capacities, evolving organizational demands, and sustained performance pressure. Such conditions are especially evident in faith-based science education institutions, where teachers often assume multiple roles as instructors, mentors, and moral exemplars, while simultaneously being expected to demonstrate measurable academic excellence (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Gumus & Bellibas, 2021).

Faith-based science education institutions represent a distinctive educational ecosystem in which academic goals coexist with moral, spiritual, and cultural missions. Leadership in these institutions is not merely administrative but also symbolic and relational, requiring leaders to act as organizational managers, ethical role models, and cultural guardians (Harris et al., 2022). Islamic boarding schools that emphasize science education illustrate this complexity particularly well. While traditionally prioritizing religious instruction, contemporary science-oriented Islamic boarding schools aim to produce graduates who excel in scientific achievement and global academic competition without compromising religious values. This dual mission places significant demands on leadership, particularly in managing teacher performance, curriculum innovation, and achievement-oriented programs under national accountability frameworks (Kafa & Striepe, 2024; Ng & Szeto, 2023). Leadership approaches that rely on rigid authority or uniform expectations risk undermining teacher motivation and organizational cohesion, whereas overly permissive leadership may weaken performance orientation (Parveen et al., 2022).

Despite extensive research on situational leadership and school effectiveness, existing studies have largely examined situational leadership within general educational contexts or have focused on leadership outcomes without sufficient attention to leadership processes embedded in value-based institutions (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). There remains limited qualitative evidence on how situational leadership operates within faith-based science education institutions pursuing sustained national-level excellence, particularly regarding how leadership behaviors are dynamically adjusted across organizational stages, such as student admissions, instructional processes, and graduate outcomes (Shula et al., 2022). Consequently, situational leadership is often conceptualized as a static interpersonal practice rather than as a continuous, adaptive framework that shapes organizational capacity and performance over time. This gap constrains theoretical understanding of situational leadership as an adaptive leadership approach and limits its applicability to complex, value-driven educational environments.

To address this gap, the present study examines how situational leadership serves as an adaptive leadership approach within a high-performing faith-based science education institution. This study contributes to educational leadership literature by reconceptualizing situational leadership as an adaptive institutional framework embedded in organizational processes rather than solely as an interpersonal leadership style. By analyzing leadership practices across input, process, and output stages of school management, the study extends situational leadership theory beyond leader–follower interactions to institutional-level dynamics. Furthermore, by situating situational leadership within a faith-based science education context, the study provides empirical insights into how leadership adaptability interacts with religious values, professional development, and performance accountability to support sustained institutional excellence.

Based on these considerations, the objective of this study is to examine how situational leadership is enacted as an adaptive leadership approach in a faith-based science education institution and how it contributes to teacher performance and national-level school excellence. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How is situational leadership enacted across organizational stages in a faith-based science education institution? (2) How do school leaders align leadership behaviors with varying levels of teacher readiness and situational demands? (3) How does situational leadership function as an adaptive institutional mechanism supporting teacher performance and sustained school excellence? Moreover, (4) How do faith-based values shape and enable the enactment of situational leadership practices in a high-performing school context?

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how situational leadership functions as an adaptive leadership approach within a faith-based science education institution. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to explore leadership practices as they are enacted in real organizational settings, emphasizing meaning, interaction, and contextual dynamics rather than variable measurement. The case study design was considered appropriate as the research addresses “how” and “why” questions related to leadership adaptation within a bounded institutional system. In line with qualitative methodology, a single-case design allows for an in-depth, holistic examination of leadership processes embedded in complex organizational and value-based contexts.

