Mission-Driven and Character-Based Leadership in Local Government Tourism Management: A Qualitative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT: This study is motivated by indications of low work discipline and work spirit among employees of the Tourism Office of North Kolaka Regency, as reflected in late attendance, absenteeism, and frequent leave submissions. Such conditions potentially affect employee performance and the overall achievement of organizational work programs. Leadership therefore plays a crucial role in shaping employee behavior, performance, and organizational work culture. This research aims to identify the leadership style applied by the Head of the Tourism Office in managing the tourism sector, to examine its influence on employee performance and work program achievement, and to analyze its impact on organizational work culture. The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using an inductive method. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing techniques. The findings reveal that the Head of the Tourism Office applies a character-based leadership style, characterized by exemplary behavior, discipline enforcement, continuous evaluation, and direct guidance to employees. This leadership style positively influences employee performance, supports the successful implementation of work programs, and fosters a more disciplined and responsible work culture within the organization. The study concludes that character leadership is an effective leadership approach in improving employee performance and organizational effectiveness in the public sector.

Keywords: leadership style; character leadership; employee performance; work culture; public organization

ABSTRAK*: Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh indikasi rendahnya disiplin dan semangat kerja pegawai di Dinas Pariwisata Kabupaten Kolaka Utara, yang tercermin dari keterlambatan kehadiran, tingkat ketidakhadiran, serta tingginya pengajuan izin kerja. Kondisi tersebut berpotensi memengaruhi kinerja pegawai dan pencapaian program kerja organisasi secara keseluruhan. Oleh karena itu, kepemimpinan memegang peran penting dalam membentuk perilaku, kinerja, dan budaya kerja organisasi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi gaya kepemimpinan yang diterapkan oleh Kepala Dinas Pariwisata dalam mengelola sektor pariwisata, menganalisis pengaruh gaya kepemimpinan tersebut terhadap kinerja pegawai dan pencapaian program kerja dinas, serta mengkaji dampaknya terhadap budaya kerja organisasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan metode induktif. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi, sedangkan teknik analisis data meliputi reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Kepala Dinas Pariwisata menerapkan gaya kepemimpinan berbasis karakter, yang ditandai dengan keteladanan, penegakan disiplin, evaluasi berkelanjutan, serta pemberian arahan langsung kepada pegawai. Gaya kepemimpinan ini berpengaruh positif terhadap peningkatan kinerja pegawai, mendukung keberhasilan pelaksanaan program kerja, serta membentuk budaya kerja yang lebih disiplin dan bertanggung jawab dalam organisasi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kepemimpinan berbasis karakter merupakan pendekatan yang efektif dalam meningkatkan kinerja pegawai dan efektivitas organisasi di sektor publik.*

Kata kunci: *gaya kepemimpinan; kepemimpinan berbasis karakter; kinerja pegawai; budaya kerja; organisasi publik*

INTRODUCTION

Leadership plays a crucial role in determining organizational effectiveness, particularly in public sector institutions where performance is closely linked to service quality, accountability, and ethical governance. In contemporary organizational contexts, leadership is no longer defined solely by technical expertise or seniority, but by the leader's capacity to influence behavior, shape values, and inspire commitment among subordinates. A strong leadership style is therefore essential in fostering discipline, responsibility, and sustained organizational performance.

In public organizations, character-based leadership has gained increasing attention due to its emphasis on integrity, ethical values, and exemplary behavior. Leaders who demonstrate character leadership are able to build trust, empower employees, and encourage collaboration while maintaining firm and fair enforcement of organizational regulations. Such leadership is particularly relevant in the tourism sector, which requires not only administrative efficiency but also innovation, stakeholder synergy, and a commitment to sustainable development.

Leaders with strong moral character are expected to prioritize public interests, uphold ethical standards, and create a work culture that supports professionalism and accountability.

The Head of the North Kolaka Regency Tourism Office represents a leadership model that emphasizes character development through discipline, responsibility, and continuous evaluation of employee performance. This leadership style is reflected in practices such as setting a personal example of discipline, accommodating employee aspirations, encouraging participation in decision-making, and applying sanctions for regulatory violations in a firm yet development-oriented manner. By fostering ethical conduct and emotional engagement among employees, this leadership approach seeks to strengthen organizational cohesion and enhance performance outcomes.

Theoretical perspectives further underline the importance of leadership in influencing employee behavior and organizational goal attainment. Hersey and Blanchard define leadership as the process of influencing individuals or groups to achieve shared objectives, while Effendi emphasizes leadership as the ability to convince and direct others toward predetermined organizational goals. These definitions highlight leadership as a dynamic process of behavioral influence that operates within specific situational contexts. Leadership, therefore, is not merely a positional authority but a relational process that shapes motivation, commitment, and collective action.

