



INTEGRATING BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS INTO ISLAMIC EDUCATION MANAGEMENT: PROMOTING ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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<https://doi.org/10.61987/jpi.v2i1.1433>

Abstract:

Ethical leadership in Islamic educational management often faces challenges stemming from behavioral biases that affect decision-making. This study aims to analyze how nudge-based leadership can enhance the ethical and moral quality of school principals' decision-making within an Islamic educational context. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected from school leaders and senior teachers through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis, and analyzed using interpretative and content analysis within a behavioral ethical framework. The findings reveal that leadership practices based on moral modeling, moral reminders, and Islamic choice architecture effectively mitigate social-affinity bias, status quo bias, and overconfidence bias in leadership decisions. These strategies foster ethical behavior by embedding values of amanah, adl, ikhlas, and ihsan into daily organizational routines rather than relying on coercive authority. The novelty of this study lies in integrating nudge theory from behavioral economics with Islamic educational management to offer a value-based behavioral leadership model. The study implies that ethical governance in Islamic schools can be strengthened through a non-coercive behavioral design that aligns spiritual values with managerial practices.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 6 November 2025

Revised: 29 Desember 2025

Accepted: 10 Januari 2026

KEY WORDS

Nudge-based leadership, Islamic Educational Management, Behavioral Economics, Behavioral Bias

INTRODUCTION

Ethical decision-making in educational leadership has become a critical issue in contemporary society, particularly in contexts where educational institutions are expected to shape moral character alongside academic achievement. In Islamic cultures, schools and madrasahs are not merely learning institutions but moral ecosystems that cultivate integrity, justice, and social responsibility (Fatmawati et al., 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Tahir, 2023). However, increasing managerial complexity, bureaucratic demands, and performance pressures have challenged school leaders' ability to uphold ethical standards consistently. Empirical evidence from leadership studies indicates that ethical failures in educational governance often stem not from the absence of moral knowledge but from cognitive limitations, social pressures, and situational constraints that shape decision-making (Brunetti et al., 2020; Junarti, Mardika, Alhabshi, & Amirsyah, 2023; Kiguba, Olsson, & Waitt, 2023). Therefore, understanding how leaders actually behave when making decisions is essential. Integrating behavioral perspectives into Islamic

educational management is socially significant, as it provides practical mechanisms to promote ethical conduct and strengthen public trust in educational leadership.

Despite the strong normative foundations of Islamic educational management, a persistent problem remains in translating ethical ideals into consistent managerial practices. School leaders are expected to act rationally and ethically, grounded in Islamic principles such as *amanah*, justice, and accountability (Fatmawati et al., 2024; Surya Bahadur et al., 2024). In reality, however, decision-making processes are frequently influenced by personal interests, institutional pressures, social relationships, and administrative constraints. From a societal perspective, such conditions weaken public confidence in educational institutions and reduce their effectiveness in moral education (Bi, Javadi, & Izadpanah, 2023; Hill, Harth, Ke, Kuok, & Promentilla, 2024; Keleş, 2024). The problem is exacerbated by the assumption embedded in classical management theories that leaders behave as entirely rational actors. This assumption neglects the psychological and behavioral dimensions of leadership (Neely, Lovelace, Cowen, & Hiller, 2020; Sorkin, Wyttenbach, Reyes, & Warner, 2023). Consequently, there is a growing need for an alternative approach that recognizes human limitations while remaining aligned with Islamic ethical values. Addressing this problem is essential for strengthening ethical governance within Islamic educational institutions.

