BECOMING A MORE NIMBLE LEADER TOOLKIT

Prepared for AASA, The School Superintendents Association

July 19, 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The School Superintendents Association (AASA) aims to support leadership development through the establishment of a resonant, resilient, and nimble leadership framework. The demands of educational leadership in 2023 call for district leaders who are *resonant*, i.e., they need to be in constant tune with their staff, community, and students; *resilient*, i.e., they need to have inner strength and health and project strength and optimism in order to meet challenges; and *nimble*, i.e., their skills, knowledge, and dispositions need to be honed to solve any problem and address any crisis – whether those challenges are educational, economic, or political. To guide superintendents in how they can become resilient, nimble, resonant leaders AASA aims to provide a series of toolkits that review these attributes and offer tools and strategies for how to develop the capacities of a resilient, nimble, resonant leader.

To support this work, AASA partnered with Hanover Research (Hanover) to develop a series of leadership toolkits. This toolkit focuses on the skills and traits of nimble leaders and is designed to support district leaders in increasing their nimble leadership skills.

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.

Audience

This toolkit is designed to support superintendents as they implement practices to become a more nimble leader.

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to support district leaders in increasing their understanding of nimble leadership and becoming a more nimble leader. Each section addresses one practice via the following content:

- Understand Nimble Leadership
- Strengthen Capacity to Lead through Change and Uncertainty

How to Navigate This Toolkit

The different sections of this toolkit (and their respective sub-sections and tools as described above) can be accessed by clicking on in the **Table of Contents** beginning on the next page. You may click on the section's, sub-section's, or tool's name or page number to be taken to the corresponding content.

A listing of endnotes cited throughout the toolkit is also accessible through the Table of Contents. You may access individual endnotes by clicking the endnote number presented. You can return to the content corresponding to each endnote by clicking the endnote number presented before the endnote information.

You can return to the Table of Contents at any time using the *Return to TOC* button at the bottom of any page in the practice sections and endnotes.

📚 Table of Contents

UNDERSTAND NIMBLE LEADERSHIP

Defining a Framework for Nimble Leadership

To establish and refine the concept of nimble leadership, Hanover synthesized related research on leadership theories conducted by leadership experts and thought leaders. The tools and opportunities for reflection found within this toolkit coalesce around central ideas, defining 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]

Nimble leadership comprises the critical skills of leadership agility, transparent communication, and collaborative leadership. The following figure further describes and defines each competency:

	Agile Leadership	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."[4]
	Open Communication	**Nimble leaders engage in strategic and transparent communication regarding major organizational changes**.[5] Effective messaging around change is targeted to specific audiences, consistent, and connected to the school's broader priorities or vision.[6] Nimble leaders similarly utilize careful listening as part of a successful communication strategy to promote collaboration, build relationships, increase understanding, and improve problem-solving.[7]
	Collaboration	**Nimble leaders collaborate to support distributed leadership teams and share leadership responsibilities, which promotes organizational flexibility and agility and increases organizational responsiveness to turbulence.**[8] Effective collaboration requires leaders to develop collaborative structures that facilitate delegation, engagement, and shared decision-making.[9]

Multiple citations cited within figure

Collaboration and communication, essential attributes of nimble leadership, contribute 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.[10] Nimble leaders' collaboration efforts further support a positive school culture and climate by building relationships, increasing trust, increasing knowledge-sharing, and empowering teachers.[11] Additionally, research finds that principals' collaboration can improve student achievement by including teacher collaboration and collective efficacy.[12]

Return to TOC

Tool Overview

The tools in this section will help district leaders deepen their understanding of nimble leadership and consider how it applies to their practice.

TOOLS FOR BUILDING NIMBLE LEADERSHIP

Tool Name	Description
Self-Reflection: Nimble Leadership	The questions presented in this guide are designed to facilitate reflection on whether your leadership style reflects nimble leadership as well as the role of nimble leadership.
Activity: Using Mindset and Behavior to Impact Change	Through this exercise, leaders can facilitate staff and community support for a change and impact mindsets and school culture regarding a change by modeling behaviors, fostering understanding and setting expectations, developing skills, reinforcing success, and removing barriers.
Self-Reflection: Learning from Past Experiences of Adversity	The questions presented in this guide are designed to facilitate reflection on times you have led through significant change or uncertainty, and how those experiences impacted your leadership at the time and overall.
Forward Planning: Strengths, Development Areas, and Goals	This activity asks you to reflect on your strengths, areas for improvement, and goals for moving forward.