Despite the strategic role of leadership, empirical conditions within the North Kolaka Regency Tourism Office indicate several challenges related to employee work morale and discipline. Monitoring results reveal instances of late attendance, absenteeism, and frequent leave requests, which reflect a decline in work discipline among some employees. Such conditions may negatively affect individual performance, disrupt teamwork, and ultimately hinder the achievement of organizational programs. These phenomena suggest the need for effective supervision and leadership practices that can motivate employees and reinforce responsibility across functional areas.

Previous studies have emphasized the relationship between leadership style and employee performance; however, limited research has specifically explored character-based leadership within local government tourism offices, particularly in the context of developing regions. This gap highlights the need for in-depth qualitative research that examines how leadership style is enacted in practice and how it influences employee behavior, organizational culture, and program implementation.

Based on the issues outlined above, this study aims to identify the leadership style applied by the Head of the Tourism Office in managing the tourism sector in North Kolaka Regency. By focusing on character-based leadership, this research

seeks to contribute to the understanding of leadership practices in public sector tourism management and provide empirical insights for strengthening organizational performance and governance.

METHODs

This study employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach to explore and analyze leadership practices without the intention of generalizing findings to broader populations. A qualitative method was considered appropriate as it enables an in-depth understanding of leadership style, employee perceptions, and organizational dynamics within their real institutional context.

The research was conducted at the Tourism Office of North Kolaka Regency. Informants were selected purposively based on their ability to provide relevant and credible information regarding the leadership style applied by the Head of the Tourism Office. The informants consisted of employees who were directly involved in daily organizational activities and had sufficient interaction with the leadership to reflect on its influence.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility for probing while maintaining consistency across informants. Interviews focused on leadership practices, discipline enforcement, employee motivation, work culture, and the perceived impact of leadership on performance and program implementation. In addition, limited observations and document reviews were used to support and contextualize the interview data.

Data analysis followed an interactive model consisting of three main stages. First, data reduction was conducted by summarizing interview transcripts, selecting relevant information, and focusing on key themes related to leadership style, employee performance, and organizational culture, while excluding irrelevant data. Second, the reduced data were presented in the form of narrative descriptions and thematic categorizations to facilitate interpretation and pattern identification. Third, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified by revisiting the data to ensure consistency with the research objectives and problem formulation.

To ensure data credibility and trustworthiness, this study applied triangulation techniques. Triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from different informants, using multiple data collection methods, and collecting data at different times. This process helped to validate findings, minimize researcher bias, and strengthen the reliability of the research results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Leadership Style Applied by the Head of the Tourism Office

The findings indicate that the leadership style applied by the Head of the North Kolaka Regency Tourism Office is predominantly character-based leadership. This

leadership style emphasizes integrity, discipline, responsibility, and exemplary behavior as the core values guiding organizational management. The leader consistently demonstrates discipline, commitment, and ethical conduct, thereby functioning as a role model for employees and fostering a positive organizational climate.

In managing the tourism sector, the Head of the Tourism Office prioritizes human resource development through structured training programs related to tourism destination management, particularly for Berova Beach and Tinukari Whitewater Rafting. These programs aim to enhance employees' technical competencies and professional capacities in managing regional tourism potential. In addition, routine meetings are held at least twice a week to evaluate ongoing activities, provide guidance, and strengthen coordination among staff.

Interview results confirm that the leadership style emphasizes participation and openness. Employees are encouraged to express their aspirations and ideas, which are considered and developed when deemed constructive, although final decision-making authority remains with the leader. This inclusive approach strengthens employees' sense of belonging and appreciation within the organization, contributing positively to organizational harmony and teamwork. As stated by the Head of the Tourism Office:

> *"The leadership implemented at the North Kolaka Regency Tourism Office prioritizes a character-based approach. Leaders demonstrate strong integrity, provide clear direction, and serve as role models who create a positive and productive work culture."* (Interview, October 1, 2024)

These findings align with the concept of inclusive and compassionate leadership, where leaders pay attention to employee welfare, motivation, and professional growth. Such leadership contributes to increased obedience, commitment, and professionalism among subordinates.

Influence of Leadership Style on Employee Performance and Work Program Achievement

The character-based leadership style applied by the Head of the Tourism Office has a significant influence on employee performance and the achievement of organizational work programs. Informants consistently emphasized the importance of trust, guidance, and motivation in enabling employees to carry out their duties effectively.