Previous studies have extensively discussed ethical and spiritual leadership within Islamic education. Suhendra et al. (2024) and Usman et al. (2025) emphasize that Islamic leadership strengthens institutional integrity through moral exemplarity, while Mahanani et al. (2022) and Abiddin et al. (2024) highlight the role of value-based management in shaping organizational culture. Bahri et al. (2022), Darwanto et al. (2024), and Islamic et al. (2024) further argue that Islamic leadership enhances trust and accountability in educational organizations. Meanwhile, scholars in behavioral economics, such as Thaler and Sunstein, as well as Latjompoh et al. (2025) and Sahid et al. (2021), demonstrate that human decision-making is systematically biased and can be improved through nudges. Recent studies by Ibrahim et al. (2024) and Wahab et al. (2023) have begun to apply behavioral insights in academic settings. However, existing research essentially treats Islamic educational management and behavioral economics as separate domains. No prior study has explicitly integrated nudge theory into Islamic educational management at the level of madrasah leadership. This theoretical separation constitutes a significant research gap that warrants systematic investigation.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative framework that combines behavioral economics, particularly nudge theory, with Islamic educational management. Unlike previous studies that examine moral norms or behavioral mechanisms in isolation, this research proposes a value-based behavioral design grounded in Islamic principles. The state of the art of this study is the conceptualization of “Islamic nudges,” where subtle behavioral interventions are aligned with values such as *amanah*, justice, and moral responsibility (Daum, Marttinen, & Banville, 2022; Kaepfel, 2021). This approach is urgent because ethical challenges in school leadership cannot be effectively addressed by coercive rules alone. By embedding Islamic values into the choice architecture of leadership decisions, nudges offer a non-coercive, context-sensitive strategy for improving ethical behavior (Kurnanto, Sumin, Zuchdi, & Asmawi, 2023; Osman, 2024; Susilo, Dewantoro, & Yuningsih, 2022). Addressing this issue is crucial for ensuring that

Islamic educational institutions remain morally credible and administratively effective in an increasingly complex academic environment.

Based on the preceding discussion, the central research problem of this study concerns how ethical decision-making in Islamic school leadership can be effectively strengthened in the presence of behavioral biases that systematically influence leaders' judgments. Although Islamic educational institutions possess strong normative ethical frameworks, there is limited empirical understanding of how school principals navigate real-life managerial decisions when confronted with social-affinity bias, status quo bias, and overconfidence bias. Existing leadership models assume rational, value-consistent behavior, leaving a gap between ethical ideals and actual leadership practices. Consequently, the key research problem addressed in this study is: How can nudge-based leadership strategies, grounded in Islamic values, be designed and implemented to mitigate behavioral biases and promote ethical decision-making among Islamic school leaders? Addressing this problem is crucial for developing leadership approaches that are both morally grounded and behaviorally realistic within Islamic educational management.

This study argues that ethical leadership in Islamic education can be enhanced through a value-based behavioral approach that integrates nudge theory with Islamic ethical principles. As a provisional answer to the research problem, this study posits that "Islamic nudges" such as moral modeling, moral reminders, and value-oriented choice architecture can effectively reduce behavioral biases without undermining leaders' autonomy. The originality of this research lies in its explicit synthesis of behavioral economics and Islamic educational management at the level of school leadership. This integration has not been systematically explored in prior studies. The study contributes theoretically by extending nudge theory to a religious-ethical context and practically by offering a non-coercive leadership model that embeds amanah, adl, ikhlas, and ihsan in everyday managerial routines. This contribution offers a new pathway to strengthen ethical governance and decision-making in Islamic educational institutions.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to obtain an in-depth, contextual understanding of nudge-based leadership in Islamic educational management (Kekeya, 2023). The qualitative case study was selected because the research focused not on measuring causal relationships or testing variables statistically, but on exploring leadership processes, meanings, and ethical reasoning as they unfold in real organizational settings. This design enables a holistic examination of how behavioral economics, particularly nudge theory, is integrated with Islamic values in school leadership practices. By emphasizing interpretation and contextual analysis, the study captures behavioral patterns, cognitive biases, and ethical considerations that shape decision-making among school leaders, which rational-choice-based management models often overlook.

