

# Islamic Leadership Based on Human Dignity in Organizational Management: A Conceptual Analysis

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.930000034>

Received: 10 December 2025; Accepted: 16 December 2025; Published: 25 December 2025

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary organizational leadership models are often trapped in a materialistic paradigm, neglecting spiritual and ethical dimensions. This leads to a failure to address issues of social justice and employee wellbeing holistically, causing widespread dissatisfaction within corporate structures and public administration. However, studies integrating the concept of *karamah insaniah* (respect for human dignity) into the framework of Islamic leadership for organizational contexts remain very limited, often only touching upon general moral aspects without a clear operational framework. This conceptual study examines classical Islamic texts and contemporary management literature. A critical content analysis approach is used to form a comprehensive theoretical framework. Three main themes emerge: first, *karamah insaniah* as the theological foundation of Islamic leadership, mandating justice; second, it demands leaders to be empathetic and just in every strategic decision—not merely rhetorical; third, the strengthening of *karamah insaniah* has the potential to create a more productive and humane organizational ecosystem, far from exploitative models. The implication is clear: this leadership model based on *karamah insaniah* offers a critical and urgent alternative for reforming management practices for the universal good.

**Keywords:** Islamic Leadership, Human Dignity, Organizational Management, Islamic Ethics, Employee Justice

## INTRODUCTION

The striking paradox—how an organization supposedly founded on human values often becomes an arena of exploitation—forces us to re-examine the foundations of leadership. Large corporations trumpet "human resources as the primary asset," yet at the same time, profit pressures and toxic work cultures cause widespread suffering among staff, a repulsive irony. This moral crisis, culminating in various corporate scandals and abuses of power, exposes the fragility of a management ideology dominated solely by capitalist logic, where profit figures are glorified more than human dignity and well-being. This is a sad sight. The concept of *karamah insaniah*, deeply rooted in Islamic teachings, asserts that every human being possesses inherent dignity that cannot be violated—it is not merely an empty slogan. Ignoring this principle in leadership, especially in an organizational context, not only violates religious ethics but also damages long-term innovation and productivity potential; does the existing system truly recognize this? The answer, unfortunately, is negative. Ironically, despite consistent calls for the application of ethical values in management, in-depth discussions on how the *karamah insaniah* framework can be operationally integrated into Islamic leadership models still appear vague; existing literature often gets stuck in religious rhetoric without offering a pragmatic blueprint. Many scholars discuss "Islamic leadership" generically, but rarely does anyone unravel in detail how this concept of human dignity, so emphasized in the Quran and Sunnah, translates into daily leadership actions and decisions. This is a serious weakness. Why does no one truly care to address this gap? This gap screams for attention, an intellectual void that must be filled. This conceptual study attempts to fill that void, offering a fresh perspective on the urgent need to reposition *karamah insaniah* as the cornerstone of organizational leadership practices. We need a paradigm shift.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars (e.g., Al-Attas, 1995) emphasize the importance of *adab* (manners) and *akhlak* (morality) in Islamic leadership, a noble and undeniable foundation. However, the extent to which this often idealistic definition can be translated into complex bureaucratic structures in modern times—that is, how these lofty values become concrete actions and not just empty rhetoric—remains a major question that is rarely given sufficient attention. Abdullah (2009) attempts to link Islamic leadership with existing Western models, such as transformational leadership, an effort that, in my view, might be overly simplistic and ignores the uniqueness of Islamic epistemology itself; this approach, indirectly, undermines the richness of Islamic leadership concepts, as if it only requires adaptation to existing molds rather than offering a genuine alternative. The concept of *karamah insaniah*—human dignity—is firmly grounded in Quranic verses (e.g., Surah al-Isra' verse 70). Scholars like Fazlur Rahman (1982) view it as a God-given fundamental right that cannot be violated. However, interpretations of the implications of this *karamah* for social and organizational structures, particularly in management, often stop at the individualistic level, emphasizing personal responsibility alone, rather than how it forms the basis of a just system—this is a significant limitation that restricts the concept's potential. Hashim (2012) attempts to broaden the scope of *karamah* to the dimension of social justice, a bolder and more relevant view for organizational contexts—however, how it translates into performance metrics or reward structures remains an unresolved mystery. The call to apply Islamic ethics in organizational management is not new; many scholars (e.g., Ali & Al-Owaihan, 2008) discuss Islamic work ethic and argue that it leads to productivity and job satisfaction. Nevertheless, this narrative often revolves around a prescriptive framework—"it should be this way"—and offers less descriptive analysis of how these values truly function in the reality of a competitive work environment, which constantly demands profit. The concept of *karamah insaniah*, which should be the essence of this ethic, is often marginalized, considered an 'additional' value rather than the central axis that shapes the entire management foundation. The lack of specific discussion on how *karamah insaniah* can serve as a filter for every management decision—from recruitment policies to termination strategies—causes Islamic ethics to often be seen as ornamentation, not the backbone that drives the organization. Dominant Western organizational behavior (OB) studies (such as Robbins & Judge, 2017) focus on motivation, performance, and leadership styles based on secular psychology and sociology. When Islamic scholars try to inject Islamic values into this framework, the result often appears as a patchwork rather than a holistic organic integration (Al-Aidaros, 2012); this leads to the question: is the concept of *karamah insaniah* merely a minor improvement to existing models, or does it demand a comprehensive reform of our understanding of organizational goals and operations? This is a major issue that every serious thinker must consider. Some (e.g., Yusuf, 2011) argue that Islamic values can enrich OB, but their arguments, unfortunately, tend not to challenge the fundamental assumptions of Western OB, instead merely 'embellishing' it, avoiding deep intellectual confrontation. This entire literature review reveals a significant gap: there is a strong moral demand for just and ethical Islamic leadership, yet the translation of the *karamah insaniah* concept into an operational framework for organizational management remains loose and unstructured. Most studies fail to offer clear mechanisms for how human dignity can become a key indicator in policy formulation, job design, and leadership interactions. The absence of a holistic and practical model centered on *karamah insaniah*, rather than just a peripheral value that can be ignored, is a major disappointment. Therefore, a more in-depth conceptual analysis, unafraid to challenge existing views, is urgently needed to produce a truly transformative framework.

