

CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN PESANTREN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: STRATEGIES FOR PRESERVING TRADITIONAL VALUES AMID EDUCATIONAL MODERNIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation in pesantren does more than transfer administrative and learning activities to digital devices; it also changes workflows, authority, competencies, and patterns of interaction among educational stakeholders. This study analyzes the change management process, leaders' strategies for aligning digital transformation with the pesantren system and culture, and efforts to preserve traditional values amid educational modernization at Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Bengkak, Wongsorejo, Banyuwangi. The study employed a qualitative case-study design. Data were obtained from 10 purposively selected informants: the pesantren leader, foundation chairperson, head of education and instruction, head of student affairs, technology manager, administrative manager, teacher, student, parent, and alumnus. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation and were analyzed through data condensation, thematic coding, matrix displays, and conclusion drawing. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source and method triangulation and member checking. The findings reveal three main patterns: change proceeded incrementally through needs diagnosis, team formation, piloting, mentoring, evaluation, and institutionalization; leaders employed value-based leadership, participation, and selective technology-use policies; and tradition was preserved by positioning adab, talaqqī, the exemplary conduct of teachers and kiai, congregational discipline, and Islamic studies as normative boundaries for transformation. The study proposes a model of digital change in pesantren that uses technology to strengthen governance and learning without displacing pedagogical authority or the institution's traditional identity.

Keywords : Change Management; Digital Transformation; Pesantren; Traditional Values; Educational Leadership

Received: 25-12-2025	Revised: 09-02-2026	Accepted: 18-03-2026
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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has evolved from the isolated use of devices into comprehensive change across processes, structures, user experiences, and organizational culture. In education, this shift is evident in academic information systems, blended learning, digital archives, parent communication, cashless payments, and data analytics. Pesantren face more complex demands because technology promises efficiency while introducing new communication patterns, sources of knowledge, and habits that do not always align with the discipline of residential life. Studies of pesantren education show that technology can broaden access to learning resources and improve services, but its success depends on human readiness, infrastructure, and leadership direction (Nugroho & Astutik, 2024; Zafi et al., 2021). The central issue, therefore, is not whether pesantren should use technology, but how change should be managed so that digital benefits can be realized without diminishing the formation of *adab* and *tafaqquh fi al-dīn*.

Pesantren possess distinctive organizational characteristics: strong *kiai* authority, the integration of learning and worship, close teacher–student relationships, and traditions transmitted through everyday practice. Digitalization that focuses solely on applications risks producing systems that are technically new but socially rejected, used half-heartedly, or disruptive to students' concentration and discipline. Research on pesantren digitalization reveals diverse patterns of adaptation, ranging from learning media and integrated administrative systems to online classical-text instruction and digital economic empowerment (Yuwanda et al., 2023; Hidayah et al., 2025; Hasibuan & Tolentino, 2025). These findings confirm that digital transformation is not merely an information technology project. It is a process of organizational change that affects role distribution, teacher competence, control over device use, policy legitimacy, and the ways pesantren sustain their traditions.

The change management literature indicates that successful transformation requires strategic direction, communication, participation, readiness, organizational learning, and the institutionalization of new practices. Digital leadership must also connect technological vision with organizational members' adaptive capacity (Özkan Alakaş, 2024; Philippart, 2022; Akarsu et al., 2026). However, concepts of change developed for business organizations or mainstream schools cannot simply be transferred to pesantren. Decisions in pesantren derive legitimacy not only from formal office but also from moral trust in the *kiai*. Acceptance of change is often determined by leaders' ability to demonstrate that innovation does not conflict with *khidmah*, *adab*, simplicity, self-reliance, and scholarly tradition. These distinctive features require a value-sensitive interpretation of change management.

Previous studies have largely described the technologies used or their effects on learning and administration. Some have examined the transition from digitization to digitalization, the integration of tradition and technology, students' digital literacy, infrastructure policy, service governance, cultural change, and the strengthening of the pesantren economy (Ridho et al., 2024; Happyana et al., 2025; Agus Alif Humaydiy et al., 2026; Sutrisno & Mas'ud, 2026; Amirudin & Nur Mizan, 2026; Nilawati Idris, 2026; Maylinda Putri Maharani, 2025; Muhardi, 2025; Mahmudah & Ridwan, 2025; Mohammad Khoirur Rachman & Ahmad Mohammad Tidjani, 2024; Abdurahman et al., 2026). Despite their importance, these studies offer limited explanations of the sequence of change, the actors who build acceptance, the mechanisms for addressing resistance, and the translation of traditional values into operational rules. Consequently, transformation is often portrayed as the presence of devices and platforms rather than an ongoing organizational negotiation. This gap underpins the present study of change management in digital transformation at Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Bengkak, Wongsorejo, Banyuwangi.

