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Communicative Leadership in Digital Transformation at an Indonesian Private University: Trust, Dialogue, and Resistance Management

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Abstract : Digital transformation in higher education is frequently treated as a technical agenda, although its implementation depends on how leaders communicate change, negotiate meaning, and sustain stakeholder commitment. This study examines how communicative leadership supports digital transformation at an Indonesian private university by fostering trust, enabling dialogic engagement, and managing resistance. An exploratory qualitative design was used, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 12 participants consisting of top-level academic leaders, middle-level academic leaders, and senior lecturers, supported by 8 selected institutional documents and 4 non-participant observation events totalling approximately 12 hours. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis with hybrid coding. The analysis shows that communicative leadership operates as a sense-making infrastructure: leaders build institutional and interpersonal trust through transparent and consistent messaging; transform dialogue into stakeholder participation through participatory forums, psychological safety, and feedback loops; and manage resistance by linking structural, workload-related, competence-based, and technological concerns with tailored communication strategies. The study contributes to leadership communication scholarship by showing that digital transformation is sustained not only by technological readiness but also by relational communication practices that convert policy mandates into shared institutional commitment.

Keywords : *Communicative Leadership, Digital Transformation, Higher Education, Indonesia, Trust, Dialogic Engagement, Resistance Management.*

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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become a defining agenda in higher education because universities are expected to integrate digital platforms, data-informed governance, online and blended learning, and more flexible academic services (Bozkus, 2023; Omol, 2024; Thomas, 2024). However, the central problem is not limited to whether institutions adopt new technologies. A more persistent difficulty concerns how institutional leaders communicate the purpose, risks, and consequences of digital change to academic stakeholders whose work routines, professional identities, and pedagogical autonomy are

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directly affected. When digital transformation is communicated primarily as an administrative instruction or technological requirement, implementation may produce compliance without commitment, adoption without meaning, and resistance that remains unmanaged.

This problem is especially relevant in Indonesia, where higher education institutions have faced multiple pressures following the COVID-19 disruption and the expansion of Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM). The MBKM policy encourages flexible learning pathways, institutional collaboration, and student mobility beyond conventional classroom structures (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). These objectives require more than platform provision; they require coordination across academic units, redesign of administrative procedures, and readiness among lecturers and students to work within digitally mediated learning environments. Indonesian studies show that digital transformation in higher education is shaped by leadership readiness, infrastructure, competence, and institutional culture (Akbari & Pratomo, 2022; Aripradono et al., 2024; Imran, 2023). The broader digital infrastructure literature also warns that technology adoption can reproduce equity and access problems when institutional support is uneven (Roy et al., 2025). Therefore, MBKM underscores the need for digital transformation while intensifying the communicative burden on institutional leaders.

Previous studies on digital transformation have emphasized that technology reshapes organizational strategy, operational processes, value creation, and institutional capability (Benavides et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2021; Vial, 2019). In higher education, this transformation intersects with academic culture, collegial governance, professional autonomy, and uneven digital literacy. The unresolved issue, however, is how leadership communication converts digital transformation from a policy or infrastructure agenda into a shared organizational process. This distinction is important because digital initiatives may fail not only due to insufficient technology but also due to weak meaning-making, low trust, limited dialogue, and unaddressed resistance (LaCroix, 2022; Pilonato & Monfardini, 2022).

Leadership communication is treated in this study as the continuous, strategic, and relational process through which leaders frame institutional direction, coordinate action, listen to stakeholders, and shape shared understanding during change. It differs from general leadership style because the analytical focus is not on broad leader traits or authority patterns, but on communicative practices through which change is explained, negotiated, and legitimated. It also differs from general organizational communication because attention is placed on how leaders use communication to influence stakeholders' interpretation, participation, and acceptance.