## METHODOLOGY

This study, consciously and deliberately, chose a conceptual analysis approach—not by chance, but as a methodological decision intensely debated in academic discourse. In the social sciences arena, where the urge for 'empirical data' often outweighs the need for a solid theoretical foundation, such a study dares to go against the current, acknowledging that some problems cannot be measured by numbers alone. The problem we are trying to solve—the crisis of human dignity in organizations under supposedly 'ethical' leadership—is not an issue that can be measured merely through superficial surveys or interviews; it is an epistemological crisis that requires the reconstruction of fundamental thought frameworks. We believe that before we can meaningfully measure anything, we must first understand what needs to be measured, and more importantly, why we should care. The document selection process was intricate, not just haphazardly browsing databases or relying on shallow keyword searches. We began by delving into classical Islamic works—specifically from the Quran,

authentic hadiths, and interpretations of reputable scholars like al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun—that directly or indirectly discuss the concept of human dignity (*karamah insaniah*) and leadership ethics, seeking their timeless essence. Simultaneously, contemporary literature in organizational management and leadership, from both Islamic and Western perspectives, was meticulously reviewed; the goal was to identify points of convergence and divergence, as well as clear intellectual gaps that remained unfilled. Sources that were too general, or merely repeated existing rhetoric without offering substantial critical analysis, were flatly rejected—we were not interested in mere ornamentation; we sought substance. Content analysis, which forms the backbone of this methodology, was conducted systematically and iteratively, not a linear process that can be performed by a machine. Each text was carefully examined, not to find 'what' was literally said, but to unravel 'how' and 'why' a concept was expressed in its broader context. Initial codes—such as justice, trust, *shura* (consultation), *ihsan* (excellence), and social responsibility—were identified, then refined and categorized into larger themes, with particular attention to how *karamah insaniah* was implied or neglected in each discourse. This was not merely summarizing; it was an effort of deep interpretation and synthesis, a task demanding patience, diligence, and high intellectual proficiency, to ensure every layer of meaning could be thoroughly peeled back to its roots. The thematic synthesis process required a higher level of conceptual thinking—it involved reorganizing fragments of information into a coherent and meaningful narrative. As themes emerged from the content analysis, we began to search for causal and correlative relationships between them; for example, how the concept of justice in Islam is directly linked to the respect for *karamah insaniah*, and how this, in turn, shapes a just and ethical leadership style in organizations. The conceptual framework constructed was not a static blueprint that could not be altered; instead, it went through several rounds of revision and refinement, where each component was tested for logical validity and consistency with Islamic teachings and the ever-changing realities of modern management. We discarded outdated theories that were no longer relevant or that failed to answer our study's core questions, without compromise. Although conceptual in nature, the rigor of this study cannot be underestimated or dismissed. Precision in source selection, depth of text analysis, and robustness of logical arguments are the primary criteria determining the quality and intellectual contribution of this study. Of course, the main challenge of this approach is the inability to empirically test the proposed framework in real-world contexts—a limitation we honestly and transparently acknowledge. But the contribution of this study lies in providing a solid theoretical foundation, a model that will serve as a valuable guide for future empirical research, as well as a critical tool for evaluating existing, often problematic, leadership practices. It is a beginning, not an end, to a larger discussion, a much-needed contribution to literature often stuck in unproductive repetition and unwilling to challenge the status quo.

