



ATTRIBUTES OF A NIMBLE LEADER IN CHANGING TIMES

Prepared for AASA, The School Superintendents Association

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INTRODUCTION

School and district leaders confront increasing challenges to achieving their missions and must operate within ever-shifting economic, political, and social landscapes. As such, leaders must be nimble and demonstrate a willingness and flexibility to address challenges and lead through change. Nimble leadership allows district staff to navigate volatility and uncertainty that impact all areas of the school environment, from staffing to school safety to political dynamics.

To support their mission of developing school leader capacity and building support for mental health, AASA, the School Superintendents Association, has partnered with Hanover Research (Hanover) to prepare a series of reports on resonant, resilient, and nimble leadership for district and school leaders. The first report in this series discussed the role of resilience in leadership and culture. This report, the second in the series, discusses the key attributes and skills of nimble leadership, as well as the role of nimble leadership in educational settings and school culture. Synthesizing empirical literature on nimble leadership and related leadership concepts in education and associated industries, this report includes the following sections:





- **Section I: Attributes of a Nimble Leader** reviews nimble leadership and examines three critical attributes of nimble leaders, including agility, communication, and collaboration.
- **Section II: Nimble Leadership in Educational Settings** discusses the role of nimble leadership in education as well as the relationship between nimble leadership and school culture.

Hanover defines nimble leadership as **the ability of leaders to effectively guide their organization through changes and challenging times with agility, open and transparent communication, and collaboration with community.**

To develop a definition and framework of nimble leadership, Hanover reviewed and synthesized the broader leadership literature from related leadership theories, including agile leadership, adaptive leadership, and change leadership, to identify essential qualities that enable leaders to successfully lead complex school systems through turbulent conditions and significant changes.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Based on our findings, Hanover presents the following practical applications of this research.

-  Understand the concept of nimble leadership and the components of agility, clear communication, and purposeful collaboration.
-  Engage in reflection on times in your professional life when challenges or changes required a nimble approach.
-  Think about your leadership style and what factors or events have influenced the development of your leadership style. Reflect on times when you may have changed or adapted your leadership style to best fit the context, occasion, or audience.
-  Consider ways to increase your practices of transparent communication and collaboration with the internal and external school or district community.

KEY FINDINGS



Nimble leadership is the ability of leaders to effectively guide their organization through changes and challenging times with agility, open and transparent communication, and collaboration with community. Nimble leaders embody mindsets of discovery and creative problem-solving to support team structures that promote organizational agility and collaborate to overcome challenges. Key attributes of nimble leadership include leadership agility, communication, and collaboration.



Being agile requires leaders to act and respond effectively and appropriately when encountering diverse, changing, and uncertain organizational conditions. Nimble leaders with agility can make challenging decisions during times of complexity and volatility to support their organization and employees. Agility empowers leaders to showcase flexibility in their leadership style: rather than rigidly following a single leadership style or processes, agile leaders strategically employ different perspectives and can adapt their leadership style or learn new styles to respond quickly and appropriately in challenging or ambiguous environments. Nimble leaders also demonstrate **learning agility** and are open to learning new skills and mindsets, reflecting on their practice, and growing from their mistakes.



Nimble leaders engage in strategic and transparent communication regarding major organizational changes. Effective messaging around change is targeted to specific audiences, consistent, and connected to the school's broader priorities or vision. Nimble leaders similarly utilize careful listening as part of a successful communication strategy to promote collaboration, build relationships, increase understanding, and improve problem-solving.



Nimble leaders collaborate to support distributed leadership teams and share leadership responsibilities, which promotes organizational flexibility and agility and increases organizational responsiveness to turbulence. Effective collaboration requires leaders to develop collaborative structures that facilitate delegation, engagement, and shared decision-making. Exercising collaborative practices enables nimble leaders to empower staff and gain buy-in for new initiatives.



Nimble leadership is critical for educational leaders to successfully lead and support their districts, schools, and community members through significant changes and shifts in the economic, political, and social landscapes. Nimble leadership also impacts organizational and school cultures, as agile leaders promote organizational agility. Additionally, the nimble qualities of collaboration and communication facilitate positive school cultures characterized by strong relationships, trust, shared expectations, transparency, engagement, knowledge-sharing, and collective efficacy.