Within this conceptual field, communicative leadership refers to leadership enacted through dialogue, feedback-seeking, sense-making, problem-solving, and active listening. Johansson et al. (2014) conceptualize communicative leadership as a framework for developing leaders' communication competence, while related work on leadership communication emphasizes that leadership is produced through interaction rather than merely expressed through formal position (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). In this study, communicative leadership is operationalized through four interrelated dimensions: setting direction, enabling sense-making, facilitating participation, and responding to concerns. These dimensions are analytically useful for examining digital transformation because stakeholders must understand not only what technology is introduced, but why

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it matters and how it changes their work. This emphasis is consistent with research linking organizational values, institutional culture, and quality assurance to leadership effectiveness in higher education (Alemu, 2025; Joshua, 2025).

Trust is a central mechanism in this process. Trust in digital transformation does not refer to a single object. It includes institutional trust in the credibility and fairness of organizational decisions, interpersonal trust in leaders' intentions and consistency, and trust in technology as stakeholders' confidence that digital systems are useful, reliable, and manageable (Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight et al., 2011). These forms of trust may overlap, but they are analytically distinct. An institution may provide a reliable system, for example, while stakeholders remain skeptical of leadership intentions. Conversely, a trusted leader may reduce anxiety even when the system is still technically imperfect. Transparency is therefore not simply a communication technique, but a condition for credibility in organizational change (Kfukfu et al., 2024).

Dialogic engagement is also central to communicative leadership. In this article, dialogue is treated both as a leadership practice and as a stakeholder response. As a practice, dialogue refers to leaders' creation of two-way communication spaces in which stakeholders can ask questions, express concerns, and contribute to decision-making. As a response, dialogic engagement refers to stakeholders' willingness to participate in meaning-making, feedback, and implementation. Dialogic theory suggests that mutuality, openness, and responsiveness are essential for communication that goes beyond one-way transmission (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Studies on participatory knowledge production further show that co-construction can strengthen inclusion and shared action when stakeholders are treated as interpretive partners rather than passive recipients (Heck, 2024). In higher education, this is particularly significant because academic staff tend to expect consultation and intellectual respect when institutional changes affect teaching, assessment, and academic autonomy.

Resistance to digital transformation must therefore be understood beyond individual reluctance. Resistance may emerge from structural constraints, workload pressure, insufficient training, technological uncertainty, or cultural attachment to established academic routines. Piderit (2000) argues that resistance often contains cognitive, emotional, and behavioral ambivalence rather than simple opposition. Similarly, change research shows that recipients' reactions are shaped by perceived fairness, competence, change consequences, and trust in leaders (Oreg et al., 2011). Studies on technology-related resistance also indicate that identity threat and perceived competence gaps can intensify stakeholder anxiety during digital adoption (Jussupow et al., 2022). For this reason, resistance can also serve as diagnostic feedback, revealing weaknesses in communication, system design, or implementation support.

Although digital transformation and leadership have been widely discussed in higher education studies, the communicative dimension of leadership remains insufficiently examined, particularly in relation to how leaders build trust, sustain dialogue, and manage resistance during institutional change. This gap is important in the Indonesian higher education context, where digital transformation is shaped not only by technological adoption but also by policy-driven reforms, institutional diversity, uneven resource allocation, and relational expectations within academic organizations. Previous studies have addressed project communication, institutional complexity, and transformation governance, yet they have not fully explained how leadership communication mediates trust, dialogue, and resistance as interrelated processes in

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digital transformation (Kosmala et al., 2024; Pilonato & Monfardini, 2022). Therefore, this study positions communicative leadership as a relational infrastructure through which digital transformation is interpreted, negotiated, and sustained within higher education institutions. Accordingly, this study is guided by three research questions: first, how academic leaders communicate digital transformation to build institutional, interpersonal, and technology-related trust; second, how dialogic engagement shapes stakeholder participation and acceptance during digital transformation; and third, what forms of resistance emerge during digital transformation and how they are addressed through leadership communication.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design to examine how communicative leadership operates in the digital transformation of higher education. The exploratory design was selected because the study did not aim to test a predetermined causal model, generate a formal grounded theory, or describe the essence of a shared lived experience as in phenomenology. Instead, it sought to identify and interpret communicative patterns, stakeholder meanings, and leadership responses within a still-developing institutional transformation process. A single-case study design was not used as the primary framing because the analytical focus was not the institution as a bounded case, but rather the communicative processes through which trust, dialogue, and resistance were constructed during digital change.