Self-Reflection: Nimble Leadership

<u>Directions</u>: Use the questions presented below to reflect on the role of nimble leadership and your experiences with nimble leadership. Space is provided below each question to record notes.

What does being nimble, in general, mean to you?

> *Notes*

What does being a nimble leader mean to you?

> *Notes*

What role does nimble leadership play in being an effective leader?

> *Notes*

Does the importance of being a nimble leader change during times of uncertainty? How so?

> *Notes*

Would you describe yourself as a nimble leader? Why or why not?

> *Notes*

Source: Hanover Research

Return to TOC

Activity: Using Mindset and Behavior to Impact Change

<u>Directions</u>: District leaders can facilitate staff and community support for change and impact mindsets and school culture regarding change by modeling behaviors, fostering understanding and setting expectations, developing skills, reinforcing success, and removing barriers. [13] When trying to gather support for change, use the following worksheet to plan for actions that support staff in changing their mindsets and behaviors. Space is provided to record notes.

INFLUENCING EMPLOYEES' MINDSETS AND BEHAVIORS TO CREATE CHANGE

Role modeling	Fostering understanding and conviction
"I see my leaders, colleagues, and staff behaving differently"	"I know what is expected of me – I agree with it, and it is meaningful"

"I choose to change my mind-set and behavior if..."

Developing talent and skills	Reinforcement mechanisms
"I have the skills and opportunities to behave in the new way"	"Barriers are being removed and I'm being rewarded for making the changes I am being asked to make"

Source: McKinsey and Company [14]

Below, list or describe the ways in which you want to influence employees' mindsets, behaviors, and contributions to school culture.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What behaviors and mindset changes do you want to see? How, when, and to whom you will model them?

Return to TOC

UNDERSTAND NIMBLE LEADERSHIP

What expectations will you set for staff? How will you communicate these expectations and ensure understanding? Will staff be held accountable to the new expectations? If so, how?

What skills or knowledge do staff need to fulfill expectations, change behavior, and support the new change? How will you ensure staff have or develop these skills and knowledge?

What barriers could hinder staff from changing their mindset or behavior? How will you remove these barriers? How will you incentivize and reward success?

Source: McKinsey and Company[15] and Hanover Research

Self-Reflection: Learning from Past Experiences of Leading through Change and Uncertainty

Directions: Use the questions presented below to reflect on experiences leading through times of uncertainty or change, and how those experiences impacted your leadership at the time and overall. Space is provided below each question to record notes.

Consider an occasion during your time as a leader that required leading through uncertainty or substantial district changes (e.g., Covid-19, district mergers, school closures, specific economic or political upheavals, etc.).

Notes

How did you feel as a leader during this time?

Notes

What leadership skills were newly critical or increased in importance during this time as compared to before the change or uncertainty?

Notes

What leadership styles, actions, and skills were successful in leading your staff and community through the change or uncertainty?

Notes

UNDERSTAND NIMBLE LEADERSHIP

Which leadership styles, actions, and skills were <u>un</u>successful during this time? Why?

<table>
<tr><td>*Notes*

</td></tr>
</table>

What did you learn about yourself, your leadership style, and your strengths from this experience?

<table>
<tr><td>*Notes*

</td></tr>
</table>

Did this experience change your leadership style, in general, and in crisis situations at all? If so, how? If not, why not?

<table>
<tr><td>*Notes*

</td></tr>
</table>

Source: Hanover Research

Forward Planning: Strengths, Development Areas, and Goals

<u>Directions</u>: Consider your responses to the tools throughout this toolkit and reflect on your strengths, areas for improvement, and goals moving forward.

Thinking about the attributes of nimble leadership, what are my strengths?

What are my areas for improvement with regard to nimble leadership?

What are my goals for becoming a more nimble leader?