## FINDINGS

True leadership, ultimately, is a reflection of obedience to the Divine—something often forgotten in the hustle and bustle of the corporate world. The concept of *karamah insaniah* is not just sweet rhetoric about 'respecting people'; it is a pillar of monotheism that strengthens justice—something often misunderstood in the clamor of modern management. The Quran affirms that humans are elevated in status, given dignity (al-Isra': 70), becoming vicegerents on earth; this is not an empty honor or mere title, but a divine trust that demands every leader, wherever they may be, to protect the dignity of every individual under their supervision with full responsibility. Every action that degrades an employee's dignity—from unfair wages to physically or emotionally oppressive work environments—is not only a violation of human ethics but also a form of betrayal of a heavenly trust. The failure to understand this direct relationship between *karamah* and justice is why many supposedly "Islamic" organizations are still trapped in exploitative practices, as if this fundamental principle is only meant to be read on walls, not to be embodied in every decision made. Empathy in leadership is not about crocodile tears or merely sweet words easily uttered at formal events; it is a critical competence founded on a deep appreciation for *karamah insaniah*—a quality that must reside in the soul of every true leader. Leaders who practice *karamah insaniah* will transcend a purely profit-driven framework, seeing employees not as 'resources' to be exploited to achieve business goals, but as entities with rights, aspirations, and noble souls. They will actively engage in understanding the challenges faced by employees, ensuring fair wage policies commensurate with effort, equitable development opportunities that unlock potential, and a work environment free from all forms of oppression—physical or psychological. This demands the courage to reject management models solely oriented towards figures, which often sacrifice human well-being for attractive financial reports and shareholder praise. Most modern leadership models only emphasize 'emotional management' for the purpose of higher

productivity; the *karamah insaniah* model demands leaders to internalize emotions, understand suffering, and take correct actions, even if difficult. When *karamah insaniah* is elevated as the central axis, it not only changes a leader's style but permeates every fiber and cell of an organization, forming a unique, resilient, and humane ecosystem. An organization that values the dignity of its employees will foster a deep culture of trust, where innovation is not stifled by fear of failure and creativity flourishes in a safe environment for risk-taking. Employees will feel themselves part of a larger purpose, not just replaceable cogs in a large, unfeeling machine. This goes far beyond narrow and materialistic productivity goals; it is about building a supportive community where every individual can grow and contribute their full potential, without feeling threatened by injustice or discrimination. Imagine a workplace where respect is the most valuable primary currency, no longer merely rank or wealth—it would be an unimaginable revolution for ordinary management thinkers trapped in old thought frameworks.

