

The Leadership Strategies in Improving the Quality of Public Services at the Department of Education and Culture of Gorontalo Province

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze leadership strategies in improving the quality of public services at the Department of Education and Culture of Gorontalo Province. The research focuses on how leadership defines strategic direction, manages human resources, maintains organizational culture, emphasizes service ethics, and strengthens control and supervision. In addition, this study examines key determinants of public service performance, including responsiveness, responsibility, and accountability. A qualitative approach was employed, with data collected through observation, interviews, and document review. The findings reveal that although the Government of Gorontalo Province has achieved an “A” rating (Green Zone) in public service performance, the implementation within the Department of Education and Culture still faces challenges such as low responsiveness of civil servants, weak responsibility in task execution, and limited oversight mechanisms. These conditions highlight the need for more visionary and transformational leadership strategies to ensure that education and cultural services meet public expectations. This research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of public administration studies and practical benefits for policy improvement and organizational performance.

Keywords: leadership strategy; public service; public administration; Gorontalo

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Introduction

Public service is one of the fundamental pillars of democratic governance, as it reflects how the state fulfills its obligations to ensure legal certainty, protection, and the welfare of its citizens. In Indonesia, the demand for high-quality public services has continued to increase in line with the growing complexity of societal needs and expectations. The enactment of Law Number 25 of 2009 on Public Services and Government Regulation Number 96 of 2012 has provided a strong legal foundation for bureaucratic reform and service improvement (Mayasari, Ahmidi, Alhamdani, & Azzahra, 2024; Jufri, 2021). However, despite these regulatory milestones, the quality of public services across various government institutions remains inconsistent, especially at the regional level, where leadership plays a decisive role in shaping performance outcomes (Ombudsman Republik Indonesia, 2024).

In this context, leadership within public organizations is not merely an administrative function, but a determinant factor that influences how policies are implemented, how resources are managed, and how organizational culture is sustained. Effective leadership ensures that public institutions are not only able to carry out their technical functions but also capable of building trust and accountability in the eyes of the public. Conversely, weak leadership tends to result in low responsiveness, poor responsibility, and limited accountability among public servants, all of which hinder the achievement of organizational goals (Idris, 2025; Hidayat, 2025).

The Department of Education and Culture of Gorontalo Province represents a strategic institution with dual responsibilities: ensuring access to quality education and preserving cultural values as part of regional identity. Its functions include teacher and staff administration, management of educational data systems, services related to official documents such as diplomas, as well as the protection and promotion of cultural heritage. These responsibilities directly affect both internal stakeholders—teachers, staff, and students—and external stakeholders, namely the broader community that depends on educational and cultural services. As such, the effectiveness of leadership strategies in this department significantly determines the public perception of the provincial government's overall performance (Tiara, Khairil, & Susanti, 2024).

Empirical data suggest that while the Provincial Government of Gorontalo achieved an “A” rating (Green Zone) in the 2024 Ombudsman compliance evaluation, signaling excellence in public service delivery, the Department of Education and Culture has not fully realized this standard in practice (Ombudsman Republik Indonesia, 2024). Various challenges persist, such as the declining number of civil servants available to handle public services, the lack of responsiveness among existing staff, and the prevalence of public complaints regarding service delivery. Problems have also been identified in the implementation of education policies, including irregularities in the admission of new students and indications of illegal fees in schools. These challenges point to the absence of strategic leadership that is capable of aligning institutional performance with the objectives outlined in the 2023–2026 Strategic Plan (Renstra) (Mayasari et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, the relationship between leadership and public service quality can be examined through multiple dimensions of public administration. Grand theories of public administration emphasize the significance of organizational structures, management systems, and leadership in ensuring effective governance (Van Gobel, Sugiyanto, & Nggilu, 2025). Middle-range theories, such as contingency theory, suggest that leadership effectiveness depends on situational alignment, while transformational leadership theories highlight the importance of vision, motivation, and cultural change in achieving organizational success (Idris, 2025). Within the context of public services, strategic leadership is required to integrate these perspectives by setting a clear direction, optimizing resources, institutionalizing ethical practices, and implementing robust monitoring mechanisms (Hidayat, 2025; Tiara et al., 2024).