Source: Hanover Research

STRENGTHEN CAPACITY TO LEAD THROUGH CHANGE & UNCERTAINTY

Lead with Agility

Nimble leaders demonstrate leadership agility and can act and respond effectively and appropriately across diverse, changing, and uncertain organizational conditions.[16] 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."[17]

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 out 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 Joiner[18]

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.[19] Josephs and Joiner identify five levels of agile leadership: expert, achiever, catalyst, co-creator, and synergist, demonstrate how leaders view leadership and demonstrate agility in key conversations, leading teams, and leading organizational change (see the figure on the following page). With each level, leaders develop additional agility capabilities.[20] Organizations that face globalization and frequent change require leaders who can lead through organizational change with authority, collaboration, teamwork, distributed responsibility, and shared goals.[21]

Return to TOC

STRENGTHEN CAPACITY TO LEAD THROUGH CHANGE AND UNCERTAINTY

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 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 Academy [22]

STRENGTHEN CAPACITY TO LEAD THROUGH CHANGE AND UNCERTAINTY

Nimble leaders also demonstrate **learning agility** and are open to learning new skills and mindsets, reflecting on their practice, and growing from their mistakes.[23] 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.[24]

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.	▪ 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:
			    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.	▪ 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.	▪ 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:
			    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

	Risk Taking	Another core component of learning agility involves venturing into unknown territory and putting oneself "out there" to try new things. Learning-agile	▪ Take on a new challenge that scares you; find something that is meaningful but not so important that failure will have serious personal

ENABLER/ DERAILER		DESCRIPTION	DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES AND PERSONAL CHALLENGE
		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.	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.	▪ 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 Leadership[25]

Tool Overview

The tools in this section will help district leaders engage with agile leadership.

TOOLS FOR AGILE LEADERSHIP

Tool Name	Description
Self-Reflection: Agile Leadership	The questions presented in this guide are designed to facilitate reflection on whether your leadership style reflects agile leadership and the role of agile leadership.
Self-Reflection: Levels of Agile Leadership	The questions presented in this guide are designed to facilitate reflection on the levels of agile leadership and how you identify with this framework.
Self-Assessment: Learning Agility	This self-assessment is designed to provide insight into how your views reflect learning agility.

Self-Reflection: Agile Leadership

<u>Directions</u>: Use the questions presented in this guide to facilitate self-reflection related to agile leadership. Space is provided below each question to record notes.

What process do you use for rapid assessment of options?

Notes

What decisions and challenges do you address proactively? Which are left to be reactive?

Notes

"That is how we have always done things" is both a trap and a means of ensuring continuity and stability. How do you resolve this tension?

Notes

How do you engage your community during times of change or uncertainty?

Notes

Do you keep an open mind when a situation requires a creative solution? How so?

Notes

STRENGTHEN CAPACITY TO LEAD THROUGH CHANGE AND UNCERTAINTY

Fear of change can often prevent leaders from making shifts. What skills and techniques do you have to identify and manage such powerful emotions when considering change?

Notes

What tools and resources do you rely on to remain goal-oriented and level-headed when faced with leading through a substantial change or period of uncertainty?

Notes

How do you seek feedback from others? What options do you have for asking others for feedback on your leadership?

Notes

Source: Hanover Research

Self-Reflection: Levels of Agile Leadership

<u>Directions</u>: Review the "Levels of Agile Leadership" on page 12. Consider how these levels apply to your own practices and reflect on the prompts below. Space is provided below each question to record notes.

Considering the levels of agile leadership, how would you categorize your leadership style: Expert, Achiever, Catalyst, Co-Creator, or Synergist? Why?

Notes

Has how you categorize your leadership style according to these levels changed over time? How so?

Notes

Describe a time you showed agility when navigating pivotal conversations. With which level of agile leadership does this example align? What actions or changes could have brought it to a higher level?

Notes

Describe a time you showed agility when leading teams. With which level of agile leadership does this example align? What actions or changes could have brought it to a higher level?

Notes

STRENGTHEN CAPACITY TO LEAD THROUGH CHANGE AND UNCERTAINTY

Describe a time you showed agility when leading organizational change. With which level of agile leadership does this example align? What actions or changes could have brought it to a higher level?

> *Notes*

Create a goal for which level of agile leadership you would like to reach. What activities will help you reach this goal?

