

Navigating Organizational Power Struggles Through Authentic Leadership in Higher Education: A Narrative Grounded Theory of Conscience and Spiritual Intelligence

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received : 08-February-2026

Revised : 21-August-2026

Accepted : 26-August-2026

Keyword:

Authentic Leadership;
Spiritual Intelligence;
Conscience;
Moral Values;
Narrative Grounded Theory

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ABSTRACT

Authentic leadership today faces significant challenges stemming from shifts in power that can lead to tensions between moral values, conscience, and organizational interests. This study explores how authentic leadership can be realized and maintained within the context of power within higher education, emphasizing the role of conscience and spiritual intelligence. Using a narrative approach and grounded theory, the stories and experiences of leaders in higher education are analyzed in depth. The themes of authenticity in decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and leaders' experiences interacting with organizational processes are explored in detail. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Data were analyzed through an iterative coding process accompanied by continuous comparisons between categories until category refinement was achieved. Then, various sources were combined to find the main concepts and relationships based on stories from research informants. The results of the analysis indicate that authentic leadership does not only depend on self-awareness, transparency, consistency, and harmony between personal values and real actions, but is closely related to the complex interaction between the voice of conscience as an internal moral guide that supports integrity when facing pressure with spiritual intelligence as a basis for understanding and responding to ethical problems wisely. This study theoretically helps broaden the understanding of authentic leadership. This research focuses on moral and spiritual perspectives. These two elements serve as mutually supportive foundations for leaders to remain authentic despite facing pressure from organizational power. The findings indicate that the implementation of real leadership in higher education is not merely a leadership style but a continuous process of maintaining the moral commitment and social responsibility of academic institutions amidst the dynamics of organizational power.

ABSTRAK**Kata Kunci:**

Kepemimpinan Autentik;
Kecerdasan Spritual;
Hati Nurani;
Nilai-Nilai Moral;
Narrative Graounded
Theory

Dewasa ini kepemimpinan autentik mengalami tantangan besar dari perubahan kekuasaan yang bisa menyebabkan ketegangan antara nilai moral, suara nurani dan kepentingan organisasi. Penelitian ini menggali bagaimana bentuk kepemimpinan autentik bisa diwujudkan dan dijaga dalam konteks kekuasaan di lingkungan perguruan tinggi dengan penekanan pada peran suara nurani dan kecerdasan spritual. Menggunakan pendekatan naratif dan metode grounded theory, di mana kisah dan pengalaman pemimpin di dunia pendidikan tinggi dianalisis secara mendalam. Tema-tema keuatentikan dalam pengambilan keputusan, hubungan antarpribadi serta pengalaman pemimpin saat berinteraksi dengan cara kerja organisasi dieksplor secara detail. Pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Data dianalisis dengan proses pengkodean berulang disertai perbandingan berkelanjutan antar kategori hingga tercapai penyempurnaan kategori. Kemudian menggabungkan berbagai sumber untuk menemukan konsep utama beserta hubungan berdasarkan cerita dari informan penelitian. Hasil analisis mengindikasikan kepemimpinan autentik tidak hanya bergantung pada kesadaran diri, transparansi, konsistensi serta keselarasan antara nilai-nilai pribadi dengan tindakan nyata, tetapi berkaitan erat dengan interaksi rumit antara suara nurani sebagai pedoman moral internal yang mendukung integritas saat menghadapi tekanan dengan kecerdasan spritual sebagai dasar memahami dan merespons masalah etis dengan bijak. Studi ini secara teori membantu memperluas pemahaman tentang kepemimpinan autentik. Riset ini fokus melihat dari sudut pandang moral dan spritual. Kedua elemen tersebut berfungsi sebagai landasan yang saling mendukung agar pemimpin tetap autentik meskipun menghadapi tekanan dari kekuasaan organisasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penerapan kepemimpinan yang nyata di pendidikan tinggi bukan hanya sekedar gaya kepemimpinan tetapi proses berkelanjutan menjaga komitmen moral dan tanggung jawab sosial lembaga akademik ditengah dinamika dalam kekuatan organisasi.

How to Cite:

Novebri, N., Retnowulan, S. R., Komariah, A., Kurniady, D. A., Suryana, A., & B, B. (2026). Navigating Organizational Power Struggles Through Authentic Leadership in Higher Education: A Narrative Grounded Theory of Conscience and Spiritual Intelligence. *Paedagogia: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 15(1), 101-126. <https://doi.org/10.24239/pdg.Vol15.Iss1.1151>

INTRODUCTION

The study of leadership has evolved from an initial focus on individual traits and behaviors to a deeper understanding of the dynamics, contexts, and processes involved in leadership practice¹. In higher education, the complexity of these dynamics increases because leadership functions within organizational structures that involve diverse interests, differing values, and varying expectations. Leadership can be seen as an important tool for fostering cooperation and institutional development. However, the potential for tension is also unavoidable when there are differences in goals between organizational agendas, demands for power, and a leader's moral values. Therefore, understanding the concept of leadership is not only limited to practical actions carried out by the leader alone, but must also pay attention to how a leader maintains his/her integrity, makes decisions wisely and negotiates personal values when facing changes and challenges from the dynamics of power in the organization.

If we examine it more deeply, there are many factors that influence the success or failure of a leader, including the power they possess². The dynamics surrounding leadership give rise to the power to act and move with the authority gained. The ability to manage these dynamics will determine the future success or failure of leaders³. In higher education, power is not only tied to official positions, but operates through a system of relationships between individuals and institutional interests. Although power can be used to coordinate and achieve common goals, its use often creates clashes between institutional interests, political considerations, and individual moral commitments. In this situation, studies on authentic leadership are needed because this leadership style emphasizes the alignment between the values within the leader and the actions and decisions taken. So, the problem is not only how to manage power but how a leader can maintain his moral values and integrity when facing various pressures in the organizational environment⁴.