2.2 Research Context and Case Selection

The study was conducted in a faith-based, science-oriented Islamic boarding school in Indonesia that integrates religious values with modern scientific education and has demonstrated sustained national-level academic achievement. This institution was purposively selected based on three criteria: (1) its explicit mission to integrate faith-based education with rigorous science instruction, (2) its formal leadership structure encompassing academic, spiritual, administrative, and achievement-oriented units,

and (3) its documented record of consistent national academic performance. Selecting a single case is methodologically justified because the institution is a critical, information-rich case for examining situational leadership as an adaptive leadership approach in a high-performing, value-driven educational environment. Such a design enables analytical depth and contextual sensitivity rather than statistical generalization.

2.3 Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their roles and direct involvement in leadership practices and institutional performance. A total of 18 participants were involved in the study, consisting of one principal, three vice principals responsible for curriculum, student affairs, and human resources, four achievement coordinators, six teachers from different subject areas and levels of professional experience, and four students actively involved in achievement-oriented programs. This composition ensured representation from leadership, instructional, and student perspectives, enabling a comprehensive analysis of situational leadership practices across organizational levels.

2.4 Data Sources and Research Instruments

Data sources in this study included school leaders, teachers, achievement coordinators, students, leadership meetings, institutional documents, and achievement records. Research instruments, in contrast, referred to the tools used to generate data from these sources. The primary research instrument was the researcher, who was responsible for data collection, interpretation, and analysis. To support systematic data generation, three supporting instruments were developed: a semi-structured interview guide, a non-participant observation protocol, and a document analysis checklist. These instruments were designed based on the core dimensions of situational leadership theory, particularly task behavior, relationship behavior, and follower readiness. An overview of the research instruments, data sources, and analytical focus is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Instruments and Data Sources

Instrument Type	Data Source	Focus of Data
Semi-structured Interview Guide	Principal, vice principals, teachers, achievement coordinators, students	Leadership practices, decision-making processes, teacher readiness, performance support
Observation Protocol	Leadership meetings, program implementation activities	Leadership behaviors, interaction patterns, participation, delegation
Document Analysis Checklist	Institutional policies, achievement records, program plans	Alignment between leadership decisions and institutional outcomes

2.5 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants to explore experiences and perceptions related to leadership practices, teacher readiness, and performance support. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Observations were carried out during leadership meetings and program implementation activities, focusing on leadership behaviors, communication patterns, levels of participation, and delegation of authority. Document analysis involved reviewing institutional policies, program plans, achievement reports, meeting minutes, and performance evaluation records. The use of multiple data collection methods enabled methodological triangulation and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

2.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview

transcripts, observation notes, and documents were systematically coded using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive codes were derived from situational leadership theory, including directive, supportive, participative, and delegative behaviors, as well as teacher readiness. Inductive codes emerged from the data to capture context-specific leadership practices. Data were displayed in matrices and thematic charts to identify patterns across organizational stages and participant perspectives. Conclusions were drawn through iterative comparison, triangulation across data sources, and continuous verification to ensure analytical rigor.

2.7 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Several strategies were employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation, prolonged engagement in the research setting, and member checking with selected participants. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail of data collection and analytical decisions. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive memo writing and the use of participant quotations to support interpretations. Transferability was facilitated by providing detailed contextual descriptions of the research setting and leadership practices. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by using pseudonyms and removing identifying information from all research records.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 Situational Leadership as an Adaptive Leadership Practice

The findings indicate that leadership within the institution was enacted through a dynamic, adaptive combination of behaviors rather than a single dominant style. School leaders continuously adjusted directive, supportive, participative, and delegative behaviors in response to teachers' levels of competence and commitment, as well as the demands of different organizational stages. Leadership decisions were preceded by an informal diagnosis of teacher readiness and task complexity, reflecting an adaptive leadership logic rather than a uniform application of authority. This orientation was articulated clearly by the principal, who stated,

"We cannot treat all teachers the same way. Some need clear direction, especially when new programs start, while others only need trust and space to work. Leadership here must be flexible, not uniform." (Principal Interview).