SECTION I: ATTRIBUTES OF A NIMBLE LEADER

This section reviews nimble leadership and examines three critical attributes of nimble leaders - agility, open and transparent communication, and collaboration with community.

Hanover reviewed and synthesized literature from related leadership theories, including agile leadership, adaptive leadership, and change leadership to develop a definition and framework of nimble leadership. Hanover leveraged overlapping and critical components of these theories to develop a framework for the characteristics that enable leaders to successfully lead complex school systems through turbulent conditions and significant changes. As there is limited established literature detailing nimble leadership, the definition of nimble leadership developed within this report relies on essential qualities from the broader leadership literature that help leaders effectively and flexibly lead their organizations through change.

NIMBLE LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES

Hanover defines nimble leadership as the ability of leaders to effectively guide their organization through changes and challenging times with agility, open and transparent communication, and collaboration with community.¹ Nimble leaders demonstrate flexibility and can adapt to changes and “prepare their teams for new paradigms ahead.”² According to research by McKinsey & Company, to lead organizations that embody agility, nimble and agile leaders adopt mindsets of discovery and innovation and shift from a reactive to a creative mindset while creating new team structures that prioritize collaboration, create team networks, and work to break down traditional silos.³

The remainder of this section examines three critical attributes of nimble leaders:







AGILITY

Nimble leaders demonstrate leadership agility and can act and respond effectively and appropriately across diverse, changing, and uncertain organizational conditions.⁴ Leadership agility is the ability to “make judicious and effective decisions amidst complex, volatile and swiftly changing environments” and “take intelligent and prudent actions under situations characterized by high uncertainty, complexity and rapid change.”⁵ Agility enables leaders to showcase flexibility in their leadership style: rather than rigidly following a single leadership style or processes, agile leaders strategically use different perspectives and can adapt their leadership style or learn new styles to respond quickly and appropriately in changing, ambiguous, and challenging environments.⁶

A seminal study of hundreds of managers by Joiner and Josephs in their book “Leadership Agility: Five Levels of Mastery for Anticipating and Initiating Change” identified four key competencies of leadership agility, including context-setting agility, stakeholder agility, creative agility, and self-leadership agility. Leaders with agility can employ these competencies in unpredictable environments to successfully lead their organizations.⁷ Figure 1.1, on the following page, discusses these competencies in greater detail.

Figure 1.1: Four Competencies of Agile Leadership

			
CONTEXT-SETTING AGILITY	STAKEHOLDER AGILITY	CREATIVE AGILITY	SELF-LEADERSHIP AGILITY
Agile leaders use broader perspectives to scan both internal and external aspects of an organization, forecast significant changes that may occur in both the short and long run and determine the necessary initiatives to take in achieving the desired outcome.	After laying the context for initiatives to be taken, leaders identify core stakeholders affected by the initiatives and seek their views and support on the initiatives. Leaders seek the suggestions and contributions of these stakeholders not just to gain their acceptance but to improve the effectiveness of the initiatives. Seeking stakeholders' ideas or input could influence and lead to quality strategies.	Leaders identify novel opportunities and transform difficult problems into preferred outcomes. Leaders must examine the encountered problem from a bigger picture, clearly define it, and consider its underlying assumptions, new alternatives, and differing viewpoints.	Leaders with this capability are able to accelerate their personal and professional development, proactively seek ideas, and decide on the kind of leaders they aim to become. These leaders use their initiatives as avenues to achieve their leadership aspirations, make the necessary adjustments and learn from their experiences.