Leadership is often associated with the distribution of power and the decision-making processes. The authority gained through a leadership position can be a gift if it is managed wisely⁵, based on mature considerations, ethically

¹ Nicolas Bastardoz, "Leadership," in *Elgar Encyclopedia of Organizational Psychology* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024), 365–68, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803921761.00072>.

² M. Helmold, *Leadership and Empowerment, Management for Professionals*, vol. Part F439, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46981-8_6.

³ W. Fourie, *Why Leaders Fail And What It Teaches Us About Leadership, Why Leaders Fail and What It Teaches Us About Leadership*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003343660>.

⁴ Novebri Novebri et al., "Authentic Leadership and Faculty Productivity: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach in Islamic Higher Education," *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan* 18, no. 2 (June 30, 2026): 3160–70, <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v18i2.9641>.

⁵ Sudhanshu Bhushan, "Power Centres in Governance of Higher Education," *Higher Education for the Future* 10, no. 1 (2023): 31–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23476311221142433>.

sound, and in line with the moral values of every established policy⁶. However, if a leader prioritizes rationality and personal interests without considering the principles of honesty and goodness, the resulting decisions tend to lose the essence of their usefulness⁷. In practice, not all decisions that appear logical and rational have a positive impact when implemented, as not all decisions that appear less than ideal according to reason will result in detrimental consequences⁸. In this context, authentic leadership plays a crucial role in ensuring that every decision is not only based on rationality alone, but also considers moral and ethical aspects⁹. This principle is in line with the teachings of the Qur'an, especially in Surah Al-Baqarah verse 216, which emphasizes that what is considered good by humans does not necessarily bring benefits, and what seems bad does not necessarily bring evil.

This verse reminds us that our perceptions of the good and bad are not always in line with reality. A leader always faces complex decision-making

⁶ S. Triantari and E. Vavouras, "Decision-Making In The Modern Manager-Leader: Organizational Ethics, Business Ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility," *Cogito* 16, no. 1 (2024): 7–28; L. Zakaraitė, "Moral Imagination and Political Judgement: Possibilities for Empirical Research | Moralinė Vaizduotė Ir Politinis Sprendimas: Empirinio Tyrimo Galimybės," *Public Policy and Administration* 22, no. 1 (2023): 64–73, <https://doi.org/10.5755/j01.ppaa.22.1.30550>.

⁷ N.M. Sooter, R.G. Brandon, and G. Ugazio, "Honesty Is Predicted by Moral Values and Economic Incentives but Is Unaffected by Acute Stress," *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Finance* 41 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbef.2024.100899>; E. Levine and D. Munguia Gomez, "I'm Just Being Honest: When and Why Honesty Enables Help versus Harm," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 120, no. 1 (2021): 33–56, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000242>.

⁸ D. Dalcher, *Context: Why Situational Awareness Remains Essential, The Evolution of Project Management Practice: From Programmes and Contracts to Benefits and Change*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315113630>; P. Göktepe-Kavis et al., "Context Changes Retrieval of Prospective Outcomes during Decision Deliberation," *Cerebral Cortex* 34, no. 12 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/cercor/bhae483>.

⁹ F.-C. Shih and S.-C. Jennifer Yeh, "Conservation of Resources Perspective on Authentic Leadership and Employee Well-Being: The Influence of Job Stress and Emotional Intelligence," *Health Care Management Review* 49, no. 4 (2024): 323–30, <https://doi.org/10.1097/HMR.0000000000000418>; D. Frömmer et al., "Linking Authentic Leadership, Moral Voice and Silence—A Serial Mediation Model Comprising Follower Constructive Cognition and Moral Efficacy," *German Journal of Human Resource Management* 35, no. 4 (2021): 436–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2397002220984440>; O. Durrah et al., "Authentic Leadership Behaviors and Thriving at Work: Empirical Evidence From The Information Technology Industry in Australia," *Psychological Reports* 127, no. 4 (2024): 1911–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00332941221144601>; S.B. Alavi, "The Making of an Authentic Leader's Internalized Moral Perspective: The Role of Internalized Ethical Philosophies in the Development of Authentic Leaders' Moral Identity," *Journal of Business Ethics* 190, no. 1 (2024): 77–92, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-023-05442-9>.

dilemmas¹⁰. When faced with such a situation, it is important to use reason and put conscience first, stand in the middle, and try to be fair based on applicable sharia and rules¹¹. Otherwise, the authority or power possessed can lead a leader down the wrong path¹². Although authentic leadership has received much attention in previous research, this study looks at authentic leadership as a process that lies at the intersection of personal morality and organizational power. Research on authentic leadership typically emphasizes authenticity as a psychological and behavioral aspect of an individual. This includes self-awareness of ingrained moral views, transparency in interpersonal relationships, and the congruence between values and concrete actions. Second, although group politics and power are considered important factors that can diminish the positive impact of authentic leadership, there is still relatively little focus on how leaders manage these tensions. Third, issues such as the role of conscience as an internal moral guide and its relationship to spiritual intelligence are rarely discussed in depth. This limitation becomes even more significant when viewed in the context of higher education, where official power is linked to the institution's academic

¹⁰ F. von Ameln, "Leadership and Decision-Making under Uncertainty | Führen Und Entscheiden Unter Unsicherheit," *Gruppe. Interaktion. Organisation. Zeitschrift Fur Angewandte Organisationspsychologie* 52, no. 4 (2021): 567–77, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11612-021-00607-4>; R.B. Gasaway, "How Smart Health Leaders Make Intuitive Decisions," *Healthcare Management Forum* 37, no. 3 (2024): 168–72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08404704231212781>; V. Žydzūnaite et al., "Ethical Dilemmas Concerning Decision-Making within Health Care Leadership: A Systematic Literature Review | Etinės Dilemos, Priimant Sprendimus Sveikatos Priežiūros Lyderystėje: Sisteminė Literatūros Apžvalga," *Medicina* 46, no. 9 (2010): 595–603, <https://doi.org/10.3390/medicina46090084>; V.A. Pustovik et al., "The Tendency to Taking Risks in Solving a Social Dilemma in the Context of Collective Interaction," *Sibirskiy Psikhologicheskij Zhurnal*, no. 93 (2024): 114–29, <https://doi.org/10.17223/17267080/93/7>; B. Al Ali et al., "Decision Making in Ethical Dilemma," in *Proceedings of Portland International Center for Management of Engineering and Technology: Technology Management for Emerging Technologies, PICMET'12*, 2012, 589–99.

