

Strategic Leadership for Social Impact during Covid-19 Outbreak: A Spotlight on Lembaga Zakat Negeri Kedah

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Abstract

The COVID-19 outbreak poses a crucial threat to Malaysian public health and economy. Many families have been affected due to this pandemic. To face this situation, zakat is a form of charitable donation in Islam aimed at social justice within society. Lembaga Zakat Negeri Kedah (LZNK) plays a significant role as a zakat institutional entity actively providing financial assistance to the community. Therefore, this study explores the strategic leadership employed by Lembaga Zakat Negeri Kedah (LZNK) during the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak. The qualitative approach is utilized in this study, employing the method of in-depth interviews with LZNK to gather data. Data is analyzed using content analysis. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of strategic leadership in the context of the pandemic at LZNK and offer valuable lessons for other organizations striving to make a positive difference in the face of such global challenges.

Keywords: Covid-19, Strategic Leadership, Lembaga Zakat Negeri Kedah

1. Introduction

Zakat institutions have disbursed funds to support basic needs, emergency health services, education activities, economic recovery, and da'wah (spreading the word of Islam) programs. Zakat, as a substantial financial potential in Islam, exerts a vast impact when properly optimized and managed. The COVID-19 outbreak has impacted many aspects of Malaysian life, including health, lifestyle, and economic changes (Abdullah, Hashim, Zainal Abidin & Mohd Shazali, 2022). This outbreak also led to the existence of poverty that Malaysia rarely deals with (Ibrahim, Raffar, Aida, Mujani, & Yaacob, 2022). Therefore, Zakat as an Islamic social fund has a role in overcoming this crisis, by helping the communities which are directly affected by the crisis (Hambari, Arif & Zaim, 2020). Zakat institutions in Malaysia have implemented innovative distribution practices to effectively manage the impact of COVID-19. They have distributed zakat funds to various recipients, including the indigent, individuals who lost income, frontline workers, hospitals, affected students, and COVID-19 task forces. These distributions have been rapid, efficient, and fair, ensuring that assistance reaches those most in need during these challenging times (Masruki, Sulaiman & Abd Majid, 2021). Additionally, global zakat institutions have initiated international initiatives to respond to the pandemic (Swabdaru & Abdel Mohsin, 2022). In addition, zakat institutions have collaborated with governmental bodies and NGOs to extend their reach and support efforts to combat the pandemic. Special aid has been provided to families of deceased COVID-19 patients, and COVID-19 patients themselves, and emergency funds have been allocated for unforeseen incidents caused by the pandemic (Marzuki, Abdul Majid & Rosman, 2023).

Lembaga Zakat Negeri Kedah (LZNK) has taken significant steps to manage the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. In response to the pandemic, LZNK has adapted its operations to ensure that zakat reaches those most affected by COVID-19. The institution has focused on providing support to hospitals, patients, and communities in need. The organization has concentrated on helping hospitals, patients, and underprivileged areas.

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Efforts like the dissemination of personal protective equipment (PPE), funding contributions for COVID-19, and partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been crucial in tackling the obstacles presented by the epidemic.

The effectiveness of zakat fundraising not only relies on a prominent leadership figure but also necessitates individuals with leadership qualities to maximize fundraising efforts. This is because leadership plays a crucial role in the fundraising of Zakat. With good leadership, a good system can be built in various aspects of zakat fundraising, such as planning, organizing, and implementing strategies to raise funds effectively. Vision, ethics, and effective communication are critical leadership attributes for anyone engaged in zakat fundraising. The importance of leadership in managing zakat at the Lembaga Zakat Negeri Kedah (LZNK) through the Covid-19 outbreak extends beyond the mere aspects of zakat collection, distribution, and fund management. Leaders provide inspiration and motivation to employees to persevere and grow, even in difficult circumstances such as a pandemic (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). In the case of LZNK, strong leadership is expected to enhance the efficiency of zakat processes, improve stakeholder relations, and contribute to the overall success of the institution during the COVID-19 outbreak. Strong leadership ensures that zakat funds are utilized efficiently to support individuals and communities impacted by the pandemic effectively. Based on the good strategic leadership efforts by LZNK during the pandemic, this study aims to explore four aspects of leadership at LZNK in terms of leadership empowerment, communication, strategic thinking, and decisiveness.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Leadership Empowerment

Leadership empowerment refers to a leadership approach or style that focuses on delegating authority, fostering autonomy, and enabling individuals within an organization to take ownership of their roles and responsibilities (Team, 2023). In the face of the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, effective leadership empowerment has emerged as a critical factor in navigating crises and ensuring social impact. Leadership empowerment entails delegating authority, fostering autonomy, and enabling individuals within an organization to take ownership of their roles and responsibilities. Within the context of LZNK, leadership empowerment has been instrumental in mobilizing resources, adapting strategies, and fostering collaboration to address the evolving needs of communities affected by the pandemic.