The practical significance of leadership strategies becomes evident when viewed against the specific challenges faced by the Department of Education and Culture. The reduction in personnel from 207 in 2023 to only 137 in 2025 illustrates a shrinking workforce tasked with increasingly complex responsibilities. Among these, only a small proportion hold echelon positions with formal leadership roles, leaving a majority of staff without clear accountability in service delivery. This imbalance creates a gap between strategic planning and operational execution, resulting in inefficiencies and public

dissatisfaction (Mayasari et al., 2024). Moreover, the persistence of behavioral issues among staff—such as absenteeism during working hours and a lack of seriousness in handling community needs—further undermines the credibility of the institution (Hidayat, 2025).

Addressing these challenges requires leadership that is not only administrative but also visionary. Visionary leadership involves the capacity to anticipate change, create new directions, and institutionalize reforms that outlast individual leadership terms (Idris, 2025). For the Department of Education and Culture, this means fostering an organizational culture centered on service excellence, encouraging ethical conduct, and ensuring that accountability mechanisms are consistently applied. Leadership strategies must also recognize the importance of responsiveness, as the inability to react promptly to public demands leads to frustration and a weakening of trust in government institutions (Tiara et al., 2024).

At the same time, the broader environment of public administration in Indonesia influences how leadership strategies are conceived and implemented. The bureaucratic system often remains hierarchical and rule-bound, which, while ensuring order, may also restrict innovation and responsiveness. Leadership, therefore, must act as a balancing force that maintains procedural compliance while encouraging creativity and adaptability among staff (Hidayat, 2025; Mayasari et al., 2024). This dual responsibility is particularly relevant in the education and cultural sectors, where public expectations are not only about efficiency but also about fairness, inclusivity, and the preservation of local wisdom.

This study is designed to explore these issues by focusing on two main questions: first, how leadership strategies are formulated and implemented to improve public service quality at the Department of Education and Culture of Gorontalo Province; and second, what factors determine the success or failure of such strategies. The study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing observation, interviews, and document analysis to capture both formal policies and practical realities (Idris, 2025; Hidayat, 2025). By doing so, it aims to uncover not only the structural and procedural aspects of leadership but also the human and cultural dimensions that shape service delivery.

The significance of this research lies in both theoretical and practical domains. Theoretically, it contributes to the discourse on leadership within the field of public administration by offering insights into how leadership strategies influence service delivery in a decentralized governance context. It also highlights the interplay between strategic direction, organizational culture, and individual accountability, thereby enriching the middle-range theories of leadership (Van Gobel et al., 2025; Idris, 2025). Practically, the findings are expected to provide policy recommendations for provincial governments, particularly in designing leadership development programs and institutional reforms that enhance service quality. For the Department of Education and Culture, the study offers a roadmap to address persistent challenges and align its performance with the expectations of both government regulators and the community it serves.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the leadership strategies implemented to improve the quality of public services at the Department of Education and Culture of Gorontalo Province. Specifically, the research aims to: (1) identify how leadership defines and communicates strategic direction within the organization; (2) examine the effectiveness of human resource management and staff motivation in achieving service excellence; (3) assess the role of organizational culture, ethical practices, and accountability in supporting public service quality; and (4) explore the contextual factors that determine the success or failure of leadership strategies at the regional government level. Through these objectives, the study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical models of public administration—particularly transformational and strategic leadership—and their practical application in local government institutions. The outcomes are expected to provide both analytical insight and actionable recommendations for enhancing the performance and credibility of public sector organizations.

The urgency of this research lies in the persistent gap between regulatory expectations and actual service performance in regional government institutions. Although the Government of Gorontalo Province has received high ratings from the Ombudsman for overall service compliance, empirical evidence indicates that several departments, including the Department of Education and Culture, continue to face serious challenges related to

leadership, responsiveness, and accountability. This condition reflects a broader issue in Indonesia's public administration—where bureaucratic structures remain rigid, leadership is often administrative rather than visionary, and ethical standards are inconsistently enforced (Hidayat, 2025; Idris, 2025).