¹¹ C.A.J. Coady, "The Significance and Complexity of Conscience," *Philosophia (United States)* 51, no. 5 (2023): 2497–2516, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-023-00692-3>; A.D. Silalahi et al., "Axiological Insights into Unveiling Independent Constitutional Judge Decisionism," *Yustisia* 13, no. 3 (2024): 230–45, <https://doi.org/10.20961/yustisia.v13i3.85127>.

¹² S. Rosita, F. Tialonawarmi, and S. Yacob, "The Impact of Leader Power On Organizational Development: A Strategic Approach To Decision-Making," *Business: Theory and Practice* 24, no. 2 (2023): 557–70, <https://doi.org/10.3846/btp.2023.19324>; Adebisi Inako Akinyele and Ziguang Chen, "Dark Clouds of Leadership: Causes and Consequences of Toxic Leadership," *International Studies of Management and Organization*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00208825.2024.2442185>; C. Lundqvist et al., "Toxic Leadership in High-Performance Sports and Its Consequences for Mental Health and Performance: A Scoping Review," *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2025.2457038>.

authority. Furthermore, institutional interests and complex power relations also play a role during both strategic and operational decision-making processes.

This study aims to investigate how authentic leadership is achieved and sustained within the context of organizational power dynamics in higher education. Specifically, it examines how leaders' perceptions, choices, and reactions to these pressures are influenced by their conscience and spiritual intelligence when their personal moral obligations conflict with organizational demands and interests. This gap is developed through an empirical understanding of how leadership authenticity is negotiated within complex power relationships using a narrative theory approach based on empirical data.

Methods

This study is qualitative research that combines grounded theory and narrative approaches. To gain a better understanding of informants' views on leadership, moral principles in the decision-making process, and power dynamics in higher education, a narrative approach was used. Meanwhile, the qualitative data collected were then analyzed systematically through the application of grounded theory. The stages include continuous coding and comparison to form categories and conceptual relationships. With this combination of methods, this research succeeded in preserving the richness of the informants' personal experiences while simultaneously producing an understanding of the involvement of the heart and spiritual intelligence in the process of authentic leadership negotiation, especially in the context of power dynamics in organizations.

In order to explain the issues of morality, power and authenticity of leadership style, informants were selected based on their leadership experience¹³. Informants consisted of university heads, vice heads, heads of study programs, unit leaders, and lecturers. Snowball sampling techniques and repeated data analysis processes were applied to obtain valid data¹⁴. Initially, the experiences of informants and the behavior and meanings contained in their experiences were used as a basis for coding data obtained from in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation. Next, a comparison and grouping process was carried out on related codes so that the use of focused coding techniques could determine which categories were most important in relation to the research phenomenon. Then, conceptual understanding was developed and then the relationship between

¹³ B. Webb and B. Mallon, "A Method to Bridge the Gap between Breadth and Depth in IS Narrative Analysis," *Journal of the Association for Information Systems* 8, no. 7 (2007): 368–71, <https://doi.org/10.17705/1jais.00134>.

¹⁴ J.E. Mello, I. Manuj, and D.J. Flint, "Leveraging Grounded Theory in Supply Chain Research: A Researcher and Reviewer Guide," *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management* 51, no. 10 (2021): 1108–29, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPDLM-12-2020-0439>.

categories was explored using more detailed analytical notes¹⁵. This entire series of steps will eventually lead to research results and findings.

On the other hand, triangulation of sources and methods is used to increase trust in research results¹⁶. This process was carried out so that the final interpretation did not depend solely on a single source of information or data collection method. This allowed for reexamining critical challenges and refining emerging theme categories during the analysis. More details on the research stages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Stages

Step	Narrative Approach	Grounded Theory Approach
Data Collection	Collect detailed stories through interviews or observations	Use theoretical sampling to guide data collection iteratively
Transcription and Initial Coding	Transcribe narratives verbatim and perform open coding	Apply initial coding to identify key concepts and categories
Focused Coding and Categorization	Identify patterns, themes, and story arcs within narratives	Conduct focused coding to refine and categorize initial codes
Memo Writing	Write memos to capture insights about narrative structure and context	Document development of categories and their relationships
Theoretical Sampling and Saturation	Continue collecting narratives until no new themes emerge	Engage in theoretical sampling until theoretical saturation is achieved
Integration and Theory Development	Construct a coherent story explaining participants' experiences	Develop a substantive theory explaining the social processes observed
Validation and Refinement	Validate findings through participant cross-checking or triangulation	Refine the theory through constant comparison and validation against the data

RESULTS

Indonesia is a rich and dynamic country, with a complex diversity of tribes and cultures. In this context, the leader's role is crucial. He must be able to embrace the differences and unite various societal elements. Becoming a leader is not an easy task, even though it has gone through a long process such as a general election. Issues surrounding leadership continue to become increasingly popular in society. Approaching 2025, issues of integrity and efforts to eradicate corruption are expected to be the main challenges for leaders, with an urgency of

¹⁵ J. Floersch et al., "Integrating Thematic, Grounded Theory and Narrative Analysis: A Case Study of Adolescent Psychotropic Treatment," *Qualitative Social Work* 9, no. 3 (2010): 407–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325010362330>.