Leadership empowerment in the context of Lembaga Zakat Negeri Kedah (LZNK) during the COVID-19 outbreak involves several key aspects: Decisive Decision-Making: Empowered leaders at LZNK made timely and decisive decisions to adapt to the rapidly changing circumstances brought about by the pandemic. This involved reorganizing zakat collection and distribution processes to ensure continued support for those in need (Eldersevi & Muhammad, 2021). Adaptive Strategies: Empowered leadership fostered the development and implementation of adaptive strategies aimed at addressing the social impact of COVID-19. These strategies may have included expanding outreach programs, leveraging technology for remote assistance, and reallocating resources to areas of greatest need (Eldersevi & Muhammad, 2021). Effective Communication: Empowered leaders facilitated effective communication both internally within the organization and externally with stakeholders. Clear and transparent communication helped maintain trust and confidence in LZNK's operations despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. (Eldersevi & Muhammad, 2021). For example, Zakat on Touch. Thus, Leadership empowerment within LZNK played a crucial role in navigating the complexities of the COVID-19 outbreak, enabling the organization to effectively fulfill its mission of providing social impact and assistance to those in need during challenging times.

2.2 Communication

During the COVID-19 pandemic, LZNK and other zakat institutions faced constraints on their activities and mobility. Zakat institutions faced challenges in maintaining effective communication while ensuring the continuation of their vital services. Effective communication in strategic leadership is vital for Lembaga Zakat Negeri Kedah to ensure social impact. Communication facilitates the dissemination of critical information about Zakat assistance programs and safety protocols to stakeholders. (Abdullah et al., 2023). In maintaining public trust and ensuring coordinated response effective crisis communication plays a pivotal role In the context of Lembaga Zakat Negeri Kedah, where the organization is responsible for managing Zakat funds and providing assistance to those in need, effective communication is essential for transparently addressing concerns, disseminating accurate information, and coordinating efforts to mitigate the impact of the crisis (Meerangani et al., 2023; Eldersevi et al., 2021; Swandaru et al., 2022).

For Zakat institutions to maintain public trust, crisis communication is essential. Transparency and timeliness reassure stakeholders of the organization's accountability, integrity, and ethics. Proactive communication tactics defend an organization's reputation during crises, according to Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT).

Businesses may retain public trust and reputation by immediately resolving issues and giving accurate information. (Coombs, 2007), Thus communication strategies should prioritize transparency and clarity to build trust among stakeholders. Clear communication channels facilitate understanding and cooperation, essential for implementing Zakat programs during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Marzuki et al., 2023)

LZNK has embraced innovative communication practices to ensure the continued delivery of Zakat services and engagement with stakeholders. The research underscores the importance of effective communication in Zakat distribution programs aimed at eradicating poverty. Clear communication channels ensure that information reaches the intended recipients, facilitating equitable access to Zakat assistance (Eldersevi et al., 2021). A key innovation of communications practice by LZNK is digital Media Utilization: Lembaga Zakat Negeri Kedah has leveraged digital media platforms effectively to enhance communication with stakeholders. By utilizing websites, social media, and online portals, they disseminate information about Zakat programs, eligibility criteria, and distribution processes (Mohd Khalis et al., 2022)

2.3 Strategic Thinking

According to Liedtka (1998), strategic thinking involves five elements, namely 1) focus on systems, 2) focus on goals, 3) thinking within a time frame, 4) hypothesis-driven, and 5) wise use of opportunities. He believes that if these five elements are well planned, they can prepare an organization to adapt to any changes that occur. This is also aligned with the Islamic approach which states that strategic planning is not only about achieving material success or personal gain but also ensuring that actions are in line with moral values and religious ethics. It also involves safeguarding the welfare of society and maintaining social justice.