Employees reported receiving clear direction before commencing tasks, either during roll calls or coordination meetings. This practice ensures that employees

understand their roles, responsibilities, and performance expectations. One informant stated:

> *"Yes, because if you do not trust employees, how can they perform their work properly?"* (Interview, October 1, 2024, KD)

This trust is reinforced through continuous supervision and guidance, especially for employees who experience difficulties in understanding instructions. Employees are encouraged to seek clarification from supervisors, colleagues, or relevant departments to ensure task completion aligns with organizational objectives.

Motivation is also a central component of leadership practice. Leaders consistently provide encouragement during meetings to ensure tasks are completed effectively and satisfactorily. As noted by one informant:

> *"During leadership meetings, I always provide motivation so that the work can be completed properly and satisfactorily."* (Interview, October 3, 2024, AG)

These practices demonstrate that leadership not only directs but also supports employees through guidance, motivation, and problem-solving, thereby improving individual and collective performance.

Impact of Leadership Style on Organizational Work Culture

The leadership style applied by the Head of the Tourism Office has positively shaped the organizational work culture. Employees reported feeling fairly treated, valued, and motivated due to the leader's firm yet just approach in enforcing discipline. Employees who violate regulations are reprimanded fairly, without discrimination, fostering a sense of justice and accountability.

> *"The leadership is fair by reprimanding employees who are lazy or complete their work late."* (Interview, October 2, 2024, KM)

Supervision plays a crucial role in maintaining discipline and preventing deviations from organizational goals. The Head of the Office, assisted by the secretary, monitors employee performance to ensure compliance with regulations and standards. This supervision aims not to punish but to guide employees toward improvement and professional growth.

The leadership style also encourages participation in decision-making processes. While strategic decisions remain centralized, employees are given the

opportunity to express opinions and contribute ideas. This openness enhances transparency, trust, and emotional engagement between leaders and subordinates.

"Every employee has the right to express their opinion, but decision-making depends on the issue."(Interview, October 2, 2024, KM)

Furthermore, leadership emphasizes ideological and ethical values by aligning organizational goals with shared values and aspirations. This approach strengthens employees' commitment and reinforces a collective sense of purpose within the organization.

Leadership Practices and Employee Development

The results reveal that leadership practices focus strongly on employee development and welfare. Leaders demonstrate concern for employees' professional growth by providing specialized training, consultation, and continuous feedback. When problems arise, leaders prioritize understanding the root causes, offering guidance, and reminding employees of applicable regulations. Sanctions are applied only when violations are severe and potentially harmful to the organization.

"I always look at problems first and give directions or remind employees about regulations so they can improve." (Interview, October 1, 2024, KD)

This approach reflects a balance between firmness and compassion, reinforcing discipline while supporting learning and improvement. Employees are encouraged to comply with regulations consciously, recognizing their rights and obligations as part of organizational responsibility.

Discussion

The discussion demonstrates that the character-based leadership style applied by the Head of the North Kolaka Regency Tourism Office is effective in enhancing employee performance, achieving organizational work programs, and cultivating a positive work culture. By integrating ethical values, transformational leadership principles, and participatory practices, the leadership approach addresses both task-oriented and human-oriented dimensions of management. These findings contribute to the literature on public sector leadership and tourism governance, particularly in regional government contexts, and highlight the importance of character leadership in achieving sustainable organizational performance.

Leadership Style Applied by the Head of the Tourism Office in Managing the Tourism Sector

The findings of this study indicate that the leadership style applied by the Head of the North Kolaka Regency Tourism Office reflects a character-based and mission-driven leadership orientation. This leadership approach is crucial in tourism management, as the tourism sector requires long-term planning, innovation, stakeholder collaboration, and strong moral commitment. Effective tourism governance cannot be separated from a leader's ability to articulate a clear vision and translate it into operational actions aligned with regional development policies.

The existence of a mission-driven government framework enables leaders with legitimate authority to provide clear direction to regional apparatus organizations. In this context, the Head of the Tourism Office aligns leadership practices with the Regional Medium-Term Development Plan, allowing organizational units to innovate and manage tourism destinations—such as Berova Beach and Tinukari Whitewater Rafting—without deviating from regulatory frameworks. This finding supports the argument that effective leadership does not restrict innovation but instead provides a structured space for creativity and accountability within public organizations.