¹⁶ N. Frost, "Do You Know What I Mean?: The Use of a Pluralistic Narrative Analysis Approach in the Interpretation of an Interview," *Qualitative Research* 9, no. 1 (2009): 9–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794108094867>.

30.9%¹⁷. Therefore, a leadership approach is needed to address this challenge. One of the most relevant approaches is authentic leadership because, in essence, this model emphasizes the importance of integrity, namely, the alignment between a leader's values, words, and actions.



Figure 1. Strategic Issues That Are the Biggest Challenges for Leaders in 2025
Source: State Administration Institute of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025

Figure 1 is presented as a background to illustrate the complexity of the leadership issues underlying this research phenomenon. This figure is not the primary outcome of the research, but serves to illustrate some of the challenges of leadership issues in organizations. Important findings were then obtained from the stories of informants in the field and written notes that show how this complexity is experienced and discussed in real-life leadership practices.

This research is based on in-depth interviews with several informants and direct observation of leadership practices in the organizational environment. This approach allows researchers to explore various perspectives and experiences that shape their understanding of authentic leadership. The findings showed that informants had diverse views on the meaning and application of authentic leadership in their respective contexts. One participant, for example, described authentic leadership as “a practice of gratitude and patience to find truth and honesty.” This view is based on personal experiences in leadership roles.

One informant stated, ‘For me, an authentic leader must be committed to thinking, speaking, and acting correctly and honestly. He uses his conscience to obey God: He must also be loyal and trustworthy’ (P1). This statement reflects a leader with strong moral principles oriented towards truth values. Another participant emphasized the importance of role models as the core of authentic leadership. He said, ‘Authentic leadership prioritizes leading by example or walking the talk, being honest with oneself, and upholding moral values in one’s

¹⁷ Lembaga Administrasi Negara, *Indonesia Leadership Outlook* (Jakarta: LAN RI, 2025).

leadership' (P2). This statement clarifies that the consistency between words and actions is an important foundation for building trust.

Another approach emerged from participants, who highlighted the importance of self-awareness in leadership. "Authentic leaders build genuine relationships, mentor their teams, and help them in their career development, and involve team members in decision-making (P3). In fact, the narratives presented by P1-P3 show that honesty, openness, self-awareness, integrity, and consistency between values and actions are characteristics frequently found in the informants' views on authentic leadership. This finding reinforces the characteristics already present in the literature on authentic leadership, and is therefore not considered a major novelty in this research. The novelty begins to be clearly visible when these characteristics are maintained in situations involving pressure from conflicts of interest within the organization and power relations as evidenced by the experiences of the informants.

In addition to the moral orientation based on conscience, the findings of this study indicate that the leadership experiences of the informants also include a process of reflection on values, deep meanings, and goals that go beyond mere organizational achievement. The informants see leadership as a process that grows gradually through concrete experiences of deep self-awareness and serious thought as they face various demands and problems in the organization. This process broadens a leader's perspective so that he not only sees the direct impact of his decisions but also conducts an in-depth examination of the suitability of these actions with the basic values and goals of leadership that he believes in. The results of this study indicate the existence of a reflective aspect and a search for the meaning of life in leadership experiences, thus becoming an important basis for understanding the role of spiritual intelligence in maintaining authenticity when leaders face difficult situations that surround them.

This perspective emphasizes that leadership is not only about the results but also about the quality of interpersonal relationships and collaborative processes. However, the narratives of several informants also reflected the tension between moral idealism and the reality of power. Many participants admitted that their authentic values often clashed with certain power structures and political interests. One of them shared an experience, "I once rejected a job because I felt it was not transparent, there were some parts that were manipulated. Subsequently, I isolated it. That was when I realized how expensive being authentic is" (P4).

Survival strategies have emerged to address these situations. The same participant added, 'I look for friends who have the same understanding.' So, if I speak up, I will not be alone, which makes me feel stronger. Although that does not guarantee that our voices will be accepted' (P4). This shows that social support plays an important role in individuals trying to maintain authenticity under external pressure.

Being authentic is not just about upholding principles but also has serious consequences. One participant stated, 'My team members say they enjoy working with me, because of the transparency and honesty I show in every discussion and activity we do. However, at the leadership level, I am often criticized for being too idealistic and unable to compromise on strategic projects' (P5). This statement reflects the real challenges that authentic leaders often face, especially when values, such as openness and integrity, do not align with expectations at higher leadership levels.

A similar situation occurs in the context of power in the academic world. An informant said, 'Lecturers who speak critically and achieve are considered a threat to power. They are ostracized, deactivated from their positions, and even transferred administratively' (P6). This phenomenon can be viewed as a form of symbolic violence in the campus environment. Campus should be a space that fosters freedom of thought and scientific expression. When this space turns into a place that limits freedom, many lecturers seek self-development outside the institution as a form of actualization because they feel that the existing system no longer supports or provides space for achievement and courage to speak up.

From these narratives, an understanding emerges that "Being authentic in the realm of power is not easy, but rather a firmness of principle and conscience to maintain moral values and honesty amidst the pressures of organizational culture." This concept emphasizes that authenticity in leadership does not emerge instantly but is formed through experience, deep self-reflection, and a continuous process of adaptation. Therefore, to become an authentic leader, a consistent commitment to moral values is needed, even when the surrounding environment does not always support it.

In general, the experiences of Informants P4-P6 show that power struggles occur through differences in interests and pressures arising from the organization against critical voices, social labeling, and negative impacts on positions or relationships within the organization. Informants do not always respond to power relations directly, but rather use a mixture of maintaining their own principles, seeking help from others, thinking deeply about the situation, and negotiating actions in accordance with organizational demands. This finding suggests that the idea of authenticity in practice does not occur in a place free from the influence of power. However, authenticity must be maintained and negotiated continuously within the context of the complex relationships that exist within the organizational environment.

