

Operationalizing ulul albab on a spiritual leader: A case of TV AlHijrah Malaysia

Nur Kamariah Abdul Wahid, Nur Arfifah Abdul Sabian, Suhaimi Md. Sarif

Business and Administration Department, Kuliyyah of Economics and Management Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

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Corresponding author:

Nur Kamariah Binti Abdul Wahid
nkamariahwahid@iium.edu.my

Author's email:

nurarfifah@iium.edu.my
suhaimims@iium.edu.my

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Center for Islamic Economics Studies and Development, Faculty of Business and Economics, Universitas Islam Indonesia

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to explore on how the leadership of TV AlHijrah Malaysia, counter the economic crisis brought by Covid19 pandemic that they have succeeded in creating tv program like My QuranTime which led them to be awarded for ASEAN Inspiring Award Winner 2021 Innovation, Inspire, Creativity, the top ASEAN Award 2021. The interest of the paper is to understand how the transposition of spiritual leadership into Islamic leadership model could be explained practically.

Methodology – The paper adopts qualitative research approach by employing interviews as the research instruments for the interest of the paper to go into in-depth understanding as well as to get the explanation on the leadership style of the leader of the organization

Findings – The paper discovered that a new emerging element define as ulul albab has become the main contributor in explaining the transposition of spiritual leadership into Islamic leadership model element by explaining the elements of human capital aspects. Simultaneously, the findings have also able to explain the performance of the subject during such crisis in terms of the ability to transform the followers as well as organizational performances

Implications – Potentially all Muslim leaders could improve their understanding of Islamic leadership from the lenses of spiritual leadership on taking the organization towards the desirable outcomes, covering the elements of organizational as well followers' performance.

Originality – The paper is believed to be with the original value as it only focuses on explaining the transposition of spiritual leadership into Islamic leadership model, by focusing on one specific organization, namely TV AlHijrah, that the emergence of ulul albab in explaining the human capital is seen as among the contribution.

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Introduction

The whole world was not prepared for the Covid19 pandemic that know to be as disastrous as one could imagine, that disrupts the functioning of community, society, and especially economic (Terblanche, 2020), and challenges the efficiency and effectiveness of the leaders in handling the uncertainties. The speed and scope of the coronavirus crisis pose extraordinary challenges for leaders in today's vital institutions (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020). A good leader can make a positive difference in people's lives and their livelihoods (Basir, 2022). Previous studies showed that leadership is one of the major turning points in business competencies in handling crisis (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020), especially with the blessing of digital economy that transform

organizational interactions. leaders are expected to understand and adapt to the problem, including planning and implementing solutions to restore normalcy (Jong, 2017).

Adding to that, Malaysian industry is not being excluded from the challenge of finding their way out in meeting the Covid19 pandemic crisis, and the same looks were given to the leaders. Quoting one of the big audit firm reports dated March 2022 on Covid19 business crisis, Ernst & Young¹ Consulting Sdn. Bhd, based on five hundred (500) companies being surveyed, it is now known that the majority of Malaysian businesses are prepared to live with COVID-19 (86%) and are prioritizing technology adoption in the immediate term (77%) as they fast track their adaptation to the new normal, that in such a challenging circumstance a call for organizational agility to navigate disruptions, address current gaps and accelerate measures to build resilience (Ernst & Young, 2022). Moreover, with so many negative critiques of all dominant or conventional leadership styles, questions are still prevalent as to how leaders are supposed to handle the need for crisis leadership that can perform beyond their benefit or gain without the reliance on spiritual values within the leaders, the spiritual leadership (Islam et al., 2021). Hence, it is believed that the paper able to shade some ideas on how to equip the leaders with fast-track adaptation to the new normal in such a challenging time to bring out organizational performance by studying the leadership approach of a state-owned Malaysian free-to-air Islamic television channel, owned and operated by Al-Hijrah Media Corporation Malaysia.