> *Notes*

Source: Hanover Research

Self-Assessment: Learning Agility

<u>Directions</u>: For each item in the self-assessment below, respond as honestly as possible. This self-assessment is designed to provide insight into how your views reflect learning agility. After scoring your agreement with each statement, total your score and consider its meaning. Next, reflect on the implications of your score for your practice.

Statement	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)
It's important that I attend to every detail.			
I accept nothing less than perfection.			
The work isn't finished until every detail has been worked out with due diligence.			
Rules are NOT meant to be broken.			
I work best when my goal and solutions are clear.			
Stability and clarity are key to a successful career.			
Flexibility leads to mistakes.			
I always try to achieve certainty so that work is done correctly.			
My decisions without full information are bad for the company.			
It's important to achieve a stable and reliable work environment.			
Total Score:			

Understanding your score:

10-20 Points	21-30 Points
Your pattern of scores indicates a predisposition toward "learning=agility," especially change and mental agility. The ability to deal with uncertainty and change, while having the capacity to tolerate a lack of details, is a hallmark of the agile approach to work.	Your pattern of scores indicates a predisposition toward diligence and dutifulness. Detail orientation and a need for certainty are hallmarks of a strong contributing employee, but they can impede promotion and are in many ways the opposite of the agile approach to work.

Source: Korn Ferry[26]

Click here to access an additional short diagnostic tool to asses your growth mindset, from MinsetWork.
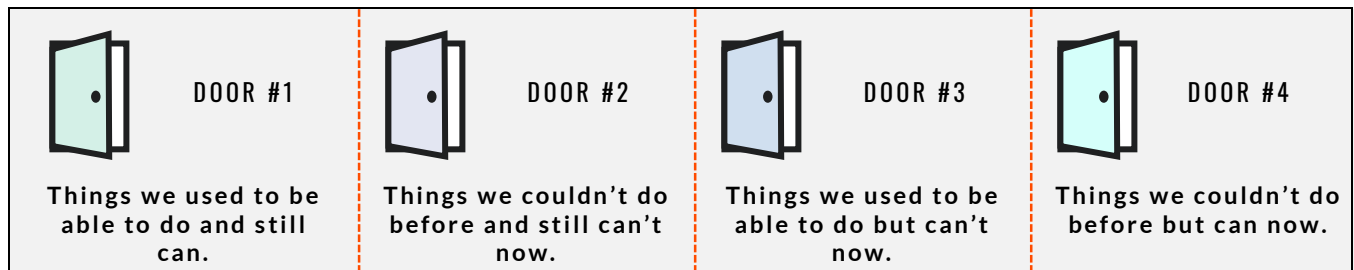
Return to TOC

Communicate Transparently

Nimble leaders are skilled communicators who clearly and deliberately communicate changes to relevant community members, as communication is essential to successfully leading through difficult times and changes.[27] Experts in the private sector recommend that leaders clearly and transparently communicate about uncertain or adverse situations and how they impact staff, particularly regarding reductions in resources or staffing level changes, to increase staff understanding.[28] Leaders should be accurate and reliable in their communication and "resist the temptation to appear secretive, inaccessible, or withdrawn."[29] Essential features of a communication strategy for leading through change include:[30]

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.

While these are effective, research-based strategies for communication, individual styles of communication may differ.[31]

Nimble leaders can also use the "4-Doors" approach to change communication, which tells 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.[32]

4-DOORS APPROACH TO CHANGE COMMUNICATION

DOOR #1	DOOR #2	DOOR #3	DOOR #4
Things we used to be able to do and still can.	Things we couldn't do before and still can't now.	Things we used to be able to do but can't now.	Things we couldn't do before but can now.

Source: RTI International Center for Education Services[33]

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 as it facilitates organizational success by promoting collaboration, building relationships, increasing accuracy, increasing understanding, improving problem-solving, and reducing conflict.[34]

Tool Overview

The tools in this section will help district leaders integrate effective communication skills and tools into their practice.

TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Tool Name	Description
Self-Reflection: Effective Communication	The questions presented in this guide are designed to facilitate reflection on whether your leadership style reflects transparent communication.
Worksheet: 4 Doors for Change Communication	This worksheet leads the author through developing a plan for effectively communicating with community members when facing a change or uncertainty.
Activity: Practicing Active Listening	This small group activity is designed to promote active listening skills and collaboration. In particular, participants in this activity practice asking questions, clarifying information, listening, and working to reduce misunderstandings.