Source: Attar and Abdul-Kareem and Josephs and Joiner⁸

Based on this research, Josephs and Joiner further identified five levels of agile leadership. These five levels - expert, achiever, catalyst, co-creator, and synergist - demonstrate how leaders view leadership and demonstrate agility in key conversations, leading teams, and leading organizational change (Figure 1.2). With each level, leaders develop additional agility capabilities.⁹ Notably, while the lower levels of agile leadership may have worked in the past for traditional, bureaucratic organizations facing stable organizational and environmental conditions, today's organizations that face globalization and frequent change require leaders that can lead through organizational change with authority, collaboration, teamwork, distributed responsibility, and shared goals.¹⁰

Figure 1.2: Levels of Agile Leadership

LEVEL	LEADERSHIP STYLE	AGILITY IN NAVIGATING PIVOTAL CONVERSATIONS	AGILITY IN LEADING TEAMS	AGILITY IN LEADING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE
Expert	Tactical, problem-solving orientation. Believes a leader's power depends upon expertise and positional authority.	Style is either to strongly assert opinions or hold back to accommodate others. May swing from one style to the other, particularly for different relationships. Tends to avoid giving or requesting feedback.	More of a supervisor than a manager. Creates a group of individuals rather than a team. Usually too caught up in details to lead in a strategic manner.	Organizational initiatives focus primarily on incremental improvements inside unit boundaries with little attention to stakeholders.
Achiever	Strategic, outcome orientation. Believes that power comes not only from authority and expertise but also from motivating others.	Primarily assertive or accommodative, with some ability to compensate with less preferred style. Will often accept feedback, if helpful in achieving desired outcomes.	Operates like a full-fledged manager. Meetings to discuss important issues are often orchestrated to try to gain buy-in to own views.	Organizational initiatives include analysis of industry environment. Strategies to gain stakeholder buy-in range from one-way communication to soliciting input.
Catalyst	Visionary, facilitative orientation. Believes that leaders articulate an innovative, inspiring vision and empower people to transform the vision into reality.	Adept at balancing assertive and accommodative tendencies as needed. Proactive in seeking feedback. Genuinely interested in learning from diverse viewpoints.	Acts as team leader and facilitator to create a highly participative team. Welcomes open exchange of views on difficult issues. Empowers direct reports and uses team development as a vehicle for leadership development.	Organizational initiatives often include development of a culture that promotes teamwork, participation, and empowerment. Proactive engagement with diverse stakeholders reflects belief that their input increases the quality of decisions.
Co-Creator	Oriented toward shared purpose and collaboration. Believes leadership is ultimately a service to others.	Style reflects an integration of assertive and accommodative tendencies. Able to process and seriously consider negative feedback even when highly charged emotionally.	Develops collaborative leadership teams, where members feel fully responsible not only for their own areas but also for the organization they collectively manage.	Develops key stakeholder relationships characterized by deep levels of mutual influence and genuine dedication to the common good. May create companies or units where corporate responsibility is an integral practice.
Synergist	Holistic orientation. Experiences leadership as participation in a palpable sense of life purpose that benefits others while serving as a vehicle for personal transformation.	Cultivates a present-centered awareness that augments external feedback and supports a strong, subtle connection with others, even during challenging conversations.	Capable of moving fluidly between various team leadership styles. Can amplify or shape group energy dynamics to bring about mutually beneficial results.	Maintains a deep, empathetic awareness of conflicting stakeholder interests, including their own. Able to access synergistic intuitions that transform seemingly intractable conflicts into solutions beneficial for all.

Source: Joiner and Josephs, American Management Academy¹¹

Relatedly, nimble leaders demonstrate **learning agility**, the ability to “remain open to new ways of thinking and to continuously learn new skills.”¹² Learning agility enables leaders to take risks, be reflective, recognize and grow from mistakes, and face new challenges and issues successfully without becoming defensive when met with criticism. Learning agility represents both a mindset and a set of practices for leading effectively.¹³

Research by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) and Columbia university Teachers’ College identified four “enablers” and one “derailer” of learning-agile leaders. The “enablers” include innovating, performing, reflecting, and risking, while defending is a “derailer” to embodying learning agility. Figure 1.3 describes these characteristics as well as activities and personal challenges that promote the personal development of these characteristics. Each quality represents a tool in an agile leader’s toolbox; while leaders will not use all four tools simultaneously, they must be able to employ them when needed.¹⁴