As a question arises on how to call for organizational change and development that able to deliberate organizational agility, it automatically produced an outcome of where the discussion on leadership comes in. How are the leaders of Malaysian businesses come to the call for organizational agility via spiritual leadership? This was where the interest of the paper to explore on how potentially the leader of TV AlHijrah able to bring agility into the organization during the downtime of Covid19 pandemic, the organization was among the few that did not let go of their employees via retrenchment, nor organization downsizing, but instead for the first time, they able to give rewards to the employees for the organization performance that the organization's Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Mr. Namanzee Haris has been awarded with ASEAN Inspiring Award Winner 2021 Innovation, Inspire, Creativity, the top ASEAN Award 2021 recently as reported by Bernama on August 6, 2022. The award was an outcome to creative contents generated by the tv station when the audience was all scared to the uncertainties of the pandemic, through the content of My QuranTime. The researchers have been informed that the program is an outcome from a collaboration between TV AlHijrah and a non-profit organization (NPO), Yayasan Ummah Ikhlas Malaysia.

Hence, the paper is to explore on how the leader (CEO) of TV AlHijrah as well as the leader of the NPO have proven that spiritual leadership is one of the enabler to turn around a business competencies in handling crisis (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020), especially during Covid19 pandemic that lead them to be recognized as the first Malaysian first Islamic free-to-air television's in terms of overall management as well as corporate governance and responsibility. The paper is also believed to contribute further into operationalizing the ulul albab context into the theoretical transposition of the components of the spiritual leadership model into a model for Islamic leadership as a theory (Fry et al., 2016).

Literature Review

In handling public crises, not excluding the Covid19 pandemic, having and effective and efficient leaders is the greatest asset (George & Pounder, 2022; Jong, 2017), for they are the leverage to organizational performance. Align to that, as captured in the qualitative study conducted on exploring TV AlHijrah's success story in transforming the company from an underdog to the most innovative, inspirational, and creative organization (ASEAN Inspiring Award Winner 2021 Innovation, Inspire, Creativity), on how the leadership style adopted by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) that has succeeded in leading the organization, breaking the barrier of Covid19 economic challenges need to be highlighted.

No doubt, leaders play an important role in the institutionalization of organizations,

¹ An accounting firm that primarily provides assurance (which includes financial audit), tax, consulting, and advisory services to its clients.

creating an environment where change can take place or affecting the perceptions and attitudes of members of the organization (Hirlak & Kara, 2018). So many researches being conducted with regards to leadership, and to the interest of Covid19, the typical approaches of leading were being challenged as well (Basir, 2022; Islam et al., 2021; Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020). Adding to that, GLOBE researchers found that outstanding leaders as demonstrating charismatic influence while being diplomatic, delegating authority, and encouraging participation (Fry et al., 2016). In that manner, the study is focussing on two leaders that have come together to bring performance to TV AlHijrah, namely the CEO of TV AlHijrah himself as well as the producer of My QuranTime, CEO Yayasan Ummah Ikhlas Malaysia.

Unfortunately, though, recurring dishonest controversies, financial misconduct, immoral management methods have demonstrated that all dominant or conventional leadership programs have struggled to deliver adequate crisis leadership that can perform beyond their personal benefit or gains without the reliance on spiritual values within the leaders, the spiritual leadership (Islam et al., 2021). Spirituality has been known to have a strong connection with the phase of business stability or resilient process through crises or uncertainties as it is leveraging on the power of altruism, sense of community, as well as sense of meaningfulness, authentic holistic motivation and embodies the needs of both the leader and the follower (Fry et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2021).

Even though, many studies have successfully made it clear that part of how a leader could help in the transformation of organizations to charge in leading out of the crisis (Stern, 2017), but to the case, the context of a spiritual leader from within the CEO, no doubt proved to be supporting previous literature as evidenced through the performance recorded by TV AlHijrah under the leadership of the current CEO, Mr. Namanzee Haris, with the 2021 ASEAN award on Innovation, Inspire, Creativity, the top ASEAN Award 2021 recently as reported by Bernama on August 6, 2022. Hence, a spirituality of a leader, or the spiritual leadership approach adopted has been proven practically as having a strong contribution to an organization's ability as well as resiliencies in encountering crises, especially the economic crisis brought forward through the pandemic Covid19.