DISCUSSION

The research findings on honesty, transparency, self-awareness, integrity, and consistency between moral values and helping actions confirm the key characteristics of authentic leadership that have been widely discussed in academic literature. Therefore, this study does not identify these characteristics as its primary innovation. The results suggest that such traits have a more complex

meaning when leaders must maintain their values and principles amidst organizational demands and pressures. In the higher education environment, authenticity is not only related to how a leader demonstrates an attitude in accordance with the beliefs he or she holds, but is also closely related to how the consistency of this behavior is maintained amidst interests and pressures that may attempt to change the decisions or actions taken by the leader.

Leadership in academic institutions is a complex and multilayered theme often influenced by relational factors and social dynamics. One striking phenomenon is the inequality in career development opportunities due to personal relationships between leaders and employees. In some cases, promotion decisions are not based on performance or achievement but rather on personal closeness. There is even a tendency for discrimination based on clan or ethnicity, in which individuals from the same group as the leader receive priority in job promotions or delegation of authority. On the other hand, those who do not have an emotional or kinship relationship with their leader tend to not receive the same attention, even though they have superior competence and academic qualifications.

For example, some lecturers are promoted not because of their expertise or work results but because of the kinship or emotional relationship they have with the leader. This kind of situation often damages the motivation and productivity of other lecturers, who feel that their efforts and contributions do not receive fair recognition¹⁸. This preferential treatment can hinder lecturers' career development and create an unhealthy work environment¹⁹. Ignoring or excluding employees from the work process can be categorized as a form of tyrannical leadership that can cause stress and a desire to leave the organization for those who feel unappreciated²⁰.

Authentic leadership is expected to address these challenges by increasing transparency and ethics, and building supportive relationships in the workplace. This leadership style has great potential to foster work enthusiasm and increase productivity among lecturers. In addition, an authentic leadership style can help

¹⁸ Esmond Naalu Kuuyelleh, Emmanuel Akanpaadgi, and Gilbert Ansoglenang, "Perceived Organisational Injustices and Academic Staff Turnover Intentions in Ghanaian Technical Universities," *Social Sciences and Humanities Open* 11, no. December 2024 (2025): 101278, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101278>.

¹⁹ M. B. Saikrishna, "The Shadow of Authority: A Thematic Exploration of Tyrannical Leadership among Research Scholars through the Lens of Gioia Methodology," *International Journal of Ethics and Systems*, 2025, 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOES-10-2024-0329>.

²⁰ Javed Iqbal et al., "Impact of Petty Tyranny on Employee Turnover Intentions: The Mediating Roles of Toxic Workplace Environment and Emotional Exhaustion in Academia," *Behavioral Sciences* 14, no. 12 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14121218>; Noor Azlina Yusoff et al., "Examine the Role of Organization Justice in Predicting Turnover Intention Among Employees," *Paper Asia* 40, no. 6 (2024): 390–99, <https://doi.org/10.59953/paperasia.v40i6b.87>.

team members develop their emotional intelligence, which, in turn, contributes to improving employees' psychological well-being in the workplace²¹.

The following research findings broaden our understanding of authentic leadership. The view of conscience as an inner moral compass suggests that leaders assess whether their choices align with the values of honesty and integrity. Therefore, conscience explains the underlying workings behind the alignment between honesty and actions, especially when leaders face choices that have a significant impact on the organization. Thus, the concept of authentic leadership can be understood not only through visible external traits or behaviors but also through the inner moral processes that precede each leadership action.

Besides that, the research shows that authentic leadership not only benefits individuals, but can also boost overall institutional performance²². However, the journey to authentic leadership is difficult. Challenges arise when the values of the leader are not aligned with those of their followers. This can lead to conflict and misunderstanding. For example, what is considered honest and authentic in one culture may be considered inappropriate in another. This highlights the complexity of the interaction between leaders and followers, and the importance of understanding and respecting cultural differences in the context of leadership²³.

Educational and academic institutions are often sites of glaring inequality. Some leaders tend to provide greater opportunities to employees with whom they experience emotional closeness or family ties. Unfortunately, individuals without such ties are often overlooked even though they may have better competencies and academic qualifications. This creates feelings of dissatisfaction that can disrupt the work climate and overall employee productivity²⁴. Good leadership

²¹ Olav Kjellevoid Olsen and Roar Espevik, "Moral Antecedents of Authentic Leadership: Do Moral Justice Reasoning, Self-Importance of Moral Identity and Psychological Hardiness Stimulate Authentic Leadership?," *Cogent Psychology* 4, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2017.1382248>; Orly Shapira-Lishchinsky and Tania Levy-Gazenfrantz, "The Multifaceted Nature of Mentors' Authentic Leadership and Mentees' Emotional Intelligence: A Critical Perspective," *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 44, no. 6 (2016): 951–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143215595413>.

²² Norhasni Zainal Abiddin, "A Deep Dive into Leadership Styles in Shaping the Higher Education Institution's Value and Culture," *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences (PJLSS)* 22, no. 2 (2024): 3854–68, <https://doi.org/10.57239/pjlss-2024-22.2.00283>; Novebri Novebri et al., "Authentic Leadership in Academic Career Development: Evidence from Indonesian," *Scientific Culture* 11, no. 4 (2025): 2906–24, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.110425116>.

²³ De Long Yang and Ning Yang, "Unveiling the Path to Employee Performance Excellence: Visionary Leadership Behavior, Vision Commitment and Organization Resource Support," *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 45, no. 7 (2024): 1142–57, <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-05-2023-0247>.

²⁴ Kuuyelleh, Akanpaadgi, and Ansoglenang, "Perceived Organisational Injustices and Academic Staff Turnover Intentions in Ghanaian Technical Universities."

should avoid destructive behaviors such as discrimination based on clans or ethnicity. Such discrimination creates tension and damages trust within the institution. A fair promotion system based on meritocracy and competence is essential to build healthy and productive academic institutions. Several institutions have shown that authentic leadership and fairness in the promotion process have positive effects on employee commitment, job satisfaction, and productivity²⁵.