The research was conducted at MAN 2 Jember, a public Islamic senior secondary school in East Java, under the authority of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia. This site was purposefully selected for several reasons. First, MAN 2 Jember represents a madrasah that operates within a modern bureaucratic system while maintaining a strong commitment to Islamic values in its organizational culture. Second, the school exhibits leadership practices that emphasize moral exemplarity, value-based communication, and ethical governance, making it a relevant setting for examining the practical application of

nudge-based leadership. Third, the accessibility of the research site and the openness of school stakeholders enabled sustained observation and meaningful engagement with leadership activities in their natural context.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that informants had direct experience, held strategic roles, and possessed deep knowledge of leadership dynamics within the madrasah. The unit of analysis in this study was the principal's leadership practices as reflected in policy decisions, daily managerial actions, and social interactions within the school community. The informants included the school principal, the vice-principals responsible for academic and student affairs, and senior teachers with long-term involvement in the institution. These participants were selected because they were directly involved in or affected by leadership decision-making processes and therefore could provide rich, credible insights into how ethical considerations and behavioral nudges were enacted in practice.

Data were collected through multiple qualitative techniques to ensure depth and credibility (Cole, 2024). The primary methods included in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of ethical decision-making, leadership behavior, and the use of nudge strategies, including moral appreciation, symbolic messaging, and environmental structuring. Participant observation was carried out over three weeks to capture the principal's real-life behavior in meetings, informal interactions, and decision-making situations. Document analysis included the review of school regulations, meeting minutes, internal policy documents, moral slogans, and Qur'anic verses or prophetic traditions displayed in the school environment, which functioned as ethical cues within the organizational setting.

Data analysis was conducted inductively using an interactive model comprising data condensation, data display, and the drawing and verification of conclusions (Lee, Liu, Ma, & Pan, 2024). During the data condensation stage, raw data were selected, coded, and analyzed to identify themes related to leadership behavior, ethical values, behavioral biases, and nudge strategies. The data display stage involved organizing the condensed data into descriptive narratives and thematic matrices that illustrated patterns of nudge-based leadership and ethical responses within the school community. The final stage involved verification through critical reflection, comparison across data sources, and the refinement of emerging interpretations. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data validity was established through triangulation of sources and methods, member checking with key informants, and peer debriefing. Through this rigorous analytical process, the study aimed to develop a credible, comprehensive understanding of how behavioral economics can enhance ethical decision-making in Islamic educational leadership.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The following section presents the study's main findings, derived from systematic observations and in-depth analysis of leadership practices in an Islamic educational setting. The results highlight the conceptual foundation of nudge-based leadership, the presence of behavioral biases in decision-making, and strategies to foster ethical behavior through non-coercive, value-driven leadership.

The Fundamental Concept of Nudge-based leadership in the Islamic Context

In this study, nudge-based leadership within the Islamic context is defined as a leadership approach that employs subtle behavioral nudges to foster ethical and moral behavior among school members without coercion, yet grounded in Islamic values such as *amanah* (trustworthiness), *adl* (justice), *ikhlas* (sincerity), and *ihsan* (excellence). The principal acts as a moral designer, creating an ethical work environment that fosters ethical decision-making through personal example, communication of values, and spiritual habituation. This approach is not a form of manipulation but rather a leadership strategy that constructs an Islamic choice architecture, whereby ethical behavior becomes the most logical and conscience-driven choice rooted in faith.

Interviews with the principal of MAN 2 Jember revealed that he seldom issues rigid directives. Instead, he prefers to invite teachers to discuss and interpret policies from moral and *syar'i* (Islamic legal) perspectives. As he stated, "I try to build a decision-making culture that does not simply command but invites teachers to think together. For example, before finalizing a policy, I explain its moral and *Sharia* basis. That way, they are encouraged to follow it as part of their faith-based responsibility rather than as mere compliance." This illustrates that ethical decision-making at MAN 2 Jember stems from spiritual awareness rather than structural compulsion.

The Vice Principal for Curriculum further emphasized that the principal models moral values through daily behavior: "He often sets an example through small actions. For instance, during meetings, he arrives early and begins with a prayer. We feel ashamed of our lack of discipline. It is like a gentle push, no orders, but it inspires us to uphold ethical conduct." This demonstrates that nudge-based leadership operates through moral modeling, practical examples that foster collective moral responsibility. Observations conducted over three weeks confirmed these accounts. The school environment displays Qur'anic verses and *hadiths* emphasizing honesty, trust, and responsibility on the walls of teacher and administrative rooms. Meetings begin with prayers and moral reflections, reinforcing spiritual objectives behind every policy.