Given the central role of education and culture in shaping human capital and social identity, the effectiveness of leadership in this sector has far-reaching implications. Without strategic and ethical leadership, efforts to improve educational quality, preserve cultural heritage, and enhance public trust are unlikely to succeed. Therefore, this study is urgently needed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how leadership strategies can transform institutional performance, strengthen public accountability, and align regional governance practices with the principles of good governance and democratic administration (Mayasari et al., 2024; Van Gobel et al., 2025)

improving the quality of public services in the Department of Education and Culture of Gorontalo Province requires more than compliance with regulations; it demands effective leadership strategies that integrate vision, ethics, and accountability into organizational practices. By analyzing the current state of leadership and identifying key success factors, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing efforts of public sector reform in Indonesia. It positions leadership not only as an administrative role but as a transformative force that can bridge the gap between strategic plans and tangible outcomes, ensuring that public services truly reflect the principles of democracy, efficiency, and justice (Hidayat, 2025; Mayasari et al., 2024).

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore leadership strategies in improving the quality of public services at the Department of Education and Culture of Gorontalo Province. A qualitative design was chosen because it allows researchers to capture the complexity of organizational dynamics, human behavior, and leadership practices that cannot be adequately represented through numerical data. The focus was not to test hypotheses but to generate insights into how leadership influences service delivery and what factors determine success or failure.

The research was conducted at the Department of Education and Culture, a key provincial institution responsible for both educational services and cultural preservation. This site was selected purposively because of its strategic role and the gap between the province's overall high public service rating and persistent complaints about service quality in the department. Such a context provided an opportunity to examine leadership strategies more critically.

Participants consisted of leaders, staff, and service users, representing different perspectives within the institution. Leaders included the head of department and division heads, while staff members were civil servants responsible for daily operations. Service users teachers, students, parents, and community members were engaged to reflect the public's experience of services. A purposive sampling technique was applied, resulting in 20 participants: six leaders, nine staff, and five community members.

Data were collected through observation, interviews, and document analysis. Observation was conducted during service activities to record staff behavior and responsiveness. Semi-structured interviews explored leadership practices, staff perceptions, and public experiences, with each interview lasting about one hour. In addition, key documents such as the 2023–2026 Strategic Plan and Ombudsman evaluation reports were reviewed to provide policy context and triangulate findings.

The data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's framework. The process involved familiarization with transcripts, coding relevant segments, grouping them into themes, and refining the analysis to align with the research questions. Themes such as lack of accountability, weak responsiveness, and the need for visionary leadership emerged from this process. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and coding data systematically.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied triangulation of data sources and methods, conducted member checking with selected participants, and provided thick descriptions of context. Ethical considerations were prioritized through informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms to protect identities.

In short, this methodological design provided a rigorous and systematic way to examine how leadership strategies shape public service quality. By combining multiple perspectives and data sources, the study was able to uncover the challenges and opportunities faced by the Department of Education and Culture in Gorontalo Province.

Result and Discussion

The results of this study provide a nuanced understanding of how leadership strategies affect the quality of public services at the Department of Education and Culture of Gorontalo Province. Although the provincial government as a whole received a high rating in the 2024 Ombudsman evaluation, the department under study continues to struggle with serious challenges. The findings highlight that leadership has not yet provided clear strategic direction, staff responsiveness remains weak, responsibility and accountability are inconsistently applied, and organizational culture is insufficiently oriented toward service excellence. These findings are discussed thematically below, integrating empirical evidence with relevant theoretical perspectives.

1. Strategic Direction and Leadership Vision

A central finding of this research is the lack of a coherent strategic direction within the Department of Education and Culture. While the 2023–2026 Strategic Plan (*Renstra*) outlines three key objectives improving education services, preserving culture, and promoting religious life grounded in local wisdom implementation has not been consistent with these goals. Interviews with leaders revealed that although the vision is formally articulated, it has not been effectively communicated across all levels of the organization. Many staff members admitted that they were unaware of the specific targets set out in the *Renstra* and therefore lacked a sense of shared purpose in their daily work.

This gap between strategic planning and operational practice resonates with the arguments of Hitt et al. (2016), who emphasize that leadership strategies must not only define long-term goals but also translate them into actionable steps understood by all organizational members. The absence of this translation process in Gorontalo's education department reflects what Mintzberg describes as a failure of "strategic alignment," in which the organization's vision is disconnected from its operations.