This study addresses three questions. First, how is change management carried out in implementing digital transformation at Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Bengkak, Wongsorejo, Banyuwangi? Second, what strategies do pesantren leaders use to ensure that digital transformation aligns with the institution's educational system and culture? Third, how does the pesantren preserve traditional values amid educational modernization and digital transformation? The study aims to explain the relationship among the stages of change, value-based leadership, and mechanisms for preserving tradition. Conceptually, it draws on the diagnosis–mobilization–implementation–institutionalization framework, change readiness, digital leadership, and organizational culture. Practically, the findings are expected to guide pesantren managers in organizing digitalization incrementally, measurably, and in a manner rooted in institutional identity.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case-study design. A case study was selected because the research focuses on the processes, decisions, meanings, and interactions of actors involved in digital transformation within a single institution with clear organizational and cultural boundaries. This approach enables an understanding of change not only through the use of devices or applications, but also through stakeholders' experiences, leadership patterns, responses to change, and efforts to preserve institutional values. The unit of analysis was the change management process in digital transformation at Miftahul

Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Bengkak, Wongsorejo, Banyuwangi. The study observed informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of data solely for academic purposes.

The research site was Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School in Bengkak Village, Wongsorejo District, Banyuwangi Regency, East Java. The site was purposively selected because it uses technology in administrative and learning services while maintaining pesantren values and educational traditions. The digital transformation practices examined included student data management, attendance, official communication with parents, electronic archives, administrative services, and the limited use of digital learning materials. Informants were selected purposively based on their involvement in decision-making, technology implementation, teaching experience, user roles, and relationship with pesantren services. Ten informants participated, with each role represented by one person: the pesantren leader, foundation chairperson, head of education and instruction, head of student affairs, technology manager, administrative manager, teacher, student, parent, and alumnus. Each informant was assigned a role-based code to protect confidentiality and facilitate data presentation.

Table 1. Profile of research informants

Code	Informant role	No.	Data relevance
PG-01	Pesantren Leader	1	Vision, values, and legitimacy of change
KY-02	Foundation Chairperson	1	Policy, planning, and coordination
BP-03	Head of Education and Instruction	1	Curriculum, learning, and scholarly tradition
BK-04	Head of Student Affairs	1	Discipline, culture, and student life
TI-05	Technology Manager	1	Infrastructure, systems, and technical support
AD-06	Administrative Manager	1	Service digitalization and data management
UU-07	Teacher	1	Acceptance of change and digital learning practices
SN-08	Student	1	Experience, adaptation, and digital discipline
WS-09	Parent	1	Communication and service accountability
AL-10	Alumnus	1	Continuity of values and alumni networks

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations of learning and administrative activities, and a review of documents, including device-use policies, activity schedules, information-system guidelines, and evaluation minutes. Interview questions explored the drivers of change, decision-

making processes, members' responses, forms of assistance, emerging conflicts, perceived outcomes, and the ways institutional values were maintained. Data analysis comprised four stages: transcription and familiarization, initial coding, grouping codes into themes, and verifying the relationships between themes and the research questions. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source and method triangulation by comparing information across informants and checking interview findings against observations and documents. Negative-case analysis and member checking were also conducted to ensure interpretive accuracy. Informants were anonymized, and quotations were selected for their thematic relevance and their ability to represent diverse stakeholder experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Bengkak, Wongsorejo, Banyuwangi reveal three themes corresponding to the research questions: incremental change from needs diagnosis to institutionalization; value-based and participatory leadership; and the preservation of tradition through selective uses of technology and the reinforcement of core practices. These themes are interrelated. The stages of change provide the operational mechanism, leadership supplies legitimacy and direction, and traditional values serve as criteria for accepting, limiting, or rejecting particular uses of technology.