☁ Self-Reflection: Effective Communication

<u>Directions</u>: Use the questions presented in this guide to facilitate self-reflection related to effective communication. Listed questions are meant to stimulate reflection on your communication style and skills required for communicating during times of change or uncertainty. Space is provided below each question to record notes.

How would you describe your communication style?

> *Notes*

Does your communication style change during times of uncertainty, change, or adversity? How so?

> *Notes*

What are features of an effective communication style? What skills are required?

> *Notes*

Do you feel your communication style is effective? Why or why not? In what situations is it most effective and least effective?

> *Notes*

STRENGTHEN CAPACITY TO LEAD THROUGH CHANGE AND UNCERTAINTY

What do you want your communication style and your office's communication approach to look like?

> *Notes*

How do you want staff and community members to feel when you communicate with them, both in general and during times of change or uncertainty?

> *Notes*

When communicating during times of change or uncertainty, what are key points or values you want staff and the community to know, regardless of the specific situation?

> *Notes*

What skills do you need to continue developing for having difficult conversations?

> *Notes*

Source: Hanover Research

Worksheet: 4 Doors for Change Communication

<u>Directions</u>: When encountering a situation that contributes to change or uncertainty for your district, staff, or community, fill out the following worksheet to engage in the 4-Doors approach to change communication. Reflecting on how the change impacts your community can help you develop a plan for effectively communicating with community members.
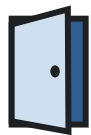
Describe the change or uncertainty: _____

_____

_____

_____

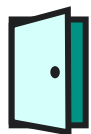**DOOR #1** — **Things we used to be able to do and still can:**
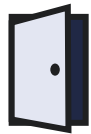
DOOR #2 — **Things we couldn't do before and still can't now:**

DOOR #3 — **Things we used to be able to do but can't now:**

DOOR #4 — **Things we couldn't do before but can now:**

Source: RTI International Center for Education Services and Hanover Research [35]

Return to TOC

◯ Activity: Practicing Active Listening

Directions: This small group activity is designed to promote active listening skills and collaboration. In particular, participants in this activity practice asking questions, clarifying information, listening, and working to reduce misunderstandings.

Educational leaders can work on this activity in pairs or as part of a group during a professional learning or networking session.

Preparation
For this game you will need the following:

- A timer

- A blank A4 sheet of paper for every participant to draw on.

- Pens for drawing.

- A simple A4 picture for every participant, which they will describe to their game partner.

    o   Create each picture using simple geometric shapes, stick figures, simple houses, flowers, etc. Put the shapes at different positions and angles. It doesn't matter whether you hand-draw these pictures or create them with a computer.

    o   Don't make the pictures too detailed. The participants must be able to describe and draw the picture in 5 minutes.

    o   In terms of uniqueness, the only rule is that Participants 1 and 2 in each pair must not receive the same picture. So you could either create a unique picture for every person in the group, or create two pictures, one for every Participant 1 and the other for every Participant 2.

    o   Click **here** and **here** for downloadable examples.

What To Do

1. Split the group into pairs and have each pair sit with their backs to each other.

2. Give Participant 1 a simple picture. Ensure that Participant 2 does not see it.

3. Give Participant 2 a blank sheet of paper and a pen for drawing.

4. Start a 5-minute timer.

    1. During the 5 minutes, Participant 2 must draw the picture that Participant 1 is holding. They can ask any questions they like, and Participant 1 is to describe the picture as prompted by those questions. The goal is to collaborate and help each other, not to compete.

    2. The only rule is that Participant 2 must not see the picture (or a photo of the picture). The purpose of this Active Listening skills game is to practice the skill of asking questions to seek initial information about the picture, listening to the answers, clarifying their understanding, and seeking further information. So, there is no benefit in cheating.

5. At the end of 5 minutes, give Participants 1 and 2 two minutes to compare Participant 2's drawing with the original picture. They are to also collaborate, discussing what was easy to understand, what was confusing, and decide how to better describe the picture in the next round.

