

Communicative Leadership for Organizational Innovation: Adaptive and Transformational Approaches in the Digital Transformation of Indonesian Higher Education

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Abstract

In the wake of accelerated digital transformation, higher education institutions worldwide face unprecedented challenges in redefining leadership, communication, and organizational culture. This study explores how academic leaders in Indonesian private universities enact adaptive and transformational leadership communication to navigate complex change processes. Drawing on a qualitative case study of three private universities and nine academic leaders, the research investigates how leaders engage stakeholders, manage resistance, and foster institutional learning in response to the demands of digital innovation. Findings indicate that adaptive leadership communication characterized by dialogic engagement, trust-building, and emotional responsiveness was essential for managing ambiguity and resistance. Simultaneously, transformational leadership communication centered on vision articulation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized support was critical in mobilizing commitment and aligning institutional narratives. Leaders who demonstrated communicative agility by integrating both styles were more successful in sustaining engagement and advancing change. The study proposes a hybrid communicative model of leadership; wherein adaptive and transformational communication practices are deployed situationally to foster both psychological safety and strategic momentum. This model reflects the cultural and operational realities of Indonesian higher education, where effective leadership is grounded not only in technical capability but in relational intelligence and contextual sensitivity. The findings offer theoretical contributions to leadership and communication scholarships and provide practical implications for developing leadership capacity in digital transformation contexts particularly in emerging economies and post-pandemic education systems.

Keywords: Adaptive Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Leadership Communication, Digital Transformation, Higher Education

1. Introduction

In recent years, digital transformation has become a critical catalyst for redefining the structure, processes, and leadership practices of organizations worldwide including within higher education. Far beyond the adoption of new technologies, this shift represents a comprehensive overhaul of

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institutional cultures, operational systems, and strategic orientations (Smith et al., 2014). The education sector has experienced profound disruption, driven by global trends such as AI integration, cloud-based learning platforms, and demand for hyper-personalized, data driven pedagogies (Fragouli & Turlaki, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically accelerated these changes, forcing universities across the globe to shift from conventional classroom-based teaching to fully digital environments. According to UNESCO (2021), over 1.6 billion learners were affected by school closures, pushing institutions to adopt emergency digital platforms while simultaneously navigating organizational uncertainty, resource disparities, and cultural resistance. In Indonesia, the Ministry of Education responded with various initiatives such as the *Kampus Merdeka* and *Merdeka Belajar* platforms. However, infrastructure gaps and limited digital literacy continue to hamper effective implementation particularly in non-urban contexts.

Scholars have emphasized that successful digital transformation is not solely contingent upon technological readiness but critically depends on adaptive and transformational leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Leadership in this context must go beyond technical administration to include the capacity to build trust, foster stakeholder engagement, and cultivate a collective vision for change. Leaders must not only understand digital tools but be able to communicate change effectively, manage resistance, and stimulate organizational learning.

Strategic leadership communication plays a central role in this transformation process. It functions as the primary mechanism to articulate institutional vision, mobilize collective commitment, and shape organizational identity in times of uncertainty (Ahmad Mukhtar et al., 2023). Communication styles grounded in empathy, dialogue, and authenticity have been shown to increase engagement and reduce psychological resistance among educators and administrative staff. Studies by (Jiang & Chen, 2021) and (Narenji Thani et al., 2022) further indicate that dialogic leadership communication enhances emotional and cognitive involvement crucial factors in supporting sustainable innovation.

Two interrelated leadership frameworks have gained relevance in this context: adaptive leadership and transformational leadership. Adaptive leaders facilitate organizational learning in response to complex, ambiguous challenges; they create “holding environments” for experimentation and reflection (Drennan, 2020). In contrast, transformational leaders inspire change through compelling vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. While their mechanisms differ, both models highlight communication as a strategic imperative and position the leader as a facilitator of cultural transformation, rather than a mere technical problem-solver.