1. The Change Management Process: From Diagnosis to Institutionalization

Change began with shared operational problems rather than a desire to follow trends. Student data were dispersed, payment reconciliation was slow, information provided to parents was inconsistent, and digital learning materials were stored in personal accounts. Leaders diagnosed these needs through unit meetings and service-process mapping. This diagnosis was important because it reframed technology from a symbol of modernity into a problem-solving tool. The most urgent needs were prioritized, while features that did not directly support services were postponed. This pattern shows that transformation began with problem-solution fit and organizational readiness rather than system procurement.

"We did not begin by asking which application was the most advanced. We began by identifying which tasks were most frequently delayed and caused confusion among parents. Only then did we select the system that was genuinely needed." (KY-02, interview, 2026).

The next stage involved establishing a change team comprising pesantren leaders, technology and administrative personnel, education-unit managers, and user representatives. This small team translated the pesantren leader's vision into procedures, coordinated needs across units, and prevented technology from becoming dependent on a single individual. Technology managers were not granted sole authority because decisions concerning data, learning, and discipline remained with the respective unit leaders. This cross-functional structure demonstrates that digital transformation requires a combination of leadership, technical capability, and organizational learning. In the pesantren context, the change coalition also required the leader's moral legitimacy so that innovation would not be perceived as a technical agenda detached from educational purposes.

"The IT unit explains what is technically possible, but the limits of use are determined collectively. When an issue affects study time, dormitory rules, or teacher-student relations, the decision must return to the pesantren leader and the head of religious education." (TI-05, interview, 2026).

Implementation proceeded through pilot projects. Attendance and payment systems were tested in one unit, while digital materials were used by several teachers who were ready to adopt them. The pilots enabled the pesantren to identify connectivity problems, duplicate accounts, difficulties among senior staff, and the potential use of devices for purposes unrelated to learning. Following evaluation, the interface was simplified, access rights were separated, and concise guidelines were prepared. The incremental approach reduced the risk of disrupting pesantren routines and allowed social corrections before technical expansion. This practice supports the finding that technology adoption in pesantren is more stable when aligned with institutional capacity, needs, and characteristics.

"During the first month, I continued to record everything twice because I was worried about losing data. After the training and after we saw that reports could be retrieved, we gradually reduced manual record-keeping." (AD-06, interview, 2026).

Resistance arose primarily from fear of losing roles, concern about the erosion of adab, and the burden of learning a new system. Leaders did not treat every objection as opposition to change. Instead, objections were classified as competency, technical, or value-related issues. Competency issues were

addressed through individual assistance, technical issues through system improvements, and value-related issues through forums involving the pesantren leader and senior teachers. This strategy turned resistance into a source of information for improving the change design. Theoretically, member involvement and change communication strengthen readiness because individuals understand the reasons for, benefits of, and boundaries of change.

“I am not opposed to technology, but students should not assume that all knowledge can be found independently. Once it was explained that digital materials were only supplementary and that instruction would remain under a teacher’s guidance, I could accept it.” (UU-07, interview, 2026).

Institutionalization occurred when digital practices were incorporated into policies, budgets, role allocations, evaluations, and competency-development programs. The pesantren established official accounts, data-backup schedules, designated service personnel, response standards for parents, and monthly evaluations. Success was measured not merely by the number of users, but by data accuracy, reduced duplication of work, service speed, compliance with rules, and the continuity of core activities. Digital change therefore evolved from a temporary project into an organizational capability. Institutionalization remained adaptive, however; a system could be discontinued or modified if its effects conflicted with educational purposes. This finding extends the concept of institutionalizing change by showing that, in value-based organizations, the sustainability of innovation depends on both performance and normative alignment.

2. Leadership Strategies: Aligning Technology with the Pesantren System and Culture

The leaders’ primary strategy was to articulate a vision of technology as a khādim, or servant of education, rather than a replacement for pedagogical relationships. Although simple, this formulation established a clear hierarchy for decision-making: educational purposes took precedence over efficiency, and scholarly authority was not delegated to platforms. The pesantren leader used study forums, meetings, and personal example to explain the rationale for change. The language employed was not merely technical but was connected to trustworthiness, order, public benefit, and responsible use of time. This framing strategy narrowed the gap between innovation and the moral vocabulary familiar to the pesantren community. Effective digital leadership

requires the ability to articulate technological purposes within an organization's identity.