6. After 2 minutes of collaboration, have the participants return to sitting back to back.

Return to TOC

7. Swap roles. Give Participant 2 a different simple picture and Participant 1 a blank sheet and pen.

8. Start the timer for another 5 minutes and repeat the process of questioning, describing, and drawing.

9. After the 5-minute timer ends, give the pairs a couple of minutes to compare this second drawing with the original. Then call everyone back together to debrief.

Follow-up Discussion

Finish the Active Listening game with a group discussion. Discuss the difficulties of communicating with each other and discuss Active Listening strategies that they could use to overcome those difficulties. Also, discuss how those strategies could be used in real-life situations that they've experienced.

Here are some possible discussion questions:

- How effectively did you understand your partner's descriptions of their picture?

- What difficulties did you encounter?

- Was your understanding of the description you received the same as your partner's understanding of the description they relayed?

    o Follow-up question: What could you have done to overcome any differences in understanding?

- How did you clarify what you were hearing?

    o Follow-up question: What kinds of clarifying questions did you ask?

- How did you increase your understanding of your partner's picture?

    o Follow-up question: What kinds of questions did you ask to seek more information?

- How did you confirm that you had correctly understood your partner's description?

    o Follow-up question: Did anyone repeat back parts of their partner's description to confirm their understanding? How effective was this technique?

    o Follow-up question: In addition to repeating back, what other techniques could you use to confirm your understanding?

- How did you utilize the 2-minute 'collaboration' pause?

    o Follow-up question: What benefits did you get from it?

    o Follow-up question: Was it easier and/or faster to convey information between each other with the second drawing? Why?

- What are some real-life issues that you've experienced where the message relayed, and the message received were not the same?

    o Follow-up question: What listening strategies could help minimize those misunderstandings?

- Any other thoughts about this Active Listening game?

Additional optional questions:

- Were you distracted by the other pairs and if so how? How did you cope with the distraction?

- How much were you influenced by the other pairs? Was their influence helpful or misleading?

Source: The GLS Project[36]

Prioritize Collaboration and Distributed Leadership
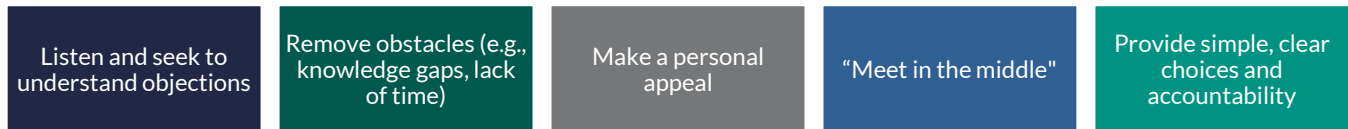
Nimble leaders collaborate to support distributed leadership teams and share leadership responsibilities, which promotes organizational flexibility and agility, increases organizational responsiveness to turbulence, and promotes a culture of trust and transparency.[37] By promoting collaboration, leaders 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 advance the achievements of the organization."[38] Effective collaboration requires leaders to develop collaborative structures that facilitate delegation, engagement, and shared decision-making, which builds ownership amongst staff.[39]

Nimble leaders who excel at collaborating use these capabilities to empower their employees.[40] Empowering staff requires that leaders establish and support structures and processes for team-based decision-making as well as find a balance between offering autonomy and providing accountability.[41] Strategies for empowering staff include:[42]

- 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 engage in consensus building and promote staff ownership for initiatives and during times of change.[43]

STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING CONSENSUS WHEN COMMUNICATING CHANGE

Listen and seek to understand objections	Remove obstacles (e.g., knowledge gaps, lack of time)	Make a personal appeal	"Meet in the middle"	Provide simple, clear choices and accountability

Source: Atlas[44]

Tool Overview

The tools in this section will help district leaders deepen their ability to collaborate and practice distributed leadership.

TOOLS FOR COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Tool Name	Description
Self-Reflection: Distributed Leadership	The questions presented in this guide are designed to facilitate reflection on whether your leadership style reflects distributed and collaborative leadership.
Activity: Norm-Setting Protocol for Consensus-Building Discussions	This tool supports individuals and leadership teams in establishing individual and group norms for consensus-building discussions.
Resource Guide: Additional Collaboration Resources	This resource provides additional tools for collaborating, empowering staff, and building consensus for decision-making.