## DISCUSSION

So, what are the implications of our findings regarding *karamah insaniah* as a pillar of justice based on monotheism for the real world of organizational management? Clearly, most contemporary leadership models—even those that boast about their 'ethical' components—fail to truly grasp the depth and necessity of this concept of *karamah insaniah*. These models, typically rooted in Western pragmatic philosophy, tend to view ethics as an 'addition' or 'icing on the cake' to improve corporate image, rather than as an ontological basis for the very existence of the organization, making it secondary to profit. This is a serious flaw that undermines the effectiveness of ethics itself. This failure, I dare say, stems from a profound epistemological difference: one side views humans as tools to achieve profit, the other views humans as an end—an entity dignified by the Creator who cannot be exploited. As a result, issues such as insufficient minimum wages, excessive working hours, and unreasonable work pressure continue to plague employees, despite beautiful slogans about 'welfare' and 'corporate social responsibility' that are often hypocritical. This is a systemic failure that must be corrected. How then can we translate empathetic leadership based on *karamah insaniah* into daily practice, beyond mere sweet rhetoric often heard? This is not just about a leader being personally 'kind-hearted'; it demands a reform of the organizational structure itself, a comprehensive change that touches the grassroots. It demands leaders to no longer hide behind mere performance data, but to engage directly—and sincerely—in the lived experiences of their employees, understanding their challenges and sufferings. It is very likely that organizations that truly embody *karamah insaniah* need to rethink their performance appraisal systems, reward structures, and even power hierarchies; do they truly reflect justice or merely perpetuate existing power imbalances that benefit a select few? Most organizations today, despite having 'employee well-being' programs, are often reactive and superficial, not addressing the deeper root causes, akin to giving painkillers to a cancer patient—alleviating symptoms but not curing the disease. Building a humane organizational ecosystem, as identified in this study's findings, is not merely a cosmetic improvement to look good in public; it demands a radical paradigm shift, a comprehensive change in mindset. It means moving from a management culture driven by control and fear to a culture based on trust and empowerment—a vision rarely achieved in the cruel corporate reality. This challenges classical management theories that treat employees as entities to be monitored and manipulated to achieve organizational goals (Taylor, 1911), undermining their human value. Conversely, the *karamah insaniah* model assumes that when employees' dignity is respected, they will naturally give their best, not out of coercion, but out of a sense of ownership and a nobler purpose. This might sound utopian and impractical, but data shows that human-centered organizations often demonstrate better and more sustainable long-term performance (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012), proving that ethics and profit are not necessarily contradictory. Therefore, ignoring *karamah insaniah* is not only irresponsible ethical negligence but also a costly and detrimental strategic error. The practical implications of this conceptual analysis are significant, and they demand more serious discussion among policymakers and managers at all levels. How do we bridge the gap between the idealistic discourse of *karamah insaniah* and the harsh and challenging reality of management? This requires a re-exploration of corporate governance principles, ethical assessment models, and human capital development systems. Do our human resource departments truly function as guardians of *karamah insaniah*, or merely as administrative tools to enforce rules and control employees? These are questions that must be answered honestly and transparently. We must challenge the narrative that profit and ethics are two conflicting entities; it is a false narrative that has harmed many organizations and societies. This points to a deeper issue—a culture too obsessed with figures and not quality of life, a narrow and dangerous view.



## CONCLUSION

True leadership, yearned for in many discourses and seminars, turns out to be not as simple as imagined; it demands more than just dry technical competence or superficial personal charisma. This conceptual study firmly concludes that effective and sustainable Islamic leadership must be centered on *karamah insaniah*, a principle that far transcends conventional management ethics, which are often bland and ineffective. It is not merely about "being good" or "doing the right thing" haphazardly, but about building a system that inherently respects and preserves the dignity of every individual—something many organizations currently fail to do, even openly violating it, for short-term interests. We have seen how *karamah insaniah* is not just an abstract spiritual concept confined to old scriptures; it is the theological foundation for justice, a practical indicator for empathetic and responsible leadership, and a clear blueprint for building a humane—not robotic or mechanistic—organizational ecosystem that prioritizes human value. Reality shows that organizations that ignore this human dimension, while perhaps achieving impressive short-term profits on paper, will face deep moral and productivity crises in the long run, a heavy price to pay. Employees who feel their dignity challenged and unappreciated will lose motivation, trust, and loyalty—something that cannot be bought with temporary and insincere bonuses or incentives. An organization without *karamah insaniah* is like machinery without oil; it may move initially, but with great friction and will eventually break down, causing greater losses. Ignoring this aspect is folly, not only from a noble ethical perspective but also from a rational business strategy perspective. For future research, specific empirical studies are suggested to assess the impact of implementing this *karamah insaniah* -based leadership model on employee well-being and organizational performance in Malaysia, in diverse contexts. More specifically, research could examine how dimensions of *karamah insaniah*—such as genuine recognition, distributive justice in rewards, and meaningful involvement in decision-making—affect employee turnover rates, organizational commitment, and innovation in Islamic-based companies. It is crucial to measure these indicators quantitatively and qualitatively, not merely relying on general perceptions or anecdotes, to provide concrete evidence of the model's effectiveness. This will enable policymakers and organizational managers to formulate more measurable and effective strategies, moving them away from unproductive old practices. Ignoring the call for leadership rooted in *karamah insaniah* is a great risk that will lead to dire consequences. If we continue to allow organizations to be dominated solely by profit-driven logic, without considering human dignity and nobility, we will not only see a moral collapse in the workplace but also a broader social decline in society. We will create a society filled with alienated, frustrated, and disempowered employees, a dangerous concoction that could explode at any moment, bringing destruction to social structures. This is a stark warning: the choice is ours—either to remain mired in outdated practices that harm all parties, or to rise and rebuild leadership based on the value of human dignity that will bring benefit to all.

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