The consequences of unclear strategic direction are visible in multiple areas. For instance, the management of student admissions (PPDB) has been marked by irregularities and deviations from official regulations. Several parents reported dissatisfaction with what they perceived as non-transparent procedures. Leaders acknowledged these issues but attributed them to technical difficulties rather than systemic flaws, thereby failing to recognize the underlying strategic weakness. The lack of visionary and transformational leadership has prevented the department from turning plans into consistent practices.

2. Responsiveness of Civil Servants

Responsiveness is one of the most immediate indicators of service quality. Observations during fieldwork revealed that many civil servants at the department were often absent from their desks during working hours, engaging in casual conversations or leaving the office without clear purpose. As a result, citizens seeking services such as document legalization, teacher certification processing, or transfer letters often experienced long waiting times and repeated visits.

Responsiveness, as defined by Denhardt and Denhardt (2015), is the ability of public servants to anticipate and react promptly to the needs of citizens. The findings here suggest a systemic deficit in this dimension. Interviews with service users highlighted frustrations about slow responses, particularly during peak service periods. One parent described the process of obtaining a school transfer letter as “time-consuming and unnecessarily complicated,” requiring multiple visits and prolonged waiting.

Leaders within the department admitted to these challenges but often blamed them on the reduced number of staff, which fell from 207 in 2023 to only 137 in 2025. While declining human resources undoubtedly pose a challenge, the problem of responsiveness cannot be attributed to numbers alone. Responsiveness also reflects motivation, discipline, and organizational culture. A more engaged and service-oriented leadership could mitigate resource shortages by promoting teamwork, rotating staff effectively, and adopting digital tools for faster processing. The lack of such initiatives reflects weak leadership in instilling a culture of responsiveness.

3. Responsibility and Task Commitment

Another major finding concerns the lack of responsibility among staff. Responsibility refers to the willingness of individuals to perform their assigned duties conscientiously and to recognize their role in delivering organizational objectives. In this study, staff often demonstrated a limited sense of responsibility. For example, some employees were reluctant to handle citizen complaints directly, preferring to shift responsibility to colleagues or higher officials.

This finding aligns with the critique by Thoha (2019), who argued that leadership must act as a guiding force that ensures staff remain committed to their duties. Without such guidance, responsibility becomes fragmented, resulting in inefficiencies and public dissatisfaction. The culture of shifting blame or avoiding direct engagement with problems reflects a leadership failure to instill personal responsibility as a core value.

Leaders interviewed for this study acknowledged that some staff “lacked seriousness” in their work but tended to frame this as an individual problem rather than a systemic one. This perspective overlooks the role of leadership in creating structures of accountability and in motivating staff to internalize responsibility. The absence of such mechanisms perpetuates a cycle of low commitment and ineffective service delivery.

4. Accountability and Oversight

Closely related to responsibility is accountability, which refers to the obligation of public servants to justify their actions and decisions to both leaders and the public. The study found that accountability within the department remains weak. For instance, in cases of delayed or mishandled services, there were no clear mechanisms for identifying the responsible individual or unit. As a result, citizens often felt that their complaints were ignored or dismissed without explanation.

This lack of accountability undermines public trust and contradicts the principles of democratic governance, where government institutions must be transparent and answerable to the people. Rosenbloom’s (2015) triad of political, legal, and managerial dimensions of accountability emphasizes that without clear reporting systems, ethical standards, and effective oversight, accountability becomes superficial. In Gorontalo’s education department,

accountability appears limited to formal reporting procedures rather than real practices that address citizens' concerns.

Oversight mechanisms also proved insufficient. While leaders claimed that monitoring was conducted regularly, staff members interviewed revealed that supervision was often limited to checking attendance rather than evaluating performance quality. This reflects a narrow interpretation of oversight, focused on discipline rather than outcomes. A more effective approach would involve not only monitoring presence but also assessing service results and citizen satisfaction.

5. Organizational Culture and Ethical Standards

The findings also highlight the absence of a strong organizational culture oriented toward public service values. Culture within the department appeared to be shaped more by routines and personal interactions than by formal values such as integrity, efficiency, or fairness. For instance, some staff members admitted that they prioritized tasks based on personal relationships rather than standardized procedures.