This statement illustrates how leadership behavior was consciously aligned with variations in teacher readiness across institutional processes. Summary: Situational leadership functioned as an adaptive leadership practice in which leadership behaviors were deliberately aligned with teacher readiness and situational demands, forming a foundational logic for leadership across organizational stages.

3.1.2 Situational Leadership Across Organizational Stages

a. Input Stage: Student Admissions and Teacher Recruitment

At the input stage, which included student admissions and teacher recruitment, leadership behavior was predominantly directive and persuasive. Leaders exercised high task orientation by establishing clear criteria, procedures, and non-negotiable standards to ensure alignment with institutional values and academic expectations. This approach reflected leaders' assessment that staff involved in selection processes demonstrated varying levels of readiness and required explicit guidance due to the high-stakes nature of admissions and recruitment decisions. As one admissions committee member explained,

"At the beginning, the principal gave us very detailed instructions on what kind of students and teachers we should select. The criteria were non-negotiable, especially regarding academic potential and value commitment." (Admissions Team Interview).

At the same time, leaders employed persuasive communication to explain the rationale behind strict standards, fostering commitment rather than resistance. As committee members gained experience, leadership behavior gradually shifted toward participative and delegative approaches, enabling greater autonomy while maintaining accountability. Summary: During the input stage, directive and persuasive leadership behaviors were aligned with moderate teacher readiness and high organizational risk, enabling consistent standards while progressively developing staff competence.

b. Process Stage: Instructional Implementation and Achievement Programs

The process stage, encompassing curriculum implementation, instructional practices, and achievement-oriented programs, demonstrated the most differentiated use of situational leadership. Leadership behaviors varied according to teacher readiness and task complexity. When new initiatives were introduced, leaders adopted both directive and supportive behaviors, providing structured guidance, detailed instructions, and close mentoring. A vice principal described this approach:

"When we introduced the modified STEM curriculum, the principal was very firm and detailed. But once we understood the direction, we were given autonomy to adjust implementation based on classroom realities." (Vice Principal Interview).

Teachers with higher levels of competence and commitment experienced participative and delegative leadership, characterized by collaborative planning and professional trust. One senior teacher noted,

"We are trusted to design learning strategies and mentor students for competitions. The leadership only monitors progress and provides support when needed." (Teacher Interview).

In contrast, less experienced teachers received more intensive guidance and socio-emotional support through coaching and regular feedback. This adaptive alignment enabled leadership to support teacher development while maintaining performance standards. Summary: At the process stage, situational leadership served as a differentiated strategy, aligning leadership behaviors with teachers' varying readiness to support instructional effectiveness and professional growth.

c. Output Stage: Graduation Outcomes and University Placement

At the output stage, which focused on student graduation outcomes and university admissions, leadership behavior was predominantly delegative. Leaders entrusted the Grade XII success team with substantial autonomy in planning and executing achievement strategies, reflecting high confidence in their competence and commitment. Leadership involvement at this stage emphasized strategic alignment and evaluation rather than operational control. The principal described this approach as follows:

"The success team already understands the system and the targets. My role is to ensure alignment and provide support, not to intervene in every decision." (Principal Interview).

Periodic monitoring and evaluation ensured accountability while preserving professional ownership. This delegative approach reinforced trust and contributed to consistently high rates of student acceptance into prestigious universities. Summary: In the output stage, delegative leadership behavior aligned with high teacher readiness enabled distributed responsibility and supported sustained achievement outcomes.

3.1.3 Leadership Alignment with Teacher Readiness

Across all organizational stages, leadership behavior was consistently aligned with teachers' levels of readiness, understood as a combination of competence and commitment. Teachers with lower

readiness experienced more directive and supportive leadership, while those with higher readiness were granted increasing autonomy. Leadership behavior evolved as teachers developed professionally, indicating that readiness was treated as a developmental condition rather than a fixed attribute. An early-career teacher reflected,

"At first, I needed a lot of direction. The leadership was very hands-on. Over time, as I became more confident, they gave me more freedom." (Teacher Interview).