Self-Reflection: Distributed Leadership

<u>Directions</u>: Use the questions presented in this guide to facilitate self-reflection related to collaborative and distributed leadership. Listed questions are meant to stimulate reflection on your experience delegating and engaging staff. Space is provided below each question to record notes.

What does distributed leadership mean to you?

Notes

How do you build ownership among staff?

Notes

How do you facilitate engagement and share decision-making?

Notes

What do you currently delegate?

Notes

What additional responsibilities could you delegate? What obstacles are preventing you from delegating these responsibilities?

Notes

Return to TOC

STRENGTHEN CAPACITY TO LEAD THROUGH CHANGE AND UNCERTAINTY

What responsibilities are not appropriate to delegate?

Notes

How do you empower staff to make decisions?

Notes

How are decisions currently made?

Notes

How do you communicate after a decision is made?

Notes

What happens when members of the leadership team disagree about a decision?

Notes

Source: Hanover Research

Activity: Norm-Setting Protocol for Consensus-Building Discussions

<u>Directions</u>: First, review the Guiding Questions for Norm and Expectation Setting. Then, use the prompts presented in this worksheet to develop norms for how you and your leadership team will conduct consensus—building discussions and reach consensus decisions. Space is provided below each question to record notes.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR NORM AND EXPECTATION SETTING

Area of Consideration	Guiding Questions
Scheduling and Timing	▪ When will the leadership team meet to review issues and/or situations requiring a consensus? ▪ How long will the individual meeting be? Will meeting time vary based on topic, or will it remain consistent across iterations?
Listening and Participation	▪ How can our team encourage active listening by all participants? How can our team discourage interruptions? ▪ How can we promote participation in group discussions by all members of our team? How do we ensure that all opinions and proposals are heard?
Decision-Making	▪ What is the specific process we will use to make decisions? Will decisions require a certain threshold of agreement to proceed? What does "consensus" look like for our leadership team? ▪ How do we intend to deal with and manage conflict within our team? What strategies will we deploy to resolve disagreements and to maintain focus on decision-making? ▪ Will all of our meetings be open to others? If not, how will we report on our discussions beyond our individual team?

Members of the Leadership Team

Record the names of individuals participating as members of the leadership team who will be involved in consensus-building conversations, including yourself.

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

Individual Norms and Expectations

In the space below, **record three to five norms and expectations** that you believe the leadership team should follow in order to ensure consensus-building discussions are productive and cordial (e.g., not interrupting one another, avoiding name-calling). You may reference the Guiding Questions for Norm and Expectation Setting.

Norm/Expectation 1

Norm/Expectation 2
Norm/Expectation 3
Norm/Expectation 4
Norm/Expectation 5

Group Norms and Expectations

As a group, share out each of your individually composed norms and expectations. Listen for areas of overall[and areas of difference. Discuss how you can consolidate overlapping norms and expectations and how you can mediate between norms and expectations that may be inverses of one another. During this conversation, **select 6-10 norms and expectations** that the full group agrees to commit to during consensus-building discussions and consensus decision-making. Record these items in the space provided below.

Norm/Expectation 1
Norm/Expectation 2
Norm/Expectation 3
Norm/Expectation 4
Norm/Expectation 5
Norm/Expectation 6
Norm/Expectation 7

STRENGTHEN CAPACITY TO LEAD THROUGH CHANGE AND UNCERTAINTY

Norm/Expectation 8
Norm/Expectation 9
Norm/Expectation 10

Source: Multiple[45]

Resource Guide: Additional Collaboration Resources

Directions: The following resources provide additional tools for leading with collaboration.

Resource Title	Description
Consensus Activity	This group activity is designed to help groups work together and build consensus practices.
Consensus-Building Techniques	This article defines consensus-building and offers actionable techniques to build consensus.
The Ultimate Guide to Employee Empowerment in 2023	This guide defines, discusses the benefits, and offers strategies for facilitating employee engagement.
Collaborative Teams Toolkit	This toolkit, from the New Jersey Department of Education, provides step-by-step guidance for implementing and sustaining collaborative teams.