Several scholars contend that spiritual leadership on basis of religion should be particularly connected to faith (Benefiel & Abbott, 2019). Adding to that, the integration of Islamic principles is believed to have an effect to the deployment of spiritual leadership within what believes as faith (Islam et al., 2021; Wahid et al., 2019) that has successfully becoming the contributor to the performance of so many organizations (Fry et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2021; Srivastava, 2022; Wahid et al., 2019; Yang & Chen, 2022). Further study has also proposed on moving forward through a holistic framework on spiritual leadership model (refer to figure 3), that human capital need to be acknowledged in order to capture the geese of spiritual leadership (Wang et al., 2020).

In responding to this call, we expect that spiritual leadership integrates spiritual qualities based in inner faith that are fundamental to Islamic principles, and hence, has the potential to provide the basis for a comprehensive performance to TV AlHijrah especially with the context of *ulul albab* which is believed to not just able to guide a person, but also to become the game changer within spiritual leadership transposition through Islamic leadership model (Fry et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2021). This paper is believed to be able to guide in operationalizing *ulul albab*, as fundamental to Islamic principles within the approach of spiritual leadership and Islamic leadership model.

Research Methods

Every type of empirical research has an implicit, if not explicit, research design (Yin, 1994), and a case study is best to empirically investigate a complex and unique phenomenon in order to make a theoretical contribution (Ridder et al., 2009) become the justification for the paper to adopt a qualitative case study approach as the researchers believe that in-depth exploration is needed implicitly to capture the whole meaning of something that cannot be measure tangibly.

Aligned to that, the adoption of qualitative case study approach in the study is believed to be able to shade the path of how TV AlHijrah able to overcome the impact of Covid19 even though facts showing that Malaysian industries were deeply impacted by the pandemic crises, that the main attention was given onto the leaders of which these are the spearhead for fast-tracking the organizations adaptation to the new normal, such a challenging circumstance that is demanding

for organizational agility to navigate disruptions, address current gaps and accelerate measures to build resilience (Earnst & Young, 2022). Hence, it is believed that the paper can shade some ideas on how to equip the leaders with fast-track adaptation to the new normal in such a challenging time to bring out organizational performance by studying the leadership approach of a state-owned Malaysian free-to-air Islamic television channel, owned and operated by Al-Hijrah Media Corporation Malaysia.

In order to create an impact of the study, the researchers constructed a critical question on “How” with the urgency to know the detail on how it is such an underdog tv station able to make a comeback during the hard time when every other organization were about to call a quit to the extent they managed to get a recognition known as ASEAN 2021 Innovation, Inspire, Creativity award, the top ASEAN Award 2021 with the belief that the study would bring a practical contribution on manifesting Islamic leadership within the scope of spiritual leadership framework.

The research questions that guide the exploration were on how the leadership looks like in the organization that has helped the organization to perform, not just through the leaders, but also by making the followers (employees) perform as well as what could have been the element that enables the top management (in this case, the CEO) to make his leadership approach as Islamic, are also part of the expected findings from the study.

The study opted for interviewing method as it is believed that interviewing able to give some in-depth understanding upon detail probing via open-ended interview questions (Maxwell, 2008; Ryan et al., 2009), able to give richer explanations given by the respondents, who was the CEO or top leader of the organization

Additionally, the study is also believed to be able to make a theoretical contribution to the body of knowledge, theory of spiritual leadership transposition into Islamic leadership model (Fry et al., 2016), enriching the conceptual understanding that in order to practically apply spiritual leadership, the element of human capital should not be forgone (Wang et al., 2020).

Results and Discussion

“All that is happening is Allah’s way of testing us to become better person. All comes with His blessings that we need to accept is as qada’ and qadr (the fifth pillar of faith). All we need to do is to find ways to be better...”