Decision-making processes are participatory, allowing teachers to contribute in accordance with principles of justice and communal benefit (*maslahah*). These findings indicate that the principal embeds Islamic values into the organizational structure without enforcing compliance through formal authority. In summary, nudge-based leadership at MAN 2 Jember operates through the internalization of Islamic values within everyday leadership practices. The principal influences ethical behavior through moral framing, moral modeling, and the creation of an ethical symbolic environment. Ethical behavior thus emerges from spiritual consciousness rather than fear of punishment. This represents a practical integration of behavioral economics within Islamic educational management.

Identification of Behavioral Biases in Decision-Making

In this study, behavioral bias is operationally defined as a pattern of decision-making behavior that deviates from entirely rational and ethically ideal considerations due to social, emotional, or habitual influences within the leadership context. At the field level, behavioral bias refers to subtle tendencies that affect how the principal prioritizes options, evaluates alternatives, and balances competing interests when making managerial and ethical decisions. These biases do not indicate unethical intentions; instead, they reflect limitations in judgment arising from concerns about social harmony,

reliance on past practices, and confidence in personal experience. In Islamic educational management, behavioral bias manifests when leadership decisions partially diverge from the principles of *amanah* (trustworthiness), *adl* (justice), and *ikhlas* (sincerity), particularly in situations that require trade-offs between relational cohesion and organizational effectiveness. The identification of behavioral biases was derived from systematic observations of leadership practices, planning meetings, task allocation processes, and organizational routines. The observed behaviors and their corresponding indicators are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Observed Behavioral Biases in Leadership Decision-Making

Observed Behavior	Indicator
Leadership decisions prioritize maintaining interpersonal harmony	Decisions favor relational closeness over objective evaluation
Recurrent use of previous-year programs without modification	Dependence on existing practices and avoidance of alternative options
Limited discussion of new ideas during meetings	Preference for confirming existing assumptions
Task assignments based on familiarity	Reliance on personal trust rather than competence-based criteria
Strong confidence in personal judgment	Minimal solicitation of external or dissenting input

Table 1 indicates that leadership decisions consistently reflect non-rational patterns shaped by social relationships, habitual practices, and personal judgment. The repeated prioritization of interpersonal harmony suggests that relational considerations frequently outweigh efficiency and fairness in decision-making. Similarly, reliance on prior-year programs reflects a tendency to maintain familiar systems, even when contextual changes indicate the need for innovation. The limited emergence of alternative viewpoints during meetings further reinforces confirmatory tendencies, in which existing assumptions are maintained rather than critically examined. Restating these findings, leadership behavior at the research site shows a consistent pattern in which emotional closeness, routine continuity, and personal confidence influence decisions alongside ethical intentions. These observations strengthen the interpretation that behavioral bias operates subtly within leadership practices and affects the moral quality of decisions.

Overall, the data reveal a clear pattern of behavioral bias characterized by relational preference, resistance to change, and experiential dominance in leadership decision-making. Decisions tend to prioritize social cohesion over procedural justice, stability over adaptation, and personal experience over collective deliberation. While these patterns contribute to organizational harmony and reduce overt conflict, they also create conditions in which fairness, transparency, and professional accountability may be compromised. The persistence of these patterns suggests that ethical leadership in this context is shaped by ongoing negotiation between moral intentions and behavioral tendencies. As a result, ethical decision-making becomes situational rather than consistently principled, underscoring the need for leadership mechanisms that align daily decisions with ethical ideals through structured behavioral guidance.

Strategies for Implementing Nudge-based leadership

In this study, nudge-based leadership strategies are operationally defined as leadership practices that guide ethical behavior by subtly shaping the decision environment rather than relying on direct commands or formal authority. At the field level, these strategies function as Islamic choice architecture, making ethical actions aligned with the values of *amanah*, *adl*, *ihsan*, and *ikhlas* more visible, accessible, and socially reinforced. This approach emphasizes persuasion, moral awareness, and habituation, allowing ethical behavior to emerge naturally through daily leadership practices, organizational routines, and symbolic environments. Nudge-based leadership in this context operates by embedding Islamic ethical values into behavioral cues that influence how school members perceive options and make decisions.