Furthermore, the leadership practices observed demonstrate strong ethical sensitivity and moral awareness. This aligns with paradigms of ethical and spiritual leadership, which emphasize integrity, moral decision-making, and meaningful service. Leaders who possess ethical sensitivity are better equipped to consider the moral consequences of their actions and decisions, thereby fostering trust and legitimacy among employees and stakeholders. This finding is consistent with Zhao's (1994) concept of paternalistic leadership, which emphasizes leaders' concern for employees' professional and personal well-being. Such concern is believed to enhance employee motivation, as subordinates strive to achieve high performance as a form of moral reciprocity and recognition from their leaders.

The study also reveals elements of inclusive leadership, where employees are encouraged to express ideas and aspirations. Although decision-making authority remains centralized, participatory mechanisms strengthen employees' sense of belonging and psychological ownership within the organization. This supports previous research suggesting that inclusive leadership enhances employee engagement and organizational commitment, particularly in public sector institutions.

Influence of Leadership Style on Employee Performance and Work Program Achievement

The findings demonstrate that the leadership style of the Head of the Tourism Office has a direct and positive influence on employee performance and the achievement of organizational work programs. Character-based leadership fosters trust, motivation, and clarity of roles, which are essential components of employee productivity. Employees who receive clear direction, guidance, and supervision tend to perform their tasks more effectively and with greater responsibility.

This result aligns with Sutrisno's (2016) assertion that leadership theories function as guiding frameworks rather than universal formulas for success. Leaders must adapt their leadership styles to organizational contexts and employee characteristics. An effective leadership style—characterized by motivation, participatory goal setting, and two-way communication—can enhance work spirit and performance. Conversely, inappropriate leadership styles may lead to frustration, dissatisfaction, and decreased employee morale.

The empirical findings show that leadership practices such as regular meetings, structured supervision, trust in subordinates, and consistent motivation significantly contribute to achieving work program targets. These practices reflect principles of transformational leadership, where leaders inspire and motivate employees to exceed routine expectations. By emphasizing vision, encouragement, and performance-oriented support, the Head of the Tourism Office effectively mobilizes employees toward achieving organizational goals.

Impact of Leadership Style on Organizational Work Culture

This study further confirms that leadership style plays a central role in shaping organizational work culture. The findings indicate that leadership in the North Kolaka Regency Tourism Office has positively influenced work culture by promoting discipline, fairness, participation, and accountability. Leaders assign tasks according to formal job descriptions, provide guidance through meetings and training, and create opportunities for employee involvement in decision-making processes.

These practices align with transformational leadership theory as proposed by Duha (2016), which emphasizes four key dimensions: attributed charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The presence of these dimensions in leadership practices contributes to improved employee performance and a healthier organizational climate. Leaders who articulate a clear vision and demonstrate ethical behavior (attributed charisma) inspire employees to align with organizational goals. Inspirational motivation enhances enthusiasm and commitment, while intellectual stimulation encourages

problem-solving and innovation. Individualized consideration, reflected in leaders' attention to employee welfare and development, fosters loyalty and trust.

Moreover, the study's findings suggest that firm yet fair leadership strengthens discipline without undermining employee morale. Employees perceive disciplinary actions as corrective rather than punitive, reinforcing a culture of responsibility and professionalism. This supports previous research indicating that leadership effectiveness in public organizations depends not only on authority but also on moral legitimacy and relational trust.

CONCLUSION

The results indicate that the leadership style applied by the Head of the Tourism Office is predominantly character-based and mission-driven. This leadership approach emphasizes integrity, discipline, responsibility, and exemplary behavior, which are consistently aligned with the vision, mission, and the Medium-Term Regional Development Plan of North Kolaka Regency. Such alignment enables tourism management to be carried out in a planned, consistent, and sustainable manner, while providing organizational units with sufficient space to innovate within established regulatory frameworks.

Furthermore, the study reveals that this leadership style positively influences employee performance and the achievement of organizational work programs. Clear direction, continuous supervision, trust in subordinates, and motivational practices contribute to increased work discipline, responsibility, and productivity among employees. These leadership practices also foster a supportive environment that encourages learning, collaboration, and accountability.

In addition, the leadership style of the Head of the Tourism Office has a significant impact on shaping a positive organizational work culture. Employees perceive leadership practices as fair, transparent, and inclusive, particularly in decision-making processes and the enforcement of discipline. This contributes to stronger organizational cohesion, higher employee engagement, and improved professional conduct within the institution.

This study concludes that effective tourism governance in North Kolaka Regency requires capable, firm, and consistent leadership that is mission-oriented and grounded in strong ethical values. While leadership remains the central driving force, successful tourism management also depends on the active support and collaboration of internal stakeholders and the wider community. These findings highlight the importance of character-based leadership as a strategic asset in strengthening public sector performance and promoting sustainable tourism development at the regional level.

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