Source: CEO, TV AlHijrah

Evidently, the statement above shows the quality of dzikir, fikr and amal saleh as the action that defined ulul albab ((Munir, 2018; Subirin et al., 2018). Additionally, similar qualities of ulul albab is made obvious from the interaction between the researcher and the leader of the NPO, Yayasan Ummah Iklas Malaysia.

“Every source of solutions to all problems can be derived from the Quran, as everything comes from Him...this is where I see the importance of taking all Muslim to the right source of knowledge, Quran is for everyone, so that it will make us as better person for the sake of Allah..”

Source: CEO, Yayasan Ummah Ikhlas, Malaysia

Additionally, riding on the qualities of ulul albab, the adaptation to spiritual leadership able to facilitate handling crises management efficiently and effectively, including in handling economic crisis driven by Covid19, that material, and spiritual pursuits are inseparable for Muslim business leaders, and all the decisions and actions are considered as an act of being religious (Islam et al., 2021). Moreover, the researchers believe that the state of conscience is actually to be discussed within the context of ulul albab, as cited by the CEO himself during the interview.

“We looked at the pandemic as blessing in disguise for it gives us the opportunities to turn around the perspective of entertainment to be within the scope of Islam... and that the pandemic allow the team to redefine news, within the guidance of the Quran and Sunnah... on the foundation of me myself started to realised that I need to do something to make the entertainment as part of solution to all the moral issues caused by them.”

Source, CEO, TV AlHijrah.

However, from the case, the characteristics of both the CEO of TV ALHijrah as well as

the NPO's leader believed to be driven by the quality of ulul albab able to explain further the holistic framework by exploring its impact on the leaders as the human capital (e.g. gender, years of work experiences, and emotional intelligence), the social capital (e.g., family bond, organizational support, and culture), and the individual characteristics (e.g., entrepreneurship and psychological ownership), which was coincident, being intangible or attitudinal, rather than tangible (Wang et al., 2020). This was where the element of ulul albab, which very much being intangible in nature, as syphoned from the interview with the leaders of both institutions, significantly gave the right impact on the quality of human capital that able to reflect Islam leadership in his decisions, thinking, and behavior.

The manifestation of ulul albab's characteristics is described by being composed of the conscience of the presence of God in all aspects of life that makes him bring out his inner sense toward Allah's blessings (dzikir), that guide the thinking (fikir), to the extent that it produces the behaviour or actions (amal saleh) of wanting to do good deeds only and to deliver the right messages to the others as well in order to bring everyone to the blessing of Allah (Munir, 2018; Subirin et al., 2018). Hence, it is believed that the ulul albab as embedded within both leaders has become the catalyst to the adaption of spiritual leadership, that leveraging on ulul albab resulted to Islamic leadership that led the organization toward such performance, especially in handling economic crisis due to Covid19 through creativity and innovativeness (Zhang & Yang, 2021).

“During my younger years, I have been brought up in an Islamic education system which I believe has been part and parcel of my spiritual values, believing that I can make a change by producing tv programmes that able to be part of solutions to all the moral issues brought by entertainment programmes that we are facing today...and the pandemic has created an opportunity for such agenda in which during the pandemic, when people are too scared to the threats of Covid19, and we able see that as an opportunity to produce a program similar to My QuranTime that could bring Muslim closer to the right teaching from Quran and Sunnah..when they learn the right news, they will feel a bit relaxed as in the Quran and Sunnah, all solutions to all problems were communicated clearly...We at TV AlHijrah together with Yayasan Ummah Ikhlas could see that now is the time to come together to bring benefits to others by giving them the right information via Quran and Sunnah...we need to make everyone to understand that everything is from the God, and should be will all the great things for everyone...”