Figure 1.3: Learning Agility Enablers and Derailer

ENABLER/ DERAILER		DESCRIPTION	DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES AND PERSONAL CHALLENGE
ENABLERS	Innovating	The first component of learning agility involves questioning the status quo and challenging long-held assumptions with a goal to discover new and unique ways of doing things. This requires one to have new experiences, which provide perspective and an opportunity to grow one’s knowledge base of understanding. High learning-agile individuals generate new ideas through their ability to view issues from multiple angles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ For each problem you face, challenge yourself to come up with new solutions, even if seemingly tried and trusted ones exist. ■ Make brainstorming new ideas a habit—the less traditional, the better. ■ When faced with a challenge, ask yourself two questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is holding me back from trying something new and different? 2. If these constraints were not in place, how would I approach this situation differently?
	Performing	Learning from experience occurs most often when we are overcoming an unfamiliar challenge. However, in order to learn from such challenges, an individual needs to be able to remain present and engaged, handling the stress brought on by ambiguity and ultimately adapting quickly in order to perform. This requires keen observation and listening skills, as well as the ability to process data quickly. Doing so enables high learning-agile people to pick up new skills more quickly and perform better than their less agile colleagues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ When faced with something new, look for similarities between the situation and things you have done in the past. Draw on these similarities to frame the new challenge. ■ Ask questions to understand, not to be understood. Really listen to what others are saying and trust that you will have a response when they have finished talking. ■ When you find yourself feeling stressed, pause. Don’t just say or do the first thing that comes to your head—take a moment to consider what is really required.
	Reflecting	Simply having new experiences does not guarantee that one learns from those experiences, and learning-agile individuals seem to know this. They are hungry for feedback and spend focused energy processing information so as to better understand their own assumptions and behavior. They generate deeper insight into themselves, others, and problems as a result.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Find someone who you trust to give you open and honest feedback and challenge that person to do so. Show that you are open to the process by only asking clarifying questions. Resist the temptation to explain your actions or make excuses. ■ Conduct After Action Reviews where you, and relevant others, reflect on recent projects by asking three questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What happened? 2. Why did it happen that way? 3. What should we stop/start/continue doing in order to ensure success in the future

ENABLER/ DERAILER		DESCRIPTION	DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES AND PERSONAL CHALLENGE
	Risk Taking	Another core component of learning agility involves venturing into unknown territory and putting oneself “out there” to try new things. Learning-agile individuals are pioneers—adventurous and comfortable with progressive risk—risk that leads to opportunity, not thrill-seeking. They volunteer for jobs and roles where success is not always guaranteed, and in fact, where failure is a possibility. Learning-agile individuals learn continuously and amass confidence by stretching themselves outside their comfort zone, resulting in a cycle of perpetual success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take on a new challenge that scares you; find something that is meaningful but not so important that failure will have serious personal consequences. Most importantly, tell others what you are doing—ask for their help and support.
DERAILER	Defending	Being open to experience is fundamental to learning. Individuals who remain closed or defensive when challenged or given critical feedback tend to be lower in learning agility. High learning-agile individuals seek feedback, process it, and adapt themselves based on their newfound understanding of themselves, situations, and problems. Highly successful people tend to gain confidence from their successes, but they also risk closing down to outside feedback as a result. To guard against this inadvertent destructive behavior, defensiveness needs to be measured and understood alongside the positive behaviors associated with learning agility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> View feedback as a gift that someone is giving you. You may not like it and it may be uncomfortable, but there is value in it nonetheless. Regardless of the other party’s motivations for giving you feedback, there is always the opportunity to learn something about yourself that you previously did not know. Resist the temptation to respond to feedback, especially at first. Try not to explain your actions to the other person or generate excuses in your own head. Always try to thank the other person.

Source: Center for Learning and Creative Leadership¹⁵

COMMUNICATION

Nimble leaders are skilled communicators who clearly and deliberately communicate changes to relevant community members.¹⁶ Indeed, communication is essential to successfully leading through difficult times and changes.¹⁷ According to research by the CCL, communication skills, or “[k]nowing what to say and how to say it to build and sustain commitment to the change” were skills demonstrated by leaders who successfully implemented change throughout their organizations.¹⁸ Experts in the private sector recommend that leaders clearly and transparently communicate about adverse situations and how they impact staff, particularly regarding reductions in resources or staffing level changes, to increase staff understanding.¹⁹ Notably, when not provided with sufficient information on what is happening, “employees will simply fill in their fears and anxieties with information, usually negative” about the organization and leader.²⁰ Therefore, leaders should be accurate and reliable in their communication and “resist the temptation to appear secretive, inaccessible, or withdrawn.”²¹ Essential features of a communication strategy for leading through change include:²²

- Messaging that is appropriate to specific stakeholder audiences;
- Consistency in messaging reflecting the shared language of the community;
- Connections to broader school strategies, priorities, and expectations for outcomes; and
- Communication that serves as a feedback loop, with avenues for both pushing information out and also hearing back from key constituencies.