Despite their relevance, there remains a critical gap in the literature on how these leadership styles especially their communicative dimensions are applied in Indonesian higher education institutions undergoing digital transformation. Most studies focus on technology implementation or generalized change management, with limited emphasis on the nuanced interplay between leadership communication and organizational readiness for change.

This study addresses this gap by exploring how academic leaders integrate adaptive and transformational leadership styles in their communication practices to navigate digital change. It aims to offer both theoretical insight and practical guidance for education leaders confronting the challenges of innovation, resistance, and institutional complexity in the post-pandemic era.

2. Literature Review

Adaptive leadership, as conceptualized by Heifetz et al. (2009), provides a framework for navigating complex, rapidly evolving environments by fostering organizational learning, encouraging experimentation, and confronting deeply held assumptions. In the context of digital transformation, particularly within higher education, adaptive leaders play a critical role in creating "holding environments" that allow institutions to respond to technological disruption with flexibility and resilience. Rather than providing authoritative answers, adaptive leaders mobilize collective problem-solving processes, enabling stakeholders to confront systemic challenges collaboratively.

Transformational leadership, as articulated by Bass and Riggio (2006), focuses on inspiring and motivating individuals to transcend their self-interests for the greater organizational good. This model comprises four dimensions idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration each of which aligns with the demands of leading digital transformation. Transformational leaders cultivate a compelling vision of the future, foster innovative thinking, and attend to the developmental needs of their followers. Within higher education, such leaders are instrumental in aligning institutional values with emerging digital imperatives and overcoming inertia toward change.

Leadership communication is increasingly recognized as a linchpin in facilitating digital (Narenji Thani et al., 2022). It transcends the mere transmission of information and involves the co-construction of meaning, trust-building, and sense-making among stakeholders (Kim, 2018). (Jiang & Chen, 2021) argue that dialogic communication characterized by openness, empathy, and mutual respect enhances stakeholder engagement and reduces resistance. In higher education, where academic autonomy and cultural complexity pose unique challenges, effective communication becomes essential for articulating a coherent digital vision and mobilizing institutional commitment.

Digital transformation within universities extends beyond the digitization of teaching and learning modalities. It encompasses structural reconfiguration, governance reform, and the development of agile capabilities (Poturak et al., 2020). In Indonesia, national initiatives such as *Kampus Merdeka* have sought to embed digital innovation into the academic ecosystem. Yet, infrastructural disparities and low digital literacy remain persistent barriers, particularly in remote areas. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the urgency for digital transformation, spotlighting the role of institutional leadership in orchestrating adaptive responses to unprecedented disruptions (UNESCO, 2021).

While existing studies have explored the technological and managerial dimensions of digital transformation, there remains a paucity of research examining how leadership communication shaped by adaptive and transformational paradigms affects institutional readiness and innovation sustainability in Indonesian higher education. This study addresses this gap by integrating leadership theories with strategic communication frameworks, aiming to elucidate how leaders navigate resistance, build trust, and shape digital trajectories in complex academic settings.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative, multiple case study approach to explore leadership communication practices among academic leaders in Indonesian universities undergoing digital transformation. The case study method is particularly suited for investigating complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts, allowing for rich, context-sensitive insights into leadership behaviors and institutional dynamics.

Purposive sampling technique was used to select three higher education institutions in Indonesia that have implemented post-COVID-19 digital transformation initiatives. In each institution, senior academic leaders (e.g. rectors, deans, or IT coordinators) were interviewed, with a total of 9 participants. These individuals were selected based on their strategic role in leading organizational change and their direct involvement in the digital innovation process.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted via Zoom and transcribed verbatim. Interview protocols were designed to probe leadership perceptions, communication strategies, and challenges in navigating digital change. In addition, institutional documents (e.g., digital roadmaps, policy guidelines, and communication memos) were analyzed to triangulate findings. An inductive-deductive coding approach was employed to identify patterns related to leadership communication, adaptive and transformational behaviors, and organizational readiness.