Source – CEO TV AlHijrah

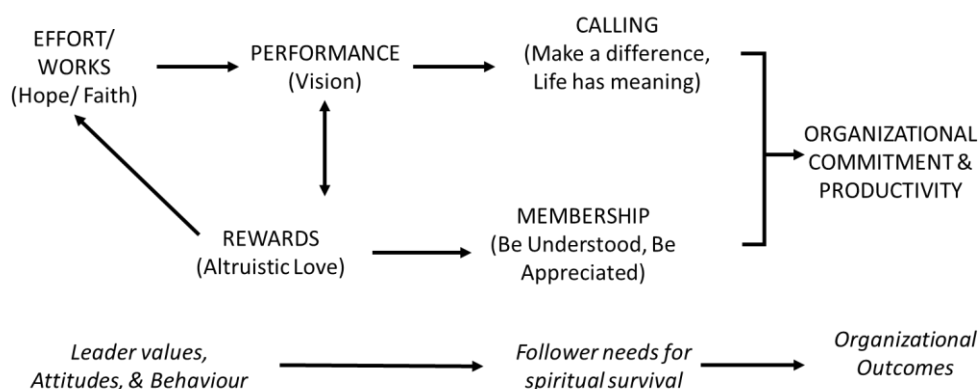


Figure 1. Spiritual Leadership Model (Fry, 2003)

As narrated from the interview, obviously enough the element of ulul albab is not something than can happened overnight. It needs to be groomed through a continuous process, that through the inner sense of an ulul albab then only the achievement of dzikir, fikir and amal saleh (conscience, Islamic thinking, and Allah's blessed actions) could be materialized to deliberate altruism, hope, vision within a spiritual leader (Fry et al., 2016). Those dzikir, fikir and amal saleh are the one that facilitates in the transposition of spiritual leadership into Islamic leadership model (Fry et al., 2016). The idealistic of an ulul albab has produced a spiritual Islamic leader that able to

be explained the basis of human capital as a catalyst to spiritual leadership in total (Wang et al., 2020), that ulul albab as the component of human capital produces the qualities of altruism, that doing good deeds that able to bring benefits to others will bear the consequences of which a person shall reap the blessing of the God (vision), hence leading to performance of good deeds (efforts) which make the CEO and his team deliberating sense of calling as well as sense of membership. These are all the elements of spiritual leadership as per figure 1. (Fry et al., 2016).

Additionally, the spiritual leadership is believed needed to be driven by spiritual qualities, which if to be discussed within the context of Islam, the fundamental of Islam itself in the Quran and Hadith, aligned to Islamic leadership model as per figure 2 (Fry et al., 2016). These findings could be explained from the interview between the researcher and the CEO of TV AlHijrah.

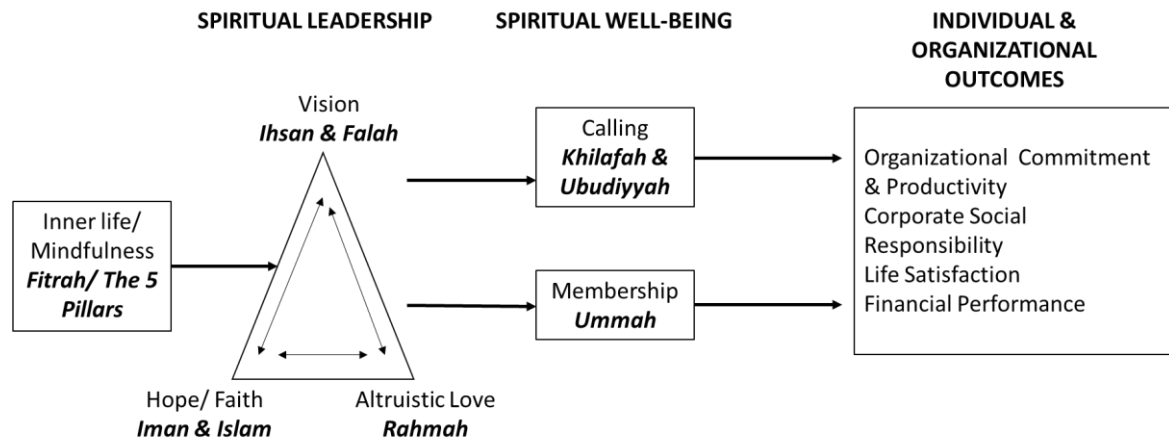


Figure 2. Transposition of Spiritual Leadership into Islamic Leadership Model (L. Fry et al., 2016)