"We accept technology as long as it helps us fulfill our educational responsibility. It must not become the master that governs every aspect of pesantren life. Values, teachers, and the goal of student formation must continue to determine our direction." (PG-01, interview, 2026).

Leaders also applied tiered participation. The pesantren leader established the general direction and value boundaries, a cross-unit team discussed operational design, and feedback on implementation was gathered from staff, teachers, students, and parents. This model was not equivalent to unrestricted democratic decision-making because the pesantren's authority structure was retained. Participation was used to obtain information, build ownership, and improve implementation quality. The combination of normative authority and operational consultation enabled timely decisions without neglecting user experience. At the organizational level, this strategy resembles ambidextrous leadership: it preserves identity while creating space for controlled experimentation.

"The core rules come from the pesantren leader, but we evaluate their implementation together. Students often offer simple suggestions that managers had not considered, such as access times and the wording of notifications." (BK-04, interview, 2026).

Alignment with the educational system was achieved by mapping the academic calendar, worship schedule, diniyah instruction, formal schooling, permission procedures, and parent services. Technology was not applied uniformly to all activities. Repetitive administrative processes requiring accuracy were digitalized more extensively, whereas activities based on interpersonal closeness, oral correction, exemplary conduct, and habituation remained predominantly face-to-face. Videos, digital libraries, and quizzes served as enrichment rather than substitutes for sorogan, bandongan, musyāwarah, and talaqqī. This selective strategy is consistent with research emphasizing the integration of tradition and technology rather than the replacement of tradition (Happyana et al., 2025; Fuadi et al., 2026).

"Digital media are useful for vocabulary and review. When studying classical texts, however, students must still observe how the teacher

interprets the text, explains it, and corrects their reading.” (UU-07, interview, 2026).

The next strategy was differentiated capacity development. Administrative staff were trained in data and report management; teachers received training in material design and digital ethics; students attended digital-literacy orientation; and unit leaders learned to interpret dashboards for decision-making. Assistance was provided in small groups so that slower learners would not feel embarrassed. The pesantren also established a rapid-support mechanism through a single official channel. Role-based training avoided the assumption that one general session would be sufficient for all users. The literature indicates that competence, digital culture, and leadership support are mutually reinforcing factors in transformation readiness.

“The training was not delivered as a one-size-fits-all session. Those of us who teach need more guidance on preparing materials and maintaining students’ focus, whereas administrative staff need accuracy in data entry and data security.” (BP-03, interview, 2026).

Leaders managed risk through restricted-access policies, account separation, content approval, data backups, and designated device-use hours. Supervision was not solely punitive. Students were educated about digital footprints, tabayyun, privacy, copyright, distraction, and responsible time management. Parents were included through an official communication channel so that they would not have to rely on potentially inconsistent personal messages. These policies demonstrate that pesantren digital governance encompasses technical, pedagogical, and ethical dimensions. Transformation aligned with culture is not transformation without rules; it is innovation within boundaries that can be understood and evaluated.

“We appreciate receiving information more quickly, but the most helpful change is having a single communication channel. Information from different groups was sometimes inconsistent; parents now know which announcements are official.” (WS-09, interview, 2026).

3. Preserving Traditional Values amid Modernization

Traditional values were preserved not by rejecting all technology, but by identifying core practices whose meaning could not be compromised. Field data indicate that these practices included respect for teachers, discipline in

congregational activities, simplicity, khidmah, self-reliance, Islamic studies, continuity of scholarly tradition, and communal life. Each innovation was assessed according to its effect on these practices. Technology was accepted when it improved order or enriched learning without reducing educational interaction; its use was restricted when it encouraged individualization, distraction, or ambiguity in scholarly authority. This approach demonstrates that preserving tradition involves translating values into criteria for design and policy.

“For us, preserving tradition does not mean that everything must remain as it was in the past. What we preserve are adab, the chain of knowledge transmission, togetherness, and earnestness. The tools may change as long as this core remains intact.” (AL-10, interview, 2026).

Adab was positioned as a digital competence rather than merely a set of rules preceding technology use. Students were taught to seek permission, acknowledge sources, refrain from interrupting teachers because they believed they had found an answer online, and avoid distributing internal materials without approval. When using digital sources, students were directed to verify information with teachers and compare sources. In this way, tabayyun and respect for scholarly authority were translated into media practices. Religious digital literacy became part of character formation rather than a separate supplementary subject (Ainia Fikri Rahmawati, 2025; Mahmudah & Ridwan, 2025). This is important because an abundance of information can broaden knowledge while weakening verification if students lack an ethical framework.