To ensure credibility, member checking was performed by sharing summaries with participants for validation. Triangulation of interview and documentary data enhanced the dependability of findings. Ethical approval was obtained from the host university's review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

4. Finding and Discussion

Adaptive Leadership Communication in the Context of Institutional Uncertainty. Digital transformation in higher education, particularly in Indonesian private universities, has introduced a new landscape of uncertainty spanning from pedagogical shifts to systemic cultural challenges. Drawing on interview data from nine academic leaders across three private institutions, this study found that adaptive leadership communication was a critical tool in managing ambiguity, building collective resilience, and initiating meaningful institutional learning. Several participants emphasized that the shift to digital education, especially post-COVID, was less a technological challenge and more a social one. P1, a rector of University A explained:

"We were overwhelmed not by technology itself, but by the sudden change in expectations, the fear among senior lecturers, and the uncertainty about what education really meant in this new format."

In response, leaders adopted what can be described as empathetic, flexible, and participatory communication practices. Weekly virtual meetings, informal reflection spaces, and open feedback loops were institutionalized to ensure that faculty and staff felt heard and supported. P4, a dean from University B, noted:

"We realized we needed to create a safe environment, not just technically but emotionally—a space where people could voice their confusion without judgment."

This aligns with Heifetz et al., 2009 theory of adaptive leadership, particularly the concept of creating a *"holding environment"* "a social space where individuals can address difficult issues, experiment with new ideas, and adaptively learn together. In all three institutions, leaders used strategic communication to shape these environments.

For example, P7, a program head at University C, intentionally moderated a WhatsApp-based discussion group for lecturers to share their teaching anxieties and solutions informally.

"I didn't come in like the boss. I came in as a facilitator, just like everyone else. My role was to listen more than talk."

This adaptive communication approach fostered a culture of shared ownership and psychological safety both crucial for driving change in low-trust environments (Sott, 2025). Importantly,

communication was not limited to top-down directives but involved two-way, iterative processes where feedback was integrated into decision-making cycles.

However, the findings also point to significant constraints. In some cases, adaptive strategies were stifled by organizational rigidities. P5, a dean at University B, reflected:

"I tried to push for an open forum policy, but the foundation leadership preferred everything to go through formal memos. It slowed us down."

This highlights a critical tension between adaptive intentions and hierarchical governance structures, a common challenge in Indonesian private higher education, where bureaucratic legacies often inhibit fluid leadership practices.

Moreover, not all leaders were equally equipped to practice adaptive communication. Some acknowledged learning on the job, often without prior exposure to formal leadership or communication training. P6 admitted:

"We never had any modules on how to lead change. What I did was mostly based on instinct, trial-and-error."

This limitation underscores the need for professional development programs focused specifically on adaptive leadership competencies, particularly those involving communication under uncertainty.

In summary, the evidence suggests that adaptive leadership communication, characterized by emotional intelligence, dialogic engagement, and responsiveness, is crucial for navigating the uncertainties of digital transformation. It enables leaders to hold the organizational space during turbulent transitions, fostering collective reflection and distributed learning. Yet, its practice remains uneven and contingent upon institutional support, leadership self-awareness, and communication capacity.

Transformational Leadership and Shared Digital Vision Building. A central theme emerging from the data was the critical role of transformational leadership in constructing and communicating a shared digital vision. While adaptive leadership provided the flexibility to manage immediate uncertainty, transformational leadership offered the *strategic direction* and *emotional inspiration* necessary for mobilizing commitment toward long-term digital innovation. Several academic leaders explicitly articulated the importance of crafting a collective sense of purpose. P2, a Vice-Rector from University A, described:

"We realized early that transformation isn't just about shifting platforms. It's about helping people understand why we are changing, where we are going, and how they're a part of it."