The research was conducted at one private higher education institution in Indonesia, which was purposively selected because it had actively introduced digital systems into academic and administrative processes. To protect institutional anonymity, the institution's name is not disclosed. The institution can be described as a medium-sized, foundation-managed private university with approximately 3,500 students, 170 lecturers, five faculties, a rectorate-dean-program governance structure, and an intermediate stage of digital transformation. During the research period, digital transformation included the use of learning management systems, online academic administration, internal communication platforms, and digitally mediated coordination among academic units. These characteristics made the institution relevant for examining leadership communication in a context where technology adoption intersected with organizational change.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least three years of leadership experience or direct strategic involvement in digital transformation, academic administration, curriculum delivery, or institutional change. Participants who had no direct involvement in digital transformation initiatives or who were unable to provide informed consent were excluded. The sample included multiple hierarchical positions to capture both leadership and stakeholder perspectives.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Participant group	Role in the institution	Number	Relevance to the study
Top-level academic leaders	Rector/vice-rector or equivalent executive role	2	Strategic direction, institutional policy, and transformation agenda
Middle-level academic leaders	Dean, department head, program head, or unit coordinator	4	Translation of policy into unit-level implementation

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Participant group	Role in the institution	Number	Relevance to the study
Senior lecturers or academic staff	Lecturers involved in digital learning or institutional change	6	User experience, acceptance, and resistance at the implementation level
Total	Anonymized participants coded P1-P12	12	Empirical basis of interview data

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and non-participant observation. The interview protocol covered four domains: institutional digital transformation initiatives, leadership communication practices, trust-building processes, stakeholder engagement, and experiences of resistance. The protocol was reviewed before data collection to ensure clarity and relevance. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian, lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, and were either face-to-face or via online platforms, depending on participant availability. Confidentiality was maintained through private meeting spaces or secure online sessions. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Document analysis was used to contextualize interview data and validate institutional claims. The documents included strategic planning materials, digital transformation policies, internal reports, official circulars, and records of communications related to digital implementation. Observation was conducted in organizational settings where digital transformation was discussed or enacted, including meetings, coordination forums, and informal communication contexts. Field notes separated descriptive notes, which recorded observable interaction and communication patterns, from reflective notes, which captured preliminary analytical impressions. These field notes were later coded together with interview transcripts and documents.

Table 2. Data Sources and Analytical Function

Data source	Scope	Procedure	Analytical function
Interviews	12 interviews	Semi-structured interviews, 60-90 minutes, recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim	Explored meanings, experiences, trust formation, dialogue, and resistance
Documents	8 institutional documents, including a strategic plan, digital transformation policy, LMS guideline, academic information system SOP, internal circulars, meeting minutes, quality assurance report, and training materials	Review of policy documents, reports, official messages, and strategic plans	Validated institutional context and traced formal communication
Observations	4 observed events totaling approximately 12 hours	Non-participant observation with descriptive and reflective field notes	Captured communication dynamics, participation, and informal responses

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis followed six phases: data familiarization, initial coding, theme construction, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report writing. Coding was

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hybrid. The conceptual focus informed deductive codes on communicative leadership, trust, dialogue, and resistance, while inductive codes were developed from participants' narratives, field notes, and institutional documents. This hybrid approach allowed the analysis to remain theoretically guided while still responsive to context-specific meanings emerging from the data.

The coding process began with repeated reading of transcripts and field notes. Meaning units related to leadership messages, feedback practices, emotional responses, perceived credibility, and forms of resistance were coded manually in analytical matrices. Codes were then compared across data sources to identify convergence, variation, and contradiction. Candidate themes were reviewed against the full dataset to avoid overinterpreting isolated quotations. A statement was considered analytically significant only when it was supported by repeated patterns across multiple participants or triangulated with documents and observations. This procedure strengthened the link between claims and evidence.

Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of interviews, documents, and observations. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with 5 participants to confirm whether the interpretations reflected their experiences. Feedback from member checking was used to refine theme labels and clarify the distinction between trust, dialogue, and resistance. Dependability was supported through an audit trail containing interview protocols, coding matrices, field notes, and analytical memos. Reflexivity was maintained by documenting the researcher's positionality and potential influence on interpretation, particularly where the researcher had professional familiarity with higher education governance or digital transformation debates. Participant names and institutional identifiers were anonymized throughout the analysis and reporting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organized around three interrelated themes: communicative leadership as sense-making infrastructure, trust formation through transparent and relational communication, and dialogic engagement as a pathway for managing resistance. Table 3 summarizes the major themes, subthemes, representative excerpts, and interpretive meanings. Participant labels were anonymized consistently as P1-P12 to protect participant identity while maintaining traceability across themes.

Table 3. Themes, Subthemes, Evidence, and Interpretive Meaning

Theme	Subtheme	Representative excerpt	Interpretive meaning
Communicative leadership as sense-making	Direction setting and shared narrative	"I no longer see myself as the primary decision-maker, but as a facilitator who helps everyone understand the direction of change and how they can contribute." (P1)	Leadership communication reframed digital transformation from top-down instruction into a shared institutional journey.
Trust formation	Transparency, consistency, and empathy	"When leaders explain the real situation, including the challenges we face, we feel more confident because nothing is hidden." (P4)	Trust was built when leaders aligned messages, decisions, and relational sensitivity.

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Theme	Subtheme	Representative excerpt	Interpretive meaning
Dialogic engagement	Participatory forums and psychological safety	"When leaders create a space where we can speak openly without fear, it makes it easier for us to adapt and learn together." (P7)	Dialogue increased acceptance by making stakeholders feel heard and involved.
Resistance management	Workload, competence, and system concerns	"Resistance is not always negative. Sometimes it shows us what needs to be improved in the system or in how we communicate the change." (P10)	Resistance served as diagnostic feedback to improve communication and implementation support.

Communicative Leadership as Sense-Making Infrastructure

The first theme shows that communicative leadership operated as a sense-making infrastructure for digital transformation. Leaders were not perceived merely as decision-makers who transmitted instructions; rather, they were expected to explain why digital change was needed, how it aligned with institutional priorities, and what each stakeholder's role could be. This finding supports the view that leadership is produced through relational and interpretive communication practices rather than through formal authority alone (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Weick et al., 2005). It also resonates with higher education studies that emphasize institutional complexity, professional autonomy, and logic work as central features of organizational change (LaCroix, 2022; Pilonato & Monfardini, 2022).

> *"I no longer see myself as the primary decision-maker, but as a facilitator who helps everyone understand the direction of change and how they can contribute." (P1)*

This excerpt is not interpreted as an isolated personal opinion. It reflects a wider pattern across the data in which leaders described their communicative role as facilitation, translation, and alignment. Digital transformation created uncertainty because stakeholders had to adjust to new systems, altered administrative routines, and changing expectations for digital learning. Communication therefore became a mechanism for reducing ambiguity and connecting institutional strategy with everyday academic work.

> *"If changes are simply presented as instructions, there is usually immediate resistance. However, when we engage them in discussion and explain the larger purpose, they begin to feel like this is part of a shared journey." (P2)*

This statement illustrates the difference between monologic and communicative leadership. Monologic communication positions stakeholders as recipients of decisions, whereas communicative leadership treats them as participants in interpreting change. In the institutional context studied, leaders used formal meetings, unit coordination forums, WhatsApp groups, and informal conversations to reinforce key messages, clarify misunderstandings, and address emerging concerns. Such multi-channel communication mattered because digital transformation was not implemented in a single event but through continuous adaptation.