Generally, zakat institutions in Malaysia face three main challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, namely in terms of zakat collection operations, limited information dissemination, and distribution aspects to the needy (Abdul Haniff, Long, & Ahmad, 2021). Facing these challenges, an effective strategic approach prioritizing innovation and the use of information technology has been implemented by LZNK. Management efforts have focused on improving the economic status of the ummah through the provision of holistic and quality services based on Islamic law, not just focusing on traditional zakat functions. Among the proactive steps taken include the establishment of Asnaf Care, Food Bank Centers, the 'JOM LAPOR ASNAF' system, as well as collaborations with higher education institutions and Islamic financial institutions (Abdul Haniff, Long, & Ahmad, 2021).

LZNK also demonstrates a new approach to zakat management in the state of Kedah with a solid foundation of good governance guided by Enactment 23 of the Kedah Darul Aman Zakat Board Enactment 2015 (ELZK, 2015) which stipulates the functions of the Chief Executive Officer and provisions regarding other employees in LZNK (Zaki, Sulong, & Ghani, 2020). Management is focused on corporate governance, risk management, and internal control strategies, all of which are implemented professionally (Suhaimi, Sollehudin, Shuib, & Saade, 2019). For example, the use of zakat logos on corporate companies can increase zakat collection for that sector (Ab Rahman, Sukari, & Syed Omar, 2022). Clearly, with this planned direction and mission, LZNK's achievements have elevated it as one of the most well-organized organizations in the zakat management sector in Malaysia.

2.4 Decisiveness

In a study by Santoni, Susiady, and Sudirman (2020), it was found that leadership, organizational commitment, and job characteristics have a positive and significant influence on job satisfaction. The trait of decisiveness in organizations is usually closely related to leadership. It involves the ability to make decisions confidently and boldly, as well as to act decisively to achieve organizational goals. This indirectly influences teams to work with full commitment and discipline to achieve organizational success. In this regard, LZNK has been recognized as the most modern zakat collection institution in Malaysia with high-quality, systematic, and integrated infrastructure and state-of-the-art technology (LZNK, 2024). The work quality outlined by LZNK aims towards world-class and comprehensive services for zakat distribution and collection (LZNK, 2024). The firm determination toward the organization's vision and mission will not materialize without the strong determination and decisiveness of the leadership. The management of LZNK explicitly assures the strengthening of zakat distribution conducted transparently and through audit processes to ensure the recognition of zakat administration. This demonstrates evidence that LZNK has been administered in line with its vision and goals since its inception (LZNK, 2024).

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology to acquire the necessary research data. Qualitative data refers to information that describes qualities or characteristics and is non-numerical. It is collected through methods like questionnaires, interviews, and observations, focusing on emotions, perceptions, and behaviors rather than numerical values. The researchers utilize semi-structured interview methods with key individuals, including heads of the internal audit division, deputy chief executive officer (Administration and Finance), head of the finance department, and head of the LZNK quality management department. Every participant had a different interview session. Purposive sampling is the method used in this study to choose respondents; in other words, the researchers purposefully chose people who would be most relevant to the topics of the study (Sekaran, 2003).

4. Finding and Discussion

Effective leadership in LZNK can impact its effectiveness by shaping the organizational culture, enhancing staff knowledge and skills, improving operating systems and transparency, promoting Islamic governance, and building a strong fundraising system (Mansor and Arshad (2021). Empowering leadership was a positive and influential factor that fostered work satisfaction and drove team performance. During the COVID-19 epidemic, the leadership of LZNK was able to continue empowering practices and effectively assist teams, which enabled the organization to absorb the effects and interruptions associated with the pandemic. In this context, strategic leadership has become crucial for ensuring the continued effectiveness and social impact of zakat institutions. As mentioned in Surah Al-Anbiya verse 73' "And we made them leaders guided by our command. and we inspired them to do good deeds, the establishment of prayer, and giving of zakah; and they were worshippers of us". In this verse, Allah describes a special group of people whom he appointed as leaders. These leaders were chosen to guide others according to Allah's command.