Conclusion

Operationalizing the context of ulul albab has helped the CEO in manifesting the right thinking with God consciousness, resulting to the right actions for the sake of God's blessings have facilitated in the application of Islamic leadership model upon the correct understanding of Fitrah and the 5 pillars of Islam, Ihsan and falah, within the scope of Iman and Islam and Rahmatan lil Alamin (Fry et al., 2016) as per figure 2.

“We do business by ensuring that our audience to feel safe, by enlightening to them the right Quranic verses, make them understand what Allah has said in Quran...make them to see the positive side of the pandemic”

Source – CEO, TV AlHijrah

Reflecting ulul albab into the spiritual leadership style spurred cooperation and creativity that become the ultimatum to the company's performance. The dzikir (God conscience) leads to the right fikr (contemplating and thought), hence produce amal saleh (the right actions that being blessed by Allah) in producing tv programme such as My QuranTime (during the peak of Covid19), which has attracted sponsorships, and this event has become the opening to the great transformation to the organization. The outcome of ulul albab further outshines the characteristic of the CEO being an Islamic leader adopting a spiritual leadership style, making his team at the end of the day found trusting and wanting to follow him irresistible. Moreover, the researchers believe that operationalizing ulul albab supports the conceptual framework of the holistic Spiritual Leadership model (Wang et al., 2020) as such that ulul albab leads the human capital, in this case, the spiritual leader (TV AlHijrah's C.E.O), guiding him at the individual level to deliberate the effective spiritual leadership style, hence resulting to Islamic leadership approach as prescribed as in terms of Ihsan and Falah that shall guide the vision, Rahmah that shall produce altruism, within the hope and faith as prescribe by Iman and Islam (Fry et al., 2016) in bringing out the right outcome at both individual as well as organizational level, especially during the crisis time, adding to enhance the conceptual holistic framework in previous literature (Wang et al., 2020).