“When we encounter a religious explanation on social media, we do not immediately treat it as true. We usually make a note of it and then ask about it during musyāwarah or consult a teacher.” (SN-08, interview, 2026).

The learning tradition was maintained through an asymmetrical hybrid model. “Asymmetrical” means that in-person meetings remained central, while digital media supported preparation, practice, documentation, and enrichment. Recordings did not replace attendance at study sessions; digital texts did not automatically replace the practice of annotating classical texts; and online forums did not replace musyāwarah, which develops confidence and appropriate speaking conduct. This approach differs from blended learning that allocates activities solely on the basis of efficiency. The pesantren assigned activities according to the type of knowledge and values to be cultivated.

Pesantren curriculum transformation that integrates digital practices and turāth must likewise preserve scholarly logic, not merely content formats.

“Videos help me review lessons, but missing an in-person class still feels different. In class, we receive direct correction and learn how to conduct ourselves before a teacher.” (SN-o8, interview, 2026).

Values were also maintained through non-digital routines. Access to devices was restricted during worship, core study sessions, khidmah, communal meals, and dormitory activities. Device-free spaces were understood not as backwardness but as an educational design for sustaining attention, social relationships, and self-discipline. These boundaries conveyed the symbolic message that not every experience should be mediated by a screen. At the same time, administrators avoided unrealistic prohibitions by providing clearly defined times and places for access. Balancing restrictions with literacy reduced concealed use and opened space for dialogue about digital problems.

“If access were available all the time, dormitory life would become quiet because everyone would be occupied with their own devices. The schedule tells us when technology may be used for learning and when we must be fully present with our friends.” (SN-o8, interview, 2026).

The exemplary conduct of leaders and teachers was the strongest mechanism for preserving values. Device-use rules lost legitimacy when administrators themselves used phones without restraint during teaching or congregational activities. Leaders therefore established standards of conduct for educators, including the use of official channels, caution in sharing content, and a willingness to learn technology without abandoning personal interaction. Traditional values endured not only in documents but also through consistency between messages and actions. Moral authority in pesantren facilitates acceptance of change, but it also requires leaders to model the boundaries they establish. This is where change leadership and pedagogical exemplarity converge.

“Students quickly notice whether rules apply only to them. When teachers also put their phones away during study sessions, restrictions feel educational rather than merely prohibitive.” (UU-o7, interview, 2026).

Overall, the findings produce a “value-anchored digital transformation” model comprising five elements: diagnosis of genuine needs; leadership legitimacy and value direction; a cross-role coalition; incremental experimentation accompanied by support; and institutionalization combined with ethical boundaries and evaluation of cultural impacts. Technology operates within a corridor of values, while values are translated into operational decisions. The model corrects two extremes: romanticizing tradition in ways that obstruct necessary change and technological determinism that assumes modernization always produces progress. Pesantren can become adaptive precisely when they use their identity as a resource for evaluating innovation rather than as a reason to reject it. Preservation and transformation are therefore not mutually exclusive agendas, but processes that must be designed concurrently.

CONCLUSION

The change management process in digital transformation at Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Bengkak, Wongsorejo, Banyuwangi comprised problem diagnosis, priority setting, formation of a cross-functional team, piloting, assistance, evaluation, and institutionalization. Change was more readily accepted when technology addressed genuine needs and when members’ objections were treated as data for improving the design. Leadership strategies centered on a vision of technology as a servant of education, value-based legitimacy, tiered participation, selective integration into educational processes, role-specific competency development, and risk governance. Traditional values were preserved by defining core practices, translating adab into digital ethics, keeping in-person learning central, providing non-digital spaces, and strengthening leaders’ exemplary conduct. Theoretically, the study shows that change management in pesantren should include normative alignment as a measure of success alongside effectiveness and adoption. Practically, pesantren should begin with needs and cultural audits, use pilot projects, establish indicators of pedagogical impact, and periodically evaluate technology’s effects on discipline, teacher–student relations, and scholarly traditions. The study is limited by its single-case design at Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School and its restricted observation period. Future research should compare multiple pesantren and employ longitudinal observation to examine the applicability of the proposed model in broader contexts.

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