Nimble leaders can also use the “4-Doors” approach (Figure 1.4) to change communication to ensure full transparency and clarity. The “4-Doors” should tell community members exactly how organizational changes may affect them. Leaders should unlock each door in their change communication efforts so community members can access these four distinct types of important information.²³

Figure 1.4: 4-Doors Approach to Change Communication



Source: RTI International Center for Education Services²⁴



For additional information on the 4-Doors approach, please follow [this link](#) to view a TEDx Talk from Jason Clarke on “Embracing Change,” which describes the “4-Doors” in greater detail.

Effective listening, a key aspect of communication, is similarly vital for nimble leaders. Listening effectively facilitates organizational success by promoting collaboration, building relationships, increasing accuracy, increasing understanding, improving problem-solving, and reducing conflict. For busy individuals and organizations, effective listening also saves time compared to poor listening.²⁵

COLLABORATION

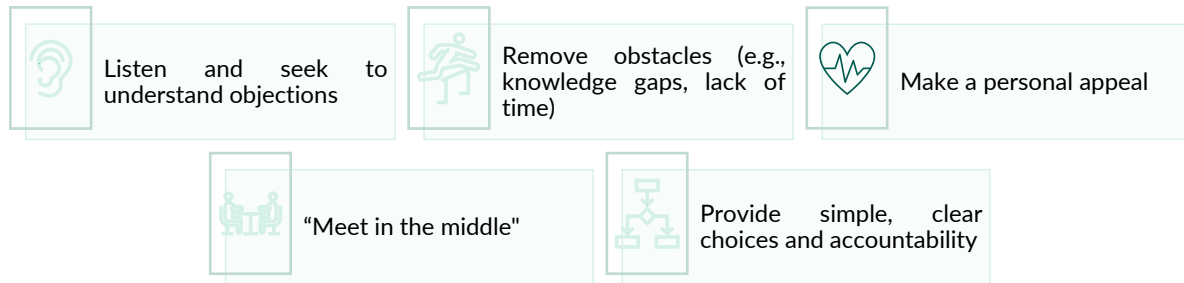
Nimble leaders can effectively collaborate within and outside of their organization, and they recognize that sharing leadership through a distributed leadership approach improves organizational outcomes.²⁶ By promoting collaboration, leaders work to “create a shared vision, agree on a common set of goals, and develop a common set of strategies that solve an organizational problem or that advance the achievements of the organization.”²⁷ Notably, effective collaboration requires leaders to develop collaborative structures that facilitate delegation, engagement, and shared decision-making.²⁸ Indeed, “[b]eing a leader does not mean being the only member of the organization that is able to make all decisions and that is accountable for results. It really means the ability to facilitate an effective collaborative process.”²⁹ Collaboration helps to share and distribute leadership responsibilities, which can help make organizations more responsive to turbulence. Additionally, collaboration can also promote a culture of trust and transparency.³⁰

Nimble leaders who excel at collaborating use these capabilities to empower their employees.³¹ Empowering staff requires that leaders establish and support structures and processes for team-based decision-making. Indeed, “[t]he attitude and competency of a leader in dealing with others can greatly help set the tone for collaboration and teamwork within a group or within the organization as a whole.”³² When supporting the development of staff leadership and empowerment, leaders must find a balance between offering autonomy and providing accountability.³³ Strategies for empowering staff include:³⁴

- Fostering collaboration and mutual trust by promoting shared goals;
- Sharing power and information. Providing staff with more complete information communicates trust and a sense of “we’re in this together.” By having access to information that helps them understand the big picture, people can better appreciate how their contribution fits in and how their behavior impacts other aspects of the organization;
- Creating a work climate that encourages employees to own their own job; and
- Promoting the taking of risks to bring about innovation and creativity.