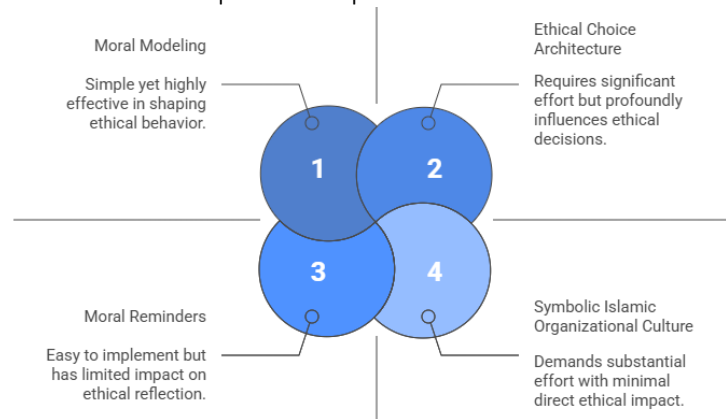


Figure 1. Strategies for Implementing Nudge-based leadership

The findings indicate that nudge-based leadership is manifested through several interconnected practices. These include consistent moral modeling by the principal in punctuality, transparency, and discipline; the use of moral reminders through Islamic quotations and value-based messages displayed in school spaces; the integration of prayer and moral reflection into formal meetings and daily routines; the structuring of decision-making processes so that ethically preferable options become the default choices; and the creation of a symbolic religious environment that continuously reinforces ethical awareness. Together, these practices constitute the core strategies for encouraging moral behavior without coercion.

Overall, the data reveal a coherent pattern in which ethical leadership is produced through alignment between behavior, environment, and values. Moral modeling establishes credibility and trust, moral reminders function as continuous ethical cues, and ethical choice architecture reduces resistance to moral action by making it the easiest option. These strategies collectively shape habits and perceptions within the school community, resulting in ethical decision-making that is consistent, internalized, and socially supported. The pattern suggests that nudge-based leadership effectively transforms abstract Islamic values into practical managerial behavior, thereby sustaining ethical governance through behavioral design rather than authoritative control.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and extend the existing literature on ethical and Islamic educational leadership by demonstrating that normative values do not solely drive ethical decision-making; they are also significantly shaped by behavioral and contextual factors. Previous studies on Islamic leadership emphasize moral integrity,

trustworthiness, and justice as core attributes of effective leadership, assuming that leaders act rationally in accordance with religious principles (Harsanto, Pradana, Firmansyah, Apriliadi, & Ifghaniyafi Farras, 2024; Sobana, Yusup, Hartati, Yulandri, & Budiana, 2024). The present findings align with this perspective in showing that Islamic values such as *amanah*, *adl*, *ikhlas*, and *ihsan* are central to leadership practice (Elshaer et al., 2023; Singh, 2020). However, this study departs from conventional assumptions by revealing that ethical intentions alone are insufficient to guarantee consistently ethical decisions. Instead, leadership behavior is mediated by bounded rationality, social considerations, and habitual practices, indicating that ethical leadership must be understood as a behavioral process rather than merely a moral one (Analiansyah et al., 2024; Supatminingsih et al., 2025).

Identifying behavioral biases in leadership decision-making supports and contextualizes insights from behavioral economics, which argue that non-rational factors systematically influence decision-makers. While earlier leadership studies often frame bias as a managerial weakness or deviation from professionalism, the findings of this study suggest a more nuanced interpretation (Hornsey, Finlayson, Chatwood, & Begeny, 2020; Mehmood, Jian, Akram, Akram, & Tanveer, 2022). Behavioral biases observed in the madrasah context emerge not from unethical motives but from efforts to preserve harmony, stability, and relational cohesion (Canavesi, 2022; Obaideen et al., 2025). This finding partially contrasts with dominant managerial perspectives that prioritize efficiency and objectivity, as it shows that, in Islamic educational settings, ethical leadership frequently entails balancing justice and social solidarity. Thus, this study contributes to the literature by situating behavioral bias within a moral and spiritual leadership framework rather than treating it as a purely cognitive flaw.