This emphasis on collective vision aligns with Bass and Riggio's (2006) model of transformational leadership, particularly the dimensions of *inspirational motivation* and *idealized influence*. The most effective leaders in this study were not those who commanded compliance, but those who inspired shared ownership through consistent, value-driven communication.

To build this shared vision, leaders employed intentional storytelling, symbolic rituals, and culturally resonant metaphors. For example, P6, a dean from University B, initiated a monthly event called "Digital Culture Breakfast Talks", where faculty, IT staff, and student representatives were invited to co-create narratives about the university's future. According to P6:

"It wasn't a meeting; it was a movement. We talked not about software, but about dreams of what kind of graduates we want to produce in this new world."

Similarly, P8, a faculty leader at University C, used religious and local cultural metaphors to connect transformation with moral duty and institutional identity:

"I often say, transforming is part of our Amanah. It's not about technology but about keeping our promise to serve learners wherever they are."

These practices mirror what Men R. (2014). describe as "*transformational communication*," where leaders use emotion-laden language, narrative structures, and strategic framing to align organizational members around a shared change trajectory.

Importantly, vision-building was not a one-off event but a continuous communicative process, reinforced across multiple platforms town halls, WhatsApp groups, newsletters, and informal corridor conversations. P3, a head of department at University B, emphasized:

"Every time we introduce a new tool or system, we frame it within the larger picture. Otherwise, it's just another burden. Vision has to live in daily talk."

Despite these strengths, several participants acknowledged challenges in sustaining vision coherence. Fragmentation occurred when leaders at different levels communicated divergent narratives, or when short-term operational pressures overrode long-term transformational goals. P9, from University C, noted:

"Sometimes the IT team pushes a tool for efficiency, while the academic team talks about pedagogy. If we don't coordinate, the message becomes confusing."

This finding underscores the need for strategic alignment across leadership layers and functional units. Without unified messaging, even the most compelling vision can be diluted or misunderstood.

Additionally, while transformational communication fostered engagement, its emotional intensity sometimes generated resistance or skepticism, especially among faculty who felt overwhelmed or excluded. As P4, a dean from University B, reflected:

"Not everyone was ready to be inspired. Some felt we were sugar-coating the pain of change. We had to learn to combine vision with listening."

This highlights a nuanced insight: effective transformational leadership is not merely about charisma or grand narratives, it requires balance between vision and empathy, between motivation and validation.

In sum, transformational leadership communication in the context of Indonesian private universities was characterized by strategic storytelling, inclusive visioning, and persistent meaning-making. When done well, it galvanizes institutional energy toward a common goal. However, its success depended on alignment, cultural sensitivity, and leaders' ability to adapt their messaging to diverse psychological and organizational realities.

Strategic Leadership Communication: Trust, Dialogue, and Resistance Management. Digital transformation in higher education, while often framed as a technical or policy challenge, is fundamentally a human process. One of the most consistent themes across the three participating institutions was that resistance to change was not primarily about the technology itself but rather, about trust, inclusion, and psychological security. Leaders who succeeded in facilitating transformation did so not merely through formal authority or strategy, but through deliberate, strategic communication practices that prioritized trust-building and dialogic engagement. Participants widely agreed that successful digital transformation required overcoming a deep-rooted skepticism and fatigue, particularly from senior faculty who perceived change as disruptive to their teaching autonomy or as a threat to job security. In this context, strategic leadership communication served as both a relational bridge and a cultural mechanism.

P3, a department head at University B, explained:

"We had to go beyond announcements. Communication had to be a space where people felt heard not just told. Otherwise, you lose them."

This reflects the essence of dialogic communication, as discussed (Narenji Thani et al., 2022), where effective leadership requires openness, mutual respect, and the willingness to engage in two-way dialogue even (and especially) in moments of tension or resistance.