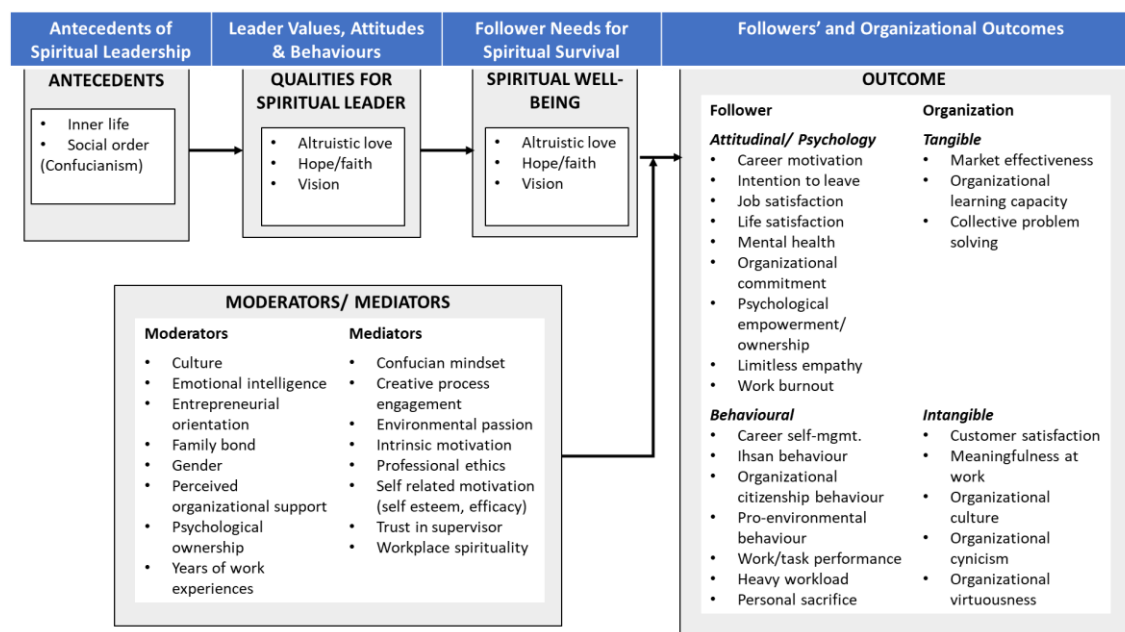


Figure 3. A holistic model of spiritual leadership (Wang et al., 2020)

Aligned to the findings, it is believed that operationalizing ulul albab able to bring out desirable organizational outcomes that able to explain on the award recognition given to TV AlHijrah recently. Operationalizing ulul albab into spiritual leadership style, able to lead to Islamic leadership of which will produce set of followers in possession of the recommended attitudinal and psychological, as well as potential of positive behavioural outcome (Wang et al., 2020; Sholikhah et al., 2018).

Limitations and Study Forward

Options given on leadership styles including spiritual leadership have long been acknowledged to have impacts an organizational performance (Basir, 2022; Fry et al., 2016; Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020), but unfortunately, the habitual dishonest controversies, financial misconduct, immoral management methods have demonstrated that all main or conventional leadership programs have struggled to deliver adequate crisis leadership that can perform beyond their personal benefit (Islam et al., 2021). But somehow, spiritual leadership has found its way in addressing all those calamities that comprise of Islamic leadership as a framework upon the incorporation of ulul albab that need to be operationalized within the human capital, especially the leader themselves.

Explorations have been made to identify among the required elements of spiritual leadership as transposed into Islamic leadership model (Fry et al., 2016) to help Muslim leaders to find the right stance from the perspective of the religion. The study on TV AlHijrah has successfully shown that grooming the human capital with the foundation of ulul albab could be the solution to achieve organizational performance, especially during the economic crisis. Ulul albab which must be rooted strongly within a Muslim, must be leveraged into transforming leaders to become spiritual leaders that could lead to the transposition of Islamic leadership. This is when at the very basic element of individual human capital level, one needs to be groomed solidly as an ulul albab, ability to contemplate his thinking, decisions and actions onto Allah, people who not only have brains to think properly, but also in knowing how to put it to correct use (Subirin et al., 2018).

To the very interesting findings unfortunately, the study has yet able to explore ulul albab into different context of industry that may require a longitudinal exploration to get into the in-depth understanding on how ulul albab can be captured tangibly. On top of that, the case study have shown that to make a person to become an ulul albab, the process need to begin from as early as primary education level, which to the limited time allowed, the researcher has not able to go into the detail on which exactly educational exposure garnered by the human capital could be the catalyst in making a person to have the ability as an ulul albab (dzikir, fikiran and amal saleh).

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Nur Kamariah Abdul Wahid
 Data curation: Nur Kamariah Abdul Wahid, Nur Arfifah Abdul Sabian
 Formal analysis: Nur Kamariah Abdul Wahid, Nur Arfifah Abdul Sabian
 Investigation: Nur Kamariah Abdul Wahid, Nur Arfifah Abdul Sabian
 Methodology: Nur Kamariah Abdul Wahid, Nur Arfifah Abdul Sabian
 Project administration: Nur Arfifah Abdul Sabian
 Supervision: Suhaimi Mhd. Sarif
 Validation: Nur Kamariah Abdul Wahid, Nur Arfifah Abdul Sabian, Suhaimi Mhd. Sarif
 Visualization: Nur Kamariah Abdul Wahid
 Writing – original draft: Nur Kamariah Abdul Wahid
 Writing – review & editing: Nur Kamariah Abdul Wahid

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