The findings on nudge-based leadership strategies align closely with behavioral leadership literature, which highlights the effectiveness of non-coercive interventions in shaping ethical behavior. Prior research on nudge theory emphasizes choice architecture, default options, and informational cues as tools to influence behavior without restricting freedom (Husin et al., 2024; Robson, DeLuccia, Baker, Bodt, & Trabulsi, 2020). This study extends that body of knowledge by demonstrating how nudges can be culturally and religiously embedded within Islamic educational management. Unlike secular applications of nudges that rely primarily on cognitive heuristics, the nudges identified in this study operate through moral modeling, spiritual routines, and symbolic religious environments (Ahmed et al., 2025; Otero, 2022; Retnowati et al., 2023). This indicates a contextual adaptation of behavioral economics, in which nudges are not value-neutral but are explicitly grounded in faith-based ethics, representing a distinctive contribution to both Leadership and behavioral studies.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study have important implications for the development of leadership and management theories within Islamic education. First, this research reinforces the argument that ethical leadership cannot be adequately explained by normative or value-based frameworks alone. By integrating behavioral economics into Islamic educational management, the study extends existing theories of Islamic leadership toward a behaviorally informed model that acknowledges bounded rationality and contextual influence. This challenges the dominant rational-actor assumption and contributes to theory by positioning Islamic ethics not only as moral ideals but as operationalized values embedded within choice architecture. Furthermore, the concept of Islamic nudges enriches behavioral leadership theory by demonstrating

that nudges can be ethically grounded, culturally situated, and spiritually meaningful, thereby expanding the applicability of behavioral economics beyond secular organizational contexts.

From a practical perspective, this study offers actionable insights for school principals, educational policymakers, and administrators in Islamic educational institutions. The findings suggest that ethical governance can be strengthened through non-coercive leadership strategies that subtly guide behavior rather than relying solely on formal rules or disciplinary mechanisms. Practices such as moral modeling by leaders, routine-based moral reminders, and the structuring of decision environments around Islamic values can reduce the impact of behavioral biases while preserving relational harmony. For policymakers and leadership trainers, this implies incorporating behavioral ethics and nudge-based strategies into leadership development programs for madrasah principals. In practice, the study provides a scalable, culturally relevant leadership model that aligns spiritual values with managerial effectiveness, thereby enhancing ethical consistency and institutional credibility in Islamic schools.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study reveals that nudge-based leadership within the context of Islamic education at MAN 2 Jember fosters a pattern of decision-making that is more ethical, reflective, and oriented toward spiritual values such as *amanah* (trustworthiness), *adl* (justice), *ihsan* (excellence), and *ikhlas* (sincerity). This leadership approach emphasizes moral influence without coercion, positioning the principal as a moral designer who stimulates ethical behavior through personal example, value communication, and the creation of a symbolic environment grounded in Islamic principles. The key insight derived from this finding is that moral and behavioral transformation need not rely on strict control or administrative sanctions. Still, it can instead emerge through nudges that awaken faith-based awareness and spiritual responsibility. Thus, nudge-based leadership represents a relevant model of Islamic leadership for cultivating an organizational culture rooted in justice, harmony, and *maslahah* (communal benefit).

From a scholarly perspective, this research makes an essential contribution by renewing the theoretical perspective of Islamic educational management through the integration of behavioral economics and Islamic values. It offers a novel framework for understanding Islamic leadership not only from a normative standpoint but also through behavioral and psychological dimensions, thereby enriching the faith-and-behavior-based leadership paradigm. The strength of this study lies in its synthesis of choice architecture and Islamic spirituality, yielding an ethical, contextually grounded leadership model. However, this study is limited in scope, as it was conducted at a single site, MAN 2 Jember, with participants limited to the principal and a small number of teachers. Therefore, future research should expand its scope by incorporating diverse institutional contexts and gender and age diversity, and by employing survey or quantitative methods to obtain a more comprehensive understanding. The findings are expected to serve as a foundation for developing more effective, inclusive, and ethically grounded leadership policies in Islamic education.

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