> *"In fact, the most honest conversations often happen outside of formal meetings, for example, in WhatsApp groups or during casual chats after meetings." (P3)*

Informal digital channels shaped communicative leadership differently from face-to-face interaction. Face-to-face forums provided legitimacy and collective visibility,

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while WhatsApp groups enabled quicker clarification, more frequent feedback, and lower barriers to participation. However, informal channels also required careful leadership because messages could be fragmented, misread, or circulated without context. Effective leaders therefore combined formal authority with relational accessibility, ensuring that informal communication supported rather than replaced official explanation.

Trust Formation Through Leadership Communication

The second theme concerns trust formation. The findings show that trust was constructed through transparency, consistency, empathy, and alignment between messages and actions. This trust was multidimensional. Institutional trust was linked to the perceived credibility of policies and decisions. Interpersonal trust was linked to leaders' openness, empathy, and willingness to listen. Trust in technology was linked to stakeholders' confidence that digital systems were useful, learnable, and adequately supported. Distinguishing these dimensions prevents trust from being treated as a generic attitude.

"When leaders explain the real situation, including the challenges we face, we feel more confident because nothing is hidden." (P4)

Transparency reduced uncertainty by allowing stakeholders to see the rationale behind digital decisions, including constraints and risks. This aligns with trust theory, which emphasizes perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity as foundations of trustworthiness (Mayer et al., 1995). In this study, transparent communication signaled integrity because leaders did not present digital transformation only as success rhetoric; they also acknowledged technical limitations, workload pressure, and the need for gradual adjustment.

"What matters is not just frequent communication, but consistency in the message. If it keeps changing, people start to doubt it." (P5)

Consistency was particularly important because digital transformation involved multiple units and communication channels. When messages from top-level leaders, middle-level managers, and technical units were aligned, stakeholders perceived the initiative as more credible. Conversely, inconsistent instructions produced confusion and skepticism. Thus, the communicative task was not only to provide more information but to coordinate meaning across institutional levels.

"We trust leaders more when they are willing to listen and understand our concerns, not just give instructions." (P6)

Empathy contributed to interpersonal trust by making stakeholders feel that their anxiety was recognized rather than dismissed. This finding is consistent with psychological safety literature, which shows that individuals are more willing to speak, learn, and take interpersonal risks when the environment is perceived as safe (Edmondson, 1999). In digital transformation, such safety is important because stakeholders may be reluctant to admit difficulties with technology if communication is punitive or overly directive.

Dialogic Engagement and Stakeholder Participation

The third theme shows that dialogic engagement was both a leadership practice and a stakeholder response. Leaders practiced dialogue by opening participatory forums, inviting feedback, and acknowledging disagreement. Stakeholders responded by becoming more willing to ask questions, provide input, and participate in

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implementation. This distinction is analytically important because dialogue is not automatically achieved by holding meetings; it is achieved when stakeholders perceive that their voices can influence interpretation or action.

> *"We are not just asked to follow instructions anymore; we are invited to discuss and give input on how the system should work." (P7)*

The data suggest that participatory forums changed stakeholder acceptance in at least three ways. First, they clarified the purpose of digital transformation by connecting institutional goals with lecturers' daily work. Second, they reduced resistance by allowing concerns to surface before they hardened into rejection. Third, they created a sense of ownership because stakeholders could see their feedback reflected in implementation adjustments. This finding extends dialogic communication theory by showing that dialogue functions not only as ethical openness but also as a mechanism for implementation (Heck, 2024; Kent & Taylor, 2002).

> *"When we are part of the conversation, we understand why the change is needed, and we feel responsible for making it work." (P8)*

This excerpt indicates that engagement moved beyond attendance or symbolic participation. Stakeholders developed shared accountability when they were involved in defining the meaning and practical implications of digital transformation. In higher education, where academic autonomy is valued, such involvement is crucial. Leaders who respected expertise and invited deliberation were more able to align transformation with professional identity rather than positioning it as a threat to academic work.