Nimble leaders can also leverage collaboration and communication to gain buy-in for initiatives and during times of change. Building buy-in among the community and ensuring implementation capacity among those enacting change may reduce resistance and frustration and build confidence.³⁵ Although leaders cannot manifest a desire for change among the community, they can work to reduce resistance and emotions that create barriers to change (e.g., anxiety, confusion, and fear).³⁶ When implementing a change, leaders should prepare for resistance and a lack of readiness and engage with community members early in the change process.³⁷ Specific actions to build buy-in include those in Figure 1.5, below.

Figure 1.5: Strategies to Build Buy-In



Source: Atlas³⁸

SECTION II: NIMBLE LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

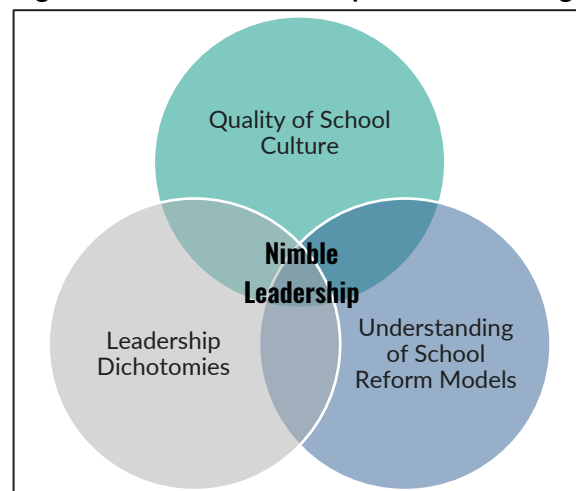
This section discusses the role of nimble leadership in education as well as the relationship between nimble leadership and school culture.

THE ROLE OF NIMBLE LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION

Nimble leadership is critical for educational leaders to successfully lead and support their districts, schools, and community members through changes. The field of education is constantly evolving across pedagogies, available resources (e.g., funding, technology), and the student expectations.³⁹ As such, school leaders are responsible for guiding their community through changes and managing changing conditions to ensure that efforts result in positive outcomes for students.⁴⁰ For example, the COVID-19 pandemic and unanticipated moves to virtual learning, staff recruitment and retention, funding, and shifting political landscapes represent challenging times and changing environments that require educational leaders to embody the nimble leadership qualities of leadership agility, communication, and collaboration.

In their chapter, “The Importance of Nimble Leadership in Rural School Settings,” Ford and Krahenbulh present a research-based framework for the relationship between nimble school leaders and achieving reform in rural schools (Figure 2.1), offering lessons on the role of nimble leadership in districts and schools. The author’s research, and the framework, found that in schools experiencing success with improvement changes, nimble leadership was characterized by an interdependence between three conditions: **the quality of school culture, an understanding of school reform models, and the execution of leadership dichotomies.**⁴² Ford and Krahenbulh emphasize that the “school leader that can embrace these three core competencies as their foundation and learn to implement them in any situation is the leader that becomes nimble enough to carry their organization through changes of any kind.”⁴³

Figure 2.1: Nimble Leadership in School Settings



Source: Ford and Krahenbulh⁴¹

In applying this framework to nimble educational leadership more broadly, an “understanding of school reform models” can be considered as a leader’s understanding of the district or school’s challenge or approach to addressing the challenge. The authors highlight that **while school leaders often do not have control over the type of change or reform model implemented at their school, they can influence the implementation and sustainability of the change.** Change is implemented through the district and school culture, showcasing the connectedness of the three components. A transparent and comprehensive implementation plan helps superintendents lead the change, establishes the implementation and sustainability features within the leader and district’s control, communicates the plan to the community to increase their understanding of the change and the district’s approach, and provides an accountability framework for accomplishing goals to support implementation sustainability.⁴⁴ School culture represents a school’s shared values, beliefs, norms, and relationships.⁴⁵ The following subsection examines the relationship between nimble leadership and school culture in greater detail. Finally, Ford and Krahenbulh posit that nimble district and school leaders must be able to find balance in the varied dichotomies required in leading schools. Sample dichotomies facing educational leaders include future-ready vs. test-prep school

cultures, distributed vs. centralized leadership, and laissez-faire management vs. micromanaging. Nimble school leaders must find middle ground between education and leadership dichotomies to create supportive learning environments. As Ford and Krahenbulh note, “[f]inding ways to understand which solutions to these challenges will serve the leader’s school culture the best will develop over time, but maintaining balance between the different extremes [is] crucial to the leader being able to maintain momentum in keeping initiatives and goals moving forward.”⁴⁶