To manage this, leaders created intentional listening spaces that allowed for emotional ventilation, feedback, and collaborative problem-solving. For example, P6, a dean at University B, utilized WhatsApp groups not just for coordination, but as informal discussion forums:

"I often dropped open-ended questions like, 'How are you all coping with the new LMS?' or 'What do you wish we could do better?' It opened conversations that would never happen in formal meetings."

Such practices highlight the role of informality in Indonesian institutional culture. In many cases, trust was not built in formal town halls, but in hallway chats, break-time talks, or virtual group chats. P9, a program headed at University C, emphasized:

"Most of the time, the breakthrough comes after meetings. That's when people speak honestly."

In these informal settings, leaders practiced what (Jiang & Chen, 2021) describes as authentic leadership communication marked by consistency, humility, and genuine responsiveness. By demonstrating vulnerability and openness, leaders normalized doubt and made space for shared reflection.

Moreover, strategic communication was also used to acknowledge and legitimize resistance, rather than suppress it. P4, a dean at University B, shared:

"Some lecturers didn't want to be part of the new system. Instead of forcing them, we tried to understand what was behind that fear. Many just needed more time, or a different kind of training."

This approach aligns with the empathic engagement model in leadership, where resistance is viewed not as a problem to be solved, but as a relational signal that requires careful interpretation and response.

However, not all communication efforts were successful. Several participants noted the tensions between transparency and organizational politics. P5, a faculty leader at University B, observed:

"Sometimes I shared bad news early thinking it would build trust. But some colleagues said it just created panic. So, we had to learn how to pace and frame our messages better."

This highlights an important challenge: timing, tone, and framing are critical elements of strategic communication. Leaders must carefully balance honesty with optimism and urgency with reassurance.

Additionally, participants emphasized that strategic communication was most effective when tailored to specific audiences. Younger faculty were more receptive to digital communication and

collaborative framing, while senior staff responded better to personalized, relationship-based messaging. As P1, a rector from University A, explained:

“With younger lecturers, I could speak in broad strokes talk about innovation and flexibility. But for senior professors, I had to be more personal. I met with them one-on-one, related it to their legacy and contribution.”

This practice exemplifies audience-sensitive leadership, a key component of strategic communication where the form, content, and delivery of messages are adapted to the values, concerns, and communication styles of different stakeholder groups.

In conclusion, strategic leadership communication in the digital transformation process functioned as a multidimensional tool: it built trust, fostered dialogue, and diffused resistance. Leaders who invested in authentic, two-way, and context-aware communication practices were more likely to sustain engagement and cultivate a culture of change-readiness. Nevertheless, such communication requires intentionality, emotional intelligence, and a deep understanding of organizational dynamics and interpersonal sensitivities qualities that are not always formally cultivated in academic leadership pathways.

Integrating Adaptive and Transformational Leadership: Toward a Hybrid Communicative Model. The findings across the three private Indonesian universities suggest that adaptive and transformational leadership are not mutually exclusive but instead function as complementary and interdependent communicative practices during digital transformation. Rather than embodying one leadership style exclusively, effective academic leaders fluidly integrated elements of both in response to evolving institutional needs, stakeholder dynamics, and digital complexities. At a strategic level, transformational leadership communication provides the narrative arc and motivational energy necessary to initiate and frame institutional change. Leaders used storytelling, vision casting, and emotionally resonant language to create meaning and mobilize collective commitment. As shown in Section 4.2, these communicative acts helped shift faculty mindsets from compliance to engagement and built a future-oriented orientation. Concurrently, adaptive leadership communication anchored the transformation in relational stability and contextual responsiveness. As elaborated in Section 4.1, this involved dialogic processes, emotional containment, and iterative reflection creating a safe space for institutional learning and experimentation. Adaptive communication allowed leaders to respond in real-time to resistance, uncertainty, and ambiguity without derailing progress. Participants implicitly described a leadership continuum: vision driven communication to initiate change, followed by adaptive dialogue to manage its emotional and operational consequences. As P2, a vice-rector from University A, summarized:

"We need to be both firm and fluid. Vision gives us direction, but listening gives us traction."