This progression reduced dependency on leadership intervention and strengthened teacher confidence, ownership, and accountability. Summary: Alignment between leadership behavior and teacher readiness served as a developmental mechanism, enabling leadership to adapt and foster teacher growth and professional autonomy.

3.1.4 Situational Leadership and Institutional Performance

The findings further demonstrate that situational leadership contributed to institutional performance by aligning leadership behaviors, teacher readiness, and organizational stages within a coherent adaptive framework. Teachers reported feeling supported rather than controlled, which sustained motivation despite high performance demands. One teacher involved in achievement programs stated,

"Preparing students for competitions is demanding, but leadership support makes it manageable. We feel appreciated and trusted." (Teacher Interview).

Faith-based values reinforced trust, collective responsibility, and commitment, enabling leadership flexibility without undermining achievement orientation. Situational leadership thus operated as an institutional adaptive mechanism that coordinated leadership practices toward sustained national-level excellence. Summary: Situational leadership supported institutional performance by integrating adaptive leadership behaviors, teacher readiness development, and organizational stage-specific demands into a coherent institutional framework.

3.2 Discussion

This study examined how situational leadership is enacted as an adaptive leadership approach within a faith-based science education institution and how such leadership supports teacher performance and sustained national-level school excellence. By integrating qualitative evidence across organizational stages, the findings provide a nuanced understanding of situational leadership as a dynamic, context-sensitive practice embedded in institutional processes rather than a static set of leadership styles. The discussion below situates the findings within existing educational leadership literature, differentiates between theoretical confirmation and extension, and articulates the study's contextual contributions.

3.2.1 Confirmation of Existing Situational Leadership Theory

Consistent with Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory, the findings confirm that leadership effectiveness depends on leaders' ability to align leadership behaviors with followers' levels of competence and commitment. Across organizational stages, school leaders adjusted directive, supportive, participative, and delegative behaviors in response to varying levels of teacher readiness, reinforcing the core assumption that no single leadership style is universally effective. This confirmation aligns with prior empirical studies demonstrating that situational leadership positively influences teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and performance when leadership behavior is appropriately matched to situational demands (Harris & Jones, 2023; Tian et al., 2021).

The findings further corroborate educational leadership research emphasizing the importance of leadership flexibility in complex school environments (Hallinger, 2020; Day & Sammons, 2021). By showing that leaders continuously diagnose task complexity and teacher readiness before determining leadership responses, this study reinforces situational leadership's relevance as a practical framework

for navigating heterogeneous professional capacities and performance pressures in schools. In this sense, the study supports existing theory by providing qualitative evidence that situational leadership remains a viable and effective leadership model in contemporary educational contexts.

3.2.2 Theoretical Extension: Situational Leadership as an Adaptive Institutional Framework

Beyond confirming existing theory, this study extends situational leadership theory by reconceptualizing it as an adaptive institutional framework rather than solely an interpersonal leadership model. While situational leadership has traditionally been applied to dyadic leader–follower interactions, the findings demonstrate that leadership adaptation in this institution operated across organizational stages—input, process, and output—shaping recruitment practices, instructional processes, and achievement management systems. This extension addresses a limitation in prior situational leadership research, which has often treated leadership adaptation as episodic or individual rather than systemic.

The study shows that situational leadership served as a coordinating mechanism, aligning leadership behaviors, teacher readiness development, and organizational processes over time. Leadership adaptation was embedded in institutional routines, performance management structures, and professional development practices, indicating that situational leadership can serve as an organizational logic guiding decision-making and capacity-building. This finding advances situational leadership theory by shifting its analytical focus from isolated leadership behaviors to sustained adaptive processes within complex organizations. In doing so, the study responds to calls in educational leadership literature to examine leadership as an ongoing adaptive practice rather than as a fixed style or role (Walker & Qian, 2021; Ng & Szeto, 2023).