> *"Our leaders often ask for feedback and actually use it to improve the process, which makes us feel that our voices matter." (P9)*

The use of feedback loops differentiated substantive dialogue from ceremonial consultation. When leaders acted on feedback, stakeholders interpreted participation as meaningful. When feedback was ignored, dialogue risked becoming symbolic and could intensify skepticism. Therefore, dialogic engagement required both communicative openness and visible responsiveness.

Resistance Management Through Adaptive Communication

Resistance was frequently observed as a normal response to digital transformation rather than as a purely negative attitude. The data indicate four forms of resistance: structural, workload-related, competence-based, and technological. These forms were interconnected. A lecturer who struggled with a new system, for example, might also experience workload pressure and anxiety about professional competence. Effective resistance management, therefore, requires adaptive communication rather than one-size-fits-all messaging.

Table 4. Forms of Resistance and Leadership Communication Strategies

Form of resistance	Observed concern	Communication strategy	Expected implementation effect
Structural	Unclear procedures, fragmented coordination, uneven unit readiness	Clarify roles, provide written guidance, and align messages across units	Reduced ambiguity and procedural confusion
Workload-related	Perception that digital systems add an administrative burden	Acknowledge the burden, explain transition phases, and provide realistic timelines	Improved acceptance and reduced frustration

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Form of resistance	Observed concern	Communication strategy	Expected implementation effect
Competence-based	Anxiety about limited digital skills or fear of appearing incapable	Use empathetic listening, peer mentoring, and non-punitive support	Increased psychological safety and willingness to learn
Technological	Concerns about system reliability, usability, and technical support	Communicate system limitations honestly and establish feedback channels	Strengthened trust in technology and support mechanisms

"Resistance is not always negative. Sometimes it shows us what needs to be improved in the system or in how we communicate the change." (P10)

This statement reframes resistance as diagnostic feedback. In line with Piderit (2000), resistance contained ambivalence: stakeholders did not necessarily reject digital transformation, but they questioned its pace, relevance, workload consequences, and support mechanisms. Communicative leaders responded by listening actively, explaining decisions gradually, and adjusting messages to different stakeholder groups. Resistance management therefore became a relational process that connected technical support with communicative legitimacy.

The findings also show that resistance declined when leaders provided continuous support after initial implementation. One-time socialization was insufficient because digital transformation required repeated learning and problem-solving. Sustained communication helped stakeholders move from uncertainty to experimentation and from passive compliance to more active engagement. Thus, resistance management was not a final stage after implementation but a continuous component of transformation governance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that communicative leadership plays a central role in digital transformation within Indonesian higher education. The findings show that leaders support transformation by constructing shared meaning, building institutional and interpersonal trust, enabling dialogic engagement, and responding adaptively to multiple forms of resistance. Digital transformation is therefore not only a technical or infrastructural project; it is also a communicative and relational process that depends on how stakeholders interpret change and how leaders sustain credible interaction. This conclusion is consistent with research showing that successful higher education digital transformation requires strategic direction, institutional readiness, technology integration, and attention to social-organizational dimensions (Akbari & Pratomo, 2022; Aripradono et al., 2024; Benavides et al., 2020).

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in positioning communicative leadership as a sense-making infrastructure for digital transformation. Rather than treating communication as a supplementary managerial skill, the analysis shows that it is constitutive of transformation, shaping trust, participation, and resistance. The study also refines the concept of trust by distinguishing institutional trust, interpersonal trust, and trust in technology in the context of higher education change.

The practical contribution is that higher education leaders should design communication strategies as part of digital transformation governance. Leaders need to align formal and informal messages, create participatory forums, respond visibly to

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feedback, and treat resistance as information about implementation risk. Digital systems may be technically available, but stakeholder commitment depends on whether leaders can explain purpose, acknowledge difficulty, and sustain support.

This study has limitations. It was conducted at a single private higher education institution, so the findings should be applied cautiously to public universities or institutions with different governance structures. The study also relied on qualitative data, which provide depth but do not measure the scale of trust, engagement, or resistance statistically. Future research may compare private and public institutions, examine student perspectives, or combine qualitative analysis with survey-based measurement of communicative leadership and digital transformation readiness.

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