Furthermore, the literature supports the role of adaptive leadership in education to enable educational leaders to overcome significant challenges. Adaptive leadership in education involves “adopting a mindset designed to build the resilience of individual school and district leaders to address complex organizational challenges.”⁴⁷ Within schools, leaders who demonstrate adaptive leadership ambitiously consider how to address complex challenges in ways that will improve outcomes for students and teachers.⁴⁸ While there is no single prescription for what adaptive leadership looks like in education, research suggests that the following practices support adaptive leadership capabilities (Figure 2.2). These practices emphasize the importance of openness to change, flexibility, and teamwork.

Figure 2.2: Adaptive Leadership Practices for School Leaders



Source: International Studies in Educational Administration⁴⁹

Limited research also supports a link between agile leadership and positive educational outcomes. For example, a study of nearly 200 teachers in Istanbul, Turkey found that school principals’ perceived agile leadership characteristics positively affected teachers’ attitudes toward professional development and their performance.⁵⁰

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NIMBLE LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOL CULTURE

Empirical research supports an association between agile leadership styles and organizational and school cultures. For example, a study of over 200 leaders of manufacturing organizations in Turkey found a relationship between leadership style and organizational culture, where agile leaders, directly and indirectly, created cultures characterized by higher levels of motivation, encouragement, openness to change, innovation, and employees' willingness to act as role models.⁵¹ As district and school leaders' beliefs and actions influence school culture, the specific innovative mindsets and collaborative actions of nimble leaders impact district and school cultures. Additionally, in their chapter on nimble leadership for rural schools, Ford and Krahenbulh suggest that school culture acts as a conduit through which nimble leaders create change and impact school reform efforts, as a collaborative culture is critical for leading and sustaining change. They emphasize that nimble "leaders should build relationships, find ways to celebrate wins related to the school's shared values, empower future leaders, consistently communicate, and embrace transparency" in order to create a culture that supports school improvement.⁵²

Collaboration and communication, essential attributes of nimble leadership, are also critical to developing positive school cultures and climates. For school principals, specifically, effective communication influences a variety of characteristics associated with positive school cultures, such as improvement in relationships, trust, shared expectations, transparency, and staff engagement.⁵³ Nimble leaders' collaboration efforts further support a positive school culture and climate by building relationships, increasing trust, increasing knowledge-sharing, and empowering teachers.⁵⁴ Additionally, research finds that principals' collaboration can improve student achievement by including teacher collaboration and collective efficacy.⁵⁵

Furthermore, McKinsey posits a strong relationship between agile leadership and organizational culture, noting that "[t]he culture of agile organizations should grow from the creative mindsets of discovery, partnership, and abundance and their associated behaviors."⁵⁶ McKinsey developed a research-based model describing how agile leaders impact culture; the model's four processes include role modeling, fostering understanding and conviction, developing talent and skills, and building capabilities (Figure 2.3), which work to influence staff mindsets and behaviors to create change. Notably, this framework requires leaders to have developed agility before expecting that the staff can change their mindsets and behaviors accordingly.⁵⁷

Figure 2.3: How Agile Leaders Influence Employees' Mindsets and Behaviors to Create Change