3.2.3 Teacher Readiness as a Developmental Construct

A further theoretical contribution lies in treating teacher readiness as a developmental and malleable condition rather than a static attribute. While situational leadership theory acknowledges varying levels of follower readiness, it often assumes that readiness is fixed at a given point in time. The findings of this study demonstrate that teacher readiness was actively cultivated through leadership practices, including structured guidance, mentoring, participative decision-making, and gradual delegation. As leadership behaviors shifted in response to teachers' professional growth, readiness emerged as both an input to and an outcome of adaptive leadership.

This insight extends situational leadership theory by emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between leadership behavior and follower development. Leadership did not merely respond to existing readiness levels; it also contributed to their evolution over time. This aligns with international research highlighting the role of adaptive and supportive leadership in building teacher capacity and professional confidence (Robinson, 2020; Tran, 2022), while offering a more explicit integration of readiness development within the situational leadership framework.

3.2.4 Contextual Contribution: Faith-Based Values as Enabling Conditions

The findings also contribute contextually by demonstrating how situational leadership operates within a faith-based science education institution without constraining innovation or performance orientation. Rather than functioning as prescriptive norms that limit leadership flexibility, faith-based values such as trust, collective responsibility, and moral commitment acted as enabling conditions for adaptive leadership. These values reinforced participative and delegative leadership behaviors by strengthening relational trust and legitimizing professional autonomy within a shared moral framework.

This analytical treatment of faith-based context advances existing literature on faith-based school leadership, which often focuses on moral leadership or value transmission in isolation (Bush, 2021; Shula et al., 2022). The present study shows that faith-based values can interact productively with situational leadership by providing social and ethical resources that simultaneously support leadership

adaptation and performance accountability. In this way, the study challenges assumptions that value-driven educational contexts inherently constrain leadership flexibility or competitiveness, offering empirical evidence that faith-based identity and adaptive leadership can be mutually reinforcing.

3.2.5 Situational Leadership and Sustainable Institutional Excellence

By integrating leadership behavior, teacher readiness, and organizational stages, the study provides a process-oriented explanation of how situational leadership supports sustained institutional excellence. Delegative leadership at the output stage did not signify reduced leadership involvement but reflected organizational maturity and distributed capacity. This finding aligns with broader leadership research suggesting that adaptive leadership enhances organizational resilience by fostering collective ownership and reducing leadership dependency (Leithwood & Sun, 2020; Hardiansyah & Mulyadi, 2022). Situational leadership thus emerged not only as a response to complexity but as a mechanism for sustaining performance under continuous accountability pressures.

Overall, this study revises situational leadership theory by positioning it as an adaptive institutional framework that operates across organizational stages, cultivates follower readiness, and interacts dynamically with contextual values. By moving beyond an interpersonal interpretation of situational leadership, the study enriches educational leadership theory and offers a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership adaptation contributes to organizational effectiveness in complex, value-driven educational environments.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that situational leadership in a faith-based science education institution functions not merely as a set of flexible leadership styles but as an adaptive institutional framework embedded in school management processes. The findings show that leaders dynamically adjusted directive, supportive, participative, and delegative behaviors across the input, process, and output stages in response to teacher readiness and task complexity. In doing so, leadership adaptation supported teacher development, distributed responsibility, professional autonomy, and sustained institutional performance while preserving the school's value-based identity.

Theoretically, this study extends situational leadership theory by repositioning it from an interpersonal leadership model to an organizational framework that shapes teacher readiness and capacity building over time. Practically, it suggests that school leaders should use situational leadership as a diagnostic and adaptive approach, aligning leadership behavior with teachers' evolving competence, commitment, and institutional demands. However, because this study used a qualitative single-case design, future research should examine this framework across diverse school types, cultural contexts, and longitudinal settings to better understand how leadership adaptation influences teacher readiness, instructional practice, and student learning outcomes.

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