This synthesis points toward a hybrid communicative model of leadership where vision and empathy, direction and dialogue, are dynamically balanced. Leaders did not toggle between models rigidly; instead, they *blended* both according to context. For example: When introducing a new digital system, leaders began with transformational framing ("This is part of our future as a world-class institution") and followed up with adaptive conversations to address fear or confusion ("What are your concerns about using this system?"). When facing setbacks or resistance, leaders did not simply push forward. Instead, they paused for adaptive reflection, re-centered trust, and then re-aligned teams using transformational narratives.

This integrative approach reflects (Poturak et al., 2020) idea of "situational adaptability" and supports the growing consensus in leadership studies that effective change leadership is inherently hybrid—requiring both clarity of purpose and flexibility of process.

The hybrid model also reflects the cultural and institutional realities of Indonesian higher education, where authority structures often co-exist with community based values. Leaders needed to project institutional strength while preserving interpersonal humility duality embedded in both adaptive and transformational paradigms.

However, the findings reveal that achieving this balance was not without tensions. Leaders often navigated competing expectations from foundations demanding rapid progress, to faculty requiring reassurance and gradualism. As P7, from University C, articulated:

"Sometimes we're expected to be visionaries, and other times therapists. It's exhausting, but that's the job."

Such reflections underscore the emotional labor involved in hybrid leadership communication, especially when support structures (e.g., leadership coaching, peer learning) are lacking. Furthermore, not all leaders were equally adept at combining the two models. While some exhibited high communicative agility, others defaulted to one style—either over-inspiring without follow-through, or over-accommodating without direction.

From a theoretical standpoint, the data contributes to ongoing discourse on leadership hybridity in organizational change, supporting arguments that leadership styles should be conceptualized not as fixed traits but as situationally deployed communication repertoires.

Practically, this study suggests that training programs for higher education leaders in Indonesia should move beyond generic management skills. Instead, they should focus on developing

communicative literacy the ability to shift between adaptive and transformational modes, craft context-sensitive messages, engage dialogically, and build psychological safety.

In conclusion, the integration of adaptive and transformational leadership communication constitutes a contextually appropriate and theoretically robust approach to leading digital transformation in Indonesian higher education. It respects the emotional realities of organizational change while maintaining strategic momentum. The leaders in this study demonstrated that digital transformation is not driven by technology alone, but by a communicative practice that is intentional, inclusive, and integrative anchored in both vision and dialogue.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how academic leaders in Indonesian private universities navigate digital transformation through the lens of adaptive and transformational leadership communication. Drawing on qualitative insights from nine leaders across three institutions, the findings reveal that effective digital transformation is not merely a matter of technological implementation, but a deeply communicative and relational process. Leaders who successfully engaged their institutions in meaningful change did so by combining strategic vision, dialogic engagement, and contextual responsiveness.

Three core conclusions can be drawn from this study: First, adaptive leadership communication was essential in managing ambiguity, emotional turbulence, and resistance during the change process. Leaders fostered trust and learning by creating spaces for open dialogue, listening actively, and reframing uncertainty as a shared challenge. These practices were especially critical in the early stages of transformation and in moments of institutional tension.

Second, transformational leadership communication played a pivotal role in inspiring commitment and articulating a shared vision for the digital future. Leaders employed emotionally resonant narratives, inclusive metaphors, and value-laden discourse to cultivate ownership and alignment across diverse stakeholder groups. This vision-building was not a one-time event, but an ongoing communicative effort embedded in both formal and informal interactions.

Third, the most effective leadership practices emerged not from rigid adherence to one leadership model but from a hybrid communicative approach. Leaders dynamically combined adaptive responsiveness with transformational inspiration, tailoring their messages to situational demands and audience needs. This hybrid leadership communication model enabled institutions to both respond to complexity and move forward with strategic coherence.

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