Source: McKinsey and Company⁵⁸

APPENDIX

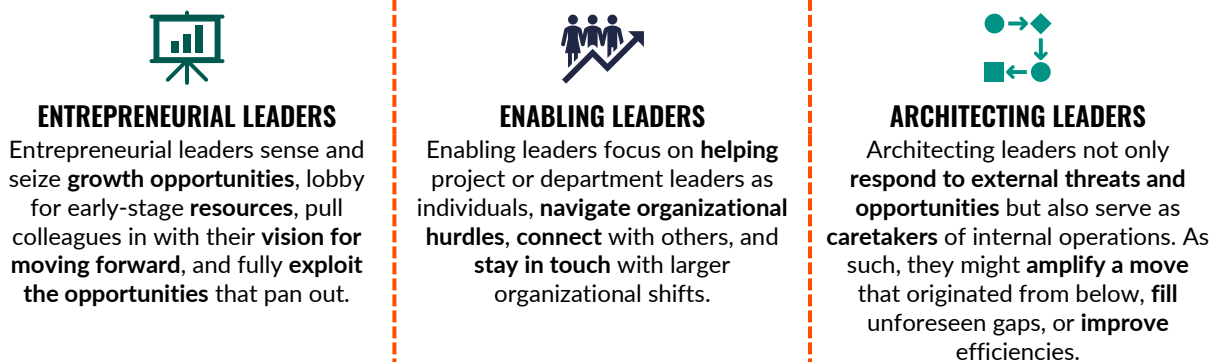
Below, Hanover describes two established leadership frameworks that contributed to our definition of nimble leadership: agile organizational theory and adaptive leadership theory.

LEADERSHIP STYLES IN AGILE ORGANIZATIONS

Agile organizations offer a framework for how leaders can establish organizational structures and processes that promote flexibility in the face of change, a critical skill for nimble leaders. An agile organization is “a network of teams within a people-centered culture that operates in rapid learning and fast decision cycles.”⁵⁹ Agile organizations combine dynamic adaptability with the stability necessary to maintain lasting impact by centering around a shared mission or purpose to unify community members.⁶⁰

Within nimble leadership emerge three types of leadership styles that have important roles within agile organizations and a distributed, team-based leadership model: **Entrepreneurial Leaders, Enabling Leaders, and Architecting Leaders**. These three types of leaders in agile organizations —whether embodied in three different people for each respective style, one leader for all styles, or a combination—“create a system [that is] adaptive and self-reinforcing.”⁶¹ Figure A.1 describes the three types of leaders for agile organizations.

Figure A.1: Leadership Styles of Agile Organizations



Source: Harvard Business Review⁶²

OVERLAP BETWEEN ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP AND NIMBLE LEADERSHIP

Adaptive leadership offers a framework for how nimble leaders can guide their organizations through **challenging environments**. Adaptive leadership theory, while distinct from nimble leadership, contributes to an understanding of nimble leadership through its focus on navigating organizational change with and understanding of those they lead, the need to build buy-in and support, and transparent decision-making.⁶³ Below, Hanover discusses the key tenants of adaptive leadership that apply to nimble leadership.

Dr. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, who introduced the concept of adaptive leadership, define it as “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.”⁶⁴ Adaptive leadership requires the ability to distinguish between **technical challenges**, which have clear definitions and pre-identified solutions and processes, and **adaptive challenges**, which lack clear definitions or existing protocols, solutions, or experts and require changing mindsets and learning new practices.⁶⁵ Adaptive leadership “is being able, both individually and collectively, to take on the gradual but meaningful process of change. It is about diagnosing the essential from the expendable and bringing about a real challenge to the status quo.”⁶⁶ Notably, while adaptive leadership represents a body of leadership theory distinct from nimble leadership, it has qualities that overlap with nimble leadership and can contribute to the discussion and development of nimble leaders. As such, Figure A.2 presents adaptive leadership traits also characteristic of nimble leaders.

Figure A.2: Adaptive Leadership Traits

- The ability to link organizational change to the primary values, abilities, and dreams of the stakeholders involved;
- The capacity to create an environment that embraces the diversity of views and takes advantage of such collective knowledge to benefit the organization;
- The adaptive leader understands that change can be a painful process. Therefore, he or she can foresee and counteract any reluctant behavior from teammates;
- An understanding that large-scale change is a gradual process, which calls for persistence and a willingness to bear the pressure that comes along with that;
- Being proactive, looking for opportunities, and investing the necessary resources to go after them;
- Admitting when they make mistakes and changing or abandoning non-productive strategies;
- Being open to experimentation and risk-taking; and
- Liking and encouraging innovation among employees.

Source: Corporate Finance Institute⁶⁷

END NOTES

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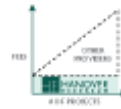
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