The impact of unfair leadership is not limited to the present. An unhealthy work environment can cause stress among employees and potentially trigger their desire to leave an organization. Many employees feel hopeless and try to find another place to value performance. This shows that good leadership is not only about power, but also about moral and ethical responsibility²⁶. Systemic racism is an important factor in this context. Some institutions argue that ongoing policy practices and organizational structures can create a culture of injustice. Research in America shows that 16% of the respondents stated that systemic racism affects lecturer productivity²⁷. This suggests the need for authentic leadership that prioritizes the empowerment and well-being of all team members regardless of their background²⁸.

In addition to considering the relational aspect, leaders are expected to avoid injustice and strive to create goodness and justice in academic institutions. In this context, religious teachings can provide a strong moral foundation regarding the importance of fair leadership, upholding justice, and avoiding oppressive behavior²⁹. This suggests that authentic leadership is closely related to

²⁵ Saikrishna, "The Shadow of Authority: A Thematic Exploration of Tyrannical Leadership among Research Scholars through the Lens of Gioia Methodology"; Sebastien Vendette et al., "Reconstructing Authenticity through a Multi-Paradigmatic Umbrella: A Process Perspective," *Leadership* 18, no. 6 (2022): 775–800, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427150221128613>.

²⁶ Iqbal et al., "Impact of Petty Tyranny on Employee Turnover Intentions: The Mediating Roles of Toxic Workplace Environment and Emotional Exhaustion in Academia"; Yusoff et al., "Examine the Role of Organization Justice in Predicting Turnover Intention Among Employees."

²⁷ Gretchen E. White et al., "The Impact of Social Unrest Due to Systemic Racism on Underrepresented Post-Doctoral Fellows and Early-Career Faculty," *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science* 6, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1017/cts.2022.445>.

²⁸ Michael Wilson, "Critical Reflection on Authentic Leadership and School Leader Development from a Virtue Ethical Perspective," *Educational Review* 66, no. 4 (2014): 482–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2013.812062>.

²⁹ M.H. Gilani, S. Ali, and G. Mohyiddeen, "Reimagining Islamic Discourse: Towards A Global Ethical Framework For Contemporary Leadership," *Al-Shajarah* 2024, no. Special is (2024): 103–20, <https://doi.org/10.31436/shajarah.vi.1931>; G. Haskins and M. Thomas, *In Search of Fairness in Leadership, Post-Pandemic Leadership: Exploring Solutions to a Crisis*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003171737-4>.

spirituality, as well as moral, ethical, and honest perspectives when leading³⁰. Spiritual intelligence can be seen as a guardrail that guards the conscience in upholding leadership authenticity and aligning it with moral values, determining whether an action is appropriate based on deeply held beliefs. Both can be seen as internal resources that support leaders in maintaining alignment between their actions and values. By explaining the internal mechanisms that support authenticity in the face of organizational challenges and demands, the integration of these two ideas broadens our understanding of authentic leadership. Authentic leadership not only depends on the position or power held, but also on the moral and ethical qualities of the leader. Conscience, a cognitive process that reflects a person's feelings, must be aligned with religious and ethical values. Leadership without a conscience can result in destructive actions that often reduce team members' trust and create dissatisfaction in the work environment³¹.

Additionally, a good leader should be a role model that subordinates can imitate through honesty, trustworthiness, and effective communication. Good role models are very important because a wise and integrity leader can build a positive work culture and inspire their followers to contribute more optimally to the institution's goals³². Thus, the issue of leadership in academic institutions covers many interrelated aspects from interpersonal relationships to moral and ethical values. Leaders must understand these dynamics and commit to creating a fair, transparent, and safe work environment for team members. Through authentic leadership that focuses on individual development and fairness, educational institutions can create an atmosphere that supports and encourages all members to achieve their maximum potential in career development.

Ultimately, this research shows that authentic leadership in higher education is a process involving maintenance and negotiation to align values and actions within the dynamics of organizational power relations. Conscience serves to provide moral guidance for evaluating various options. Meanwhile, spiritual intelligence provides meaning and perspective on difficult situations faced. On the other hand, power struggle is a situation that significantly tests the ability of

³⁰ Mark R. Shannon et al., "Trigger Events and Crucibles in Authentic Leaders' Development," *Journal of Management Development* 39, no. 3 (2020): 324–33, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-02-2019-0039>.

³¹ J.L. Badaracco, *A Late-Night Crisis: What Is My Responsibility?*, *SpringerBriefs in Philosophy*, vol. Part F1545, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-45579-7_3; G.N.R. Perera et al., "Beyond Breathing Exercises: Rethinking Mindfulness through a Buddhist Lens to Combat Unethical Decision-Making in Organizations," *Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies* 17, no. 1 (2025): 73–97, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEEE-03-2024-0109>.

³² H.B.K. Almuheiri and M. Abdullais, "Leadership Characteristic Features: An Ethical Review from the Perspective of the Qur'an and Sunnah," *Intellectual Discourse* 28, no. 2 (2020): 735–55; R. Fadilah, L. Afita, and S.A. Prinduri, *Personal Branding and Teachers' Perspectives on Leadership of the Prophet, The Role of Islamic Spirituality in the Management and Leadership Process*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-6892-7.ch012>.

leaders to maintain their level of authenticity. Therefore, the main contribution of this research is not only in the rediscovery of traits such as honesty, transparency or integrity but rather in explaining how moral and spiritual resources help leaders maintain authenticity when facing the pressures and tugs of power.