Such practices undermine ethical principles of equality and fairness in service provision. Citizens who lacked personal connections often faced longer delays compared to those with insider access. This resonates with the observations of Denhardt and Denhardt (2015), who argue that ethics in public administration must ensure that services are provided fairly and without discrimination. The persistence of favoritism within the department reflects a failure of leadership to institutionalize ethical norms.

Ethical leadership is particularly important in education and cultural services, as these sectors are directly linked to equity and social justice. Teachers' rights to promotions and certifications, for example, must be handled transparently and fairly. Any perception of favoritism not only undermines trust in the department but also jeopardizes the legitimacy of educational outcomes.

Resource Management

The decline in the number of civil servants from 207 in 2023 to 137 in 2025 has created significant pressure on service delivery. Leaders frequently cited this reduction as a key reason for inefficiency. However, the findings suggest that the problem lies not only in quantity but also in the allocation and management of resources. Despite having 137 staff members, only a small

proportion were assigned to frontline services directly dealing with citizens. This misallocation resulted in service bottlenecks and heightened public dissatisfaction.

Effective resource management requires leaders to balance available human capital with organizational priorities. According to Robbins and Judge (2024), organizational effectiveness depends not just on the number of personnel but on how they are organized and motivated. In Gorontalo's case, leadership failed to redistribute staff or redesign workflows to address the shortage in service areas. This indicates a reactive rather than proactive approach to resource management.

Integrating Findings with Theory

The findings of this study demonstrate the critical importance of leadership strategies in shaping public service quality. The lack of strategic direction, weak responsiveness, limited responsibility, and inadequate accountability all point to leadership deficiencies rather than purely structural or technical problems. This supports the argument of Fiedler's contingency theory, which suggests that leadership effectiveness depends on the alignment between leadership style and situational demands. In this case, the hierarchical and procedural culture of the department required adaptive and transformational leadership, which was not sufficiently present.

Moreover, the findings align with transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes the role of leaders in creating vision, inspiring staff, and institutionalizing change. The absence of visionary leadership in the department explains why strategic plans were not translated into effective practices. Similarly, the weak organizational culture and ethical lapses highlight the need for leaders who can act as role models, setting standards for integrity and fairness.

Implications for Practice

The study's findings carry several implications for improving leadership and public service quality. First, leadership development programs should focus on cultivating transformational and ethical leadership skills among top and middle managers. Second, accountability mechanisms need to be strengthened through clear performance indicators, transparent complaint systems, and regular feedback loops with citizens. Third, organizational culture must be

reoriented toward service excellence by embedding values of responsiveness, responsibility, and fairness into everyday practices. Finally, resource management strategies should emphasize optimal allocation of staff to frontline services and greater use of digital technologies to streamline processes.

Overall, the study shows that while the Department of Education and Culture operates within a broader provincial government that has achieved strong ratings in public service performance, its own practices remain inconsistent with these achievements. Leadership deficiencies particularly in strategic direction, responsiveness, responsibility, accountability, ethics, and resource management have prevented the department from meeting public expectations. The findings underscore the urgent need for visionary and transformational leadership that can bridge the gap between plans and outcomes, ensuring that educational and cultural services in Gorontalo Province are delivered fairly, efficiently, and in line with democratic principles.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that leadership plays a decisive role in shaping the quality of public services in the Department of Education and Culture of Gorontalo Province. By examining the institution through a qualitative lens, it becomes clear that weaknesses in leadership—whether in vision, ethical standards, or accountability—directly affect how services are perceived and experienced by the public. The research highlights that challenges in service delivery are not only the result of limited resources but also of the absence of strong strategic guidance and cultural reinforcement from leaders.

Importantly, the findings indicate that effective leadership in public administration requires more than managerial compliance. It demands the ability to integrate strategic vision with day-to-day practices, foster organizational culture grounded in fairness and responsibility, and ensure that accountability systems genuinely function rather than operate symbolically. In this regard, leadership within the department has not fully succeeded in bridging the gap between plans and performance, creating space for reform and renewal.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on public administration by offering an empirical case that underlines the centrality of leadership in service-oriented governance. While the context is specific to Gorontalo

Province, the lessons extend to other public institutions grappling with similar dilemmas of responsiveness, accountability, and resource management.

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