Effective communication in strategic leadership is vital for Lembaga Zakat Negeri Kedah to ensure social impact. Strong communication skills help LZNK leaders develop a bond with their teams, build trust, and promote clarity of goals and responsibilities. In the context of LZNK, effective communication is crucial for managing the flow of zakat funds, coordinating relief efforts, and maintaining trust among stakeholders during the pandemic. By adopting these strategies, leaders at LZNK can ensure that their organization remains responsive, adaptable, and committed to its mission of helping those in need (Rofie, Abdul Aziz, Abdullah, 2022). In addition, LZNK uses digital media such as Zakat on Touch, Zakat Kedah Portal, and Asnaf Care Platform used during the COVID-19 pandemic to manage Zakat and maintain communication with the public. The organization leveraged various digital platforms to disseminate information about Zakat, its distribution, and its services using social media to spread awareness and promote the LZNK activities (Sulong, Johari, Ramly & Awang, 2022). Good decision-making is crucial for leaders during COVID-19 pandemic. Empowering leadership practices, which include elements of decisiveness, were found to be important for LZNK during the COVID-19 outbreak. Empowering leadership was associated with increased team effectiveness, indicating the leaders' ability to make decisions that supported their teams (Haniff, Long, & Ahmad, 2021).

A leader who possesses leadership empowerment, communication, strategic thinking, and decisiveness is well-equipped to drive the organization toward success. They inspire their teams, make informed decisions, and navigate the complexities of the business landscape with precision. These qualities are essential for building a positive work culture, fostering innovation, and achieving sustainable growth and competitive advantage.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the strategic leadership demonstrated by LZNK during the COVID-19 outbreak has been exemplary in fostering significant social impact. Through proactive measures and innovative initiatives, LZNK has effectively addressed the challenges posed by the pandemic, ensuring the welfare and well-being of communities in Kedah. In addition, by leveraging its resources and expertise, LZNK has not only provided essential aid and support but has also set a commendable example of responsible and impactful leadership in times of crisis. This strategic approach underscores the importance of adaptive and responsive leadership in navigating unprecedented challenges for the betterment of society.

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This section presents the findings and discussion based on thematic analysis as follows at Table 1

Table1: Informants' Quoted as Findings

T/P	Int 1	Int 2
Leadership empowerment	- "When the Datuk CEO came in, if we were to distribute to a single recipient, they would receive according to their needs."	- "The intention of the Datuk CEO is for them not to just sit idly and expect to receive indefinitely. Another aspect is the culture of eradicating poverty; perhaps we cannot simply close it off so easily, but we are moving towards safeguarding the future generations, their children."
Communication	- "Zakat on Touch is an application as a medium of communication that can track Asnaf based on the Qariah system that Amil governs. The 'Amil is able to check the list of Asnaf from the apps to deliver information and financial assistance to Asnaf under his jurisdiction." - "Zakat on Job aims to develop a successful <i>asnaf</i> . Instead of giving financial support, we also help them develop their skills as we do for Smart Sawah."	- "We have the Zakat Kedah portal, okay, so all the social media platforms that are currently active, I remember during COVID, the active ones were Facebook, Instagram, and so on. - We employed the Asnaf Care platform, as a result, we were able to establish a food bank etc."
Strategic Thinking	- "At the end of 2019, the money could not be distributed to the Asnaf if the money of the Zakat is RM fifty (50) million at the end of the year. So, we will keep going next year. Our plan is more efficient at the time of COVID-19, the people who put it in the savings that is what makes our emergency money. Example on, during a pandemic, if we want to get a quote at that time, we cannot even cover it. However, the money of Zakat, the Zakat that we get at the end of 2019 can cover the distribution to Asnaf." - "That is why we have strategic	- "More than just agricultural entrepreneurs, many banks are willing to assist our entrepreneurs because they may receive support from Bank Negara. This support is primarily aimed at entrepreneurs, and thankfully, this year, many banks are willing to help our recipients in the form of these entrepreneurs." - "Hmm, during COVID, it was for our local entrepreneurs at that time, but thankfully, this year alone, we have provided significant assistance to many entrepreneurs. For Agro Bank, they focus more on agriculture, okay, and for what we do with HBVA, these corporate agencies/companies assist us in our mission by providing small rice machines, three of them."

	partners from UiTM, UUM, and Unishams that are together to assist us in research activity and approach to strengthen LZNK in distributing Zakat for Asnaf."	
Decisiveness	- "Before the Datuk CEO took over, recipients would receive aid based on their needs. They would continue to receive support if they required it. Consequently, discontinuing aid could lead to their dissatisfaction. However, we have now shifted the recipients' mindset. We emphasize that eligibility is not indefinite but temporary, aiming to educate them on this aspect."	- "The CEO is very firm in changing the mindset of the Asnaf recipients by providing assistance and educating them to be more independent and resilient."

T= Theme, Int= Informant
 (Source: Study Interview)