Authentic leaders also maintain strong emotional connections with members of the organization, treat them fairly, and value their contributions as valuable assets. Leadership is not just about rewards and punishments, but also about building long-term trust, so team members feel valued not just as workers but as an important part of the organization's identity³³. In contrast, leaders who are authoritarian and dominant often interpret criticism as a threat or form of betrayal, which distances them from authentic leaders who are open to feedback³⁴. From the perspective of authentic leadership, power is not merely an instrument of domination, but a means to build coordination, satisfaction, and conducive team relationships. Leaders who understand the dynamics of power will manage it in a balanced and adaptive way, not centering on one individual, but rather dividing it strategically according to the needs of the team³⁵. Those who can communicate, participate, and adapt their leadership style to the characteristics of the team tend to increase the effectiveness of collective work³⁶.

Those who can communicate, participate, and adapt their leadership style to the characteristics of the team tend to increase the effectiveness of collective work³⁷.

The main characteristic of authentic leadership is a commitment to moral and ethical principles. Leaders with high morality make fair and transparent decisions, even in difficult situations or ethical dilemmas³⁸. Ethical leadership reinforces the values of justice and equality in the organization, creates a supportive, discrimination-free work environment, and provides space for every

³³ Liangding Jia et al., "Leadership Styles and Employees' Job-Related Attitudes: An Empirical Study on the Mediating Effects of Reciprocity and Trust," *Frontiers of Business Research in China* 1, no. 4 (2007): 574–605, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11782-007-0033-9>.

³⁴ Bob Altemeyer, "Highly Dominating, Highly Authoritarian Personalities," *Journal of Social Psychology* 144, no. 4 (2004): 421–48, <https://doi.org/10.3200/SOCP.144.4.421-448>.

³⁵ Chihmao Hsieh and Woo Jin Lee, "How Would Autonomist and Autocratic Teammates Affect Individual Satisfaction on Prefounding Entrepreneurship Teams?," *Journal of Small Business Management* 61, no. 2 (2023): 659–703, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2020.1815471>.

³⁶ Michael Hoven et al., "Leader Airtime Management and Team Effectiveness in Emergency Management Command and Control (EMCC) Teams," *Ergonomics* 66, no. 10 (2023): 1565–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00140139.2022.2157493>.

³⁷ Hoven et al.

³⁸ Neil J. MacKinnon, "Affect Control Theory Applied to Morality," *American Behavioral Scientist* 67, no. 2 (2023): 224–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211066042>.

individual to develop³⁹. Leaders with an authentic orientation are also proactive in reducing structural barriers, such as excessive bureaucracy, thereby supporting the professional development of their organization's members⁴⁰. However, in the context of power and hierarchy, it is important to realize that higher positions are often associated with negative perceptions of morality when used for personal gain⁴¹. Therefore, maintaining proportional social distance is very important, not too close to the point of losing objectivity but also not too far from the point of breaking off healthy communication⁴².

Authentic leadership emphasizes the value of role modelling. Leaders who behave ethically not only create a fair and transparent work culture but also foster a sense of collective responsibility that ultimately strengthens organizational performance⁴³. In a democratic system, the quality of the leader determines its direction and sustainability. Democracy cannot grow under authoritarian leadership but only with a leader who is a protector and guardian⁴⁴. Authentic leadership is also demonstrated by a willingness to share power, encourage participation in decision making, and create a healthy space for discussion. Leaders who suppress or dominate run the risk of turning power into a normative control tool that limits members' initiatives⁴⁵. When leaders rely on rigid rules and procedures without considering moral context, they may fail to build team trust⁴⁶.

³⁹ Rizwan Raheem Ahmed et al., "How and When Ethics Lead to Organizational Performance: Evidence from South Asian Firms," *Sustainability (Switzerland)* 15, no. 10 (2023): 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15108147>.

⁴⁰ Edward S. Dove and Cristina Douglas, "Ethics Governance in Scottish Universities: How Can We Do Better? A Qualitative Study," *Research Ethics* 19, no. 2 (2023): 166–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17470161221147801>.

⁴¹ M. Ena Inesi and Kimberly Rios, "How Prosocial Actors Use Power Hierarchies to Build Moral Reputation," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 106, no. January (2023): 104441, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104441>.

⁴² Didde Cramer Jensen et al., "Span of Control and Ethical Leadership in Highly Professionalized Public Organizations," *Public Personnel Management* 52, no. 2 (2023): 191–217, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00910260221140398>.

⁴³ Ahmed et al., "How and When Ethics Lead to Organizational Performance: Evidence from South Asian Firms."

⁴⁴ Martin Foltin, "Some Ideas about Democracy and the Importance of Education in the Work of T. G. Masaryk," *Ethics and Bioethics (in Central Europe)* 13, no. 1–2 (2023): 95–104, <https://doi.org/10.2478/ebce-2023-0004>.

⁴⁵ Inesi and Rios, "How Prosocial Actors Use Power Hierarchies to Build Moral Reputation"; Sharon Lindberg et al., "Doing Good Business? Design Leaders' Perspectives on Ethics in Design," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 8, no. GROUP (2024): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3633067>.

⁴⁶ Jodok Troy, "Ethics as Moral Practice in Peacekeeping Missions: Insights on the Importance of Ethical Training," *International Peacekeeping* 31, no. 3 (2024): 309–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2024.2305901>.

Even though there are organizational principles such as "just culture" or "no-blame," in reality many organizational members are reluctant to report errors because they are afraid of negative consequences⁴⁷. Therefore, authentic leaders must be role models in upholding organizational values and ethics as well as creating a safe and open environment for expressing opinions⁴⁸. When leaders are inconsistent in applying moral standards, for example, allowing dishonesty because it benefits them, unethical behavior can grow and take root in the organization⁴⁹. Authentic leadership rejects such practices and emphasizes the importance of honesty, integrity, and positive reciprocal influence between leaders and subordinates.

The principles of good governance, such as transparency, accountability, and responsiveness, can only be effective if supported by authentic and integrated leadership⁵⁰. Power in this case is not to strengthen personal dominance, but to advance the common good. In reality, power can be misused to maintain personal image and interests if it is not balanced by authentic leadership⁵¹. The concept of "smooth power" is a reflection of intelligent and flexible authentic leadership, where leaders use influence subtly and strategically, manage emotions, and maintain team solidarity⁵². However, political pressure remains a challenge in the academic world, for example, in the process of selecting a rector or allocating research funds that are sometimes not based on meritocracy but on power and lobbying⁵³.

An authentic leader demonstrates moral responsibility by courageously admitting mistakes, whether made by himself or by his subordinates, because the

⁴⁷ Laurie Bouchard and Marianne Dion-labrie, "Including Organizational Ethics in the Risk Management Process: Towards Improved Practices and Analysis," *Canadian Journal of Bioethics Revue Canadienne de Bioéthique* 7, no. 2–3 (2025): 107–17.

⁴⁸ Lindberg et al., "Doing Good Business? Design Leaders' Perspectives on Ethics in Design."

⁴⁹ Simon Tobias Karg, Christian Truelsen Elbæk, and Panagiotis Mitkidis, "Who's Leading Whom? Mutual Influences in Moral Decision-Making between Leaders and Subordinates over Time and the Role of Self-Interest," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 115, no. June (2024): 104645, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2024.104645>.

⁵⁰ M. M. Kusnadi et al., *How Effective Leadership Mediates the Influence of Organizational Culture, Governance, and Integrity on Employee Performance*, *Journal of Ecohumanism*, vol. 3, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i8.4844>.

⁵¹ Sawasn Al-Husseini, "Examining the Impact of Top Management Support on Employee Creativity through the Mediating Role of Knowledge Management and Absorptive Capacity," *International Journal of Innovation Science* 16, no. 4 (July 19, 2024): 658–82, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJIS-01-2023-0017>.

⁵² Alicia Ohlsson, Aida Alvinus, and Gerry Larsson, "Smooth Power: Identifying High-Level Leadership Skills Promoting Organizational Adaptability," *International Journal of Organization Theory and Behavior* 23, no. 4 (2020): 297–313, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOTB-02-2019-0009>.

⁵³ Bhushan, "Power Centres in Governance of Higher Education."

leader is a representation of the organization⁵⁴. In the world of education, forms of injustice, such as testimonial injustice, must be avoided because they can ignore someone's opinion because of their social identity⁵⁵. Ultimately, true leadership is based not only on formal authority but also on social recognition, expertise, charisma, and the ability to build meaningful relationships with members of the organization⁵⁶. Authentic leadership reflects moral courage, openness, and ethical responsibility in managing power and fostering healthy relationships within an organizational structure. Indeed, no leader is completely authentic at all times, and the journey toward authenticity can involve choices that lead to incongruence or conflict in practice⁵⁷.

These findings on power struggles indicate that authority is an external aspect of authentic leadership and a situation that tests and shapes authentic behavior. The experiences of informants indicate that adherence to moral values can lead to unfavorable consequences such as ostracism, being seen as overly idealistic, and the pressure of oppression. This situation demonstrates a conflict between the need to conform to the system and organizational goals and to adhere to personal moral values. Therefore, the power struggle in this study can be understood as a bargaining process between the distribution of authority, organizational demands, and individual moral values. This view broadens the concept of authentic leadership from its initial focus on personal traits to a more contextual and relational perspective.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that authentic leadership in higher education is not only characterized by honesty, transparency, self-awareness, and alignment between values and actions. Furthermore, this concept is a method that is always formed and obtained in facing various demands from organizations and existing power relationships. Based on the use of the grounded theory method, the research findings show that conscience plays a role as a moral guide within oneself. Meanwhile, a retrospective look at core values and goals provides a basis for understanding the role of spiritual intelligence in maintaining leadership

⁵⁴ Xingyu Wang et al., "Leader Apology in the Employee–Organization Relationship: The Roles of Subordinate Power Distance Belief and Leader Competence," *Tourism Management* 96, no. April 2022 (2023): 104694, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2022.104694>.

⁵⁵ Meng Tian and Graham Nutbrown, "Retheorising Distributed Leadership through Epistemic Injustice," *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 51, no. 4 (2023): 774–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211022776>.

⁵⁶ Frida Grimm, Lars Norqvist, and Katarina Roos, "Exploring Visual Method in the Field of Educational Leadership: Co-Creating Understandings of Educational Leadership and Authority in School Organisations," *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 51, no. 5 (2023): 1219–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211030747>.

⁵⁷ Vendette et al., "Reconstructing Authenticity through a Multi-Paradigmatic Umbrella: A Process Perspective."

authenticity. The emergence of power struggles can be understood as situations that test and shape leaders' ability to maintain harmony between their values and actions.

Theoretically, this research proposes that authentic leadership can be understood as a process of maintaining authenticity amidst various pressures from organizational power. In this situation, moral and intellectual resources help leaders to maintain values when they face complex pressures and interests. Therefore, the main contribution of this research does not lie in repeating the original characteristics of pre-existing leadership but rather in explaining how authenticity is maintained and negotiated through the interaction between the voice of conscience, spiritual intelligence, and power struggle in the context of higher education. Thus, these findings broaden the understanding of authentic leadership by providing a perspective that shifts from a focus on individual traits to a more contextualized and changing process.

Implications and Limitation

Practically, leadership development in higher education environments can be directed at increasing reflection on values, ethical decision-making processes, and the leader's ability to manage differences of interest and power conflicts. Academic institutions can also provide a place for dialogue and convey important views in a more effective manner. Theoretically, these findings provide an important framework for developing authentic leadership studies through the relationship between conscience, spiritual intelligence, and power struggles.

This research is limited to specific informants and the context of higher education, so the use of the findings in other organizations can be adjusted to the values they uphold. Furthermore, because this research is based on grounded theory, the research produces a conceptual framework based on the experiences and interpretations of the informants, rather than a direct test of causal relationships. The concept of spiritual intelligence was developed through a process of understanding stories about reflections on values and meaning. Therefore, further research needs to test and explain this concept with clearer and more measurable real data.

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