ENDNOTES

[1] [1] Ancona, D., E. Backman, and K. Isaacs. "Nimble Leadership." *Harvard Business Review*, July 1, 2019. https://hbr.org/2019/07/nimble-leadership [2] Smet, A.D., M. Lurie, and A.S. George. "Leading Agile Transformation: The New Capabilities Leaders Need to Build 21st-Century Organizations." McKinsey & Company, October 2018. pp. 8–11. https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/business%20functions/people%20and%20organizational%20performance/our%20insights/leading%20agile%20transformation%20the%20new%20capabilities%20leaders%20need%20to%20build/leading-agile-transformation-the-new-capabilities-leaders-need-to-build-21st-century-organizations.pdf

[2] Bowen, D. "Becoming a Nimble Leader." *Healthcare Executive*, 2015.

[3] Smet, Lurie, and George, Op. cit., pp. 8–11.

[4] Attar, M. and A. Abdul-Kareem. "The Role of Agile Leadership in Organisational Agility." In *Agile Business Leadership Methods for Industry 4.0*, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020. p. 183. Accessed via EBSCOhost.

[5] [1] Edney, J. and L. Baker. "Managing Change in Education: Practical Strategies to Improve Change Outcomes in K-12." RTI International Center for Education Services. p. 15. https://educationservices.rti.org/downloads/Managing%20Change%20in%20Education.pdf [2] Johnson, E. "How to Communicate Clearly During Organizational Change." *Harvard Business Review*, 2017. https://hbr.org/2017/06/how-to-communicate-clearly-during-organizational-change [2] "6 Lessons for Leading Change in Schools." Battelle for Kids, March 8, 2016. https://www.battelleforkids.org/learning-hub/learning-hub-item/6-lessons-learned-about-leading-and-navigating-change-in-schools [2] Bendixen, S.M. et al. "Change Capable Leadership: The Real Power Propelling Successful Change." Center for Creative Leadership, 2017. pp. 11–13. https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Change-Capable-Leadership.pdf [2] Sutton, R.I. "How to Be a Good Boss in a Bad Economy." *Harvard Business Review*, June 1, 2009. https://hbr.org/2009/06/how-to-be-a-good-boss-in-a-bad-economy

[6] "Change Leadership - A Guide for School Leaders." Minnesota Department of Education, February 2019. p. 30. https://education.mn.gov/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=mde059459&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary

[7] Kolzow, D.R. *Leading from within: Building Organizational Leadership Capacity*. 2014. p. 131. https://www.iedconline.org/clientuploads/Downloads/edrp/Leading_from_Within.pdf

[8] [1] "The Factors and Qualities Needed to Boost Nimble Leadership." For-Managers, September 10, 2019. https://for-managers.com/nimble-leadership/ [2] "The Nine Principles of Agile Leadership." Agile Business. https://www.agilebusiness.org/static/2dad89f2-331e-4f12-a081cff090e7f8d1/9d0c99b5-193e-4fc3-bec3dd4367ebfa91/The-Nine-Principles-of-Agile-Leadership-Poster.pdf [3] Kolzow, Op. cit.

[9] [1] Yukl, G. and R. Mahsud. "Why Flexible and Adaptive Leadership Is Essential." *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 62:2, 2010. p. 86. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rubina-Mahsud/publication/232567495_Why_flexible_and_adaptive_leadership_is_essential/links/572e91e608aeb1c73d1297c6/Why-flexible-and-adaptive-leadership-is-essential.pdf?_sg%5B0%5D=started_experiment_milestone&origin=journalDetail [2] Dunn, R. "Adaptive Leadership: Leading Through Complexity." *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 48:1, January 2020. p. 36. Accessed via EbscoHost.

[10] Grissom, J.A., A. Egalite, and C.A. Lindsay. "How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research." The Wallace Foundation, February 2021. p. 56. https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/How-Principals-Affect-Students-and-Schools.pdf

[11] Ibid., pp. 64–66.

[12] Goddard, R. et al. "A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis of the Roles of Instructional Leadership, Teacher Collaboration, and Collective Efficacy Beliefs in Support of Student Learning." *American Journal of Education*, August 1, 2015. Accessed via EbscoHost.

[13] Smet, Lurie, and George, Op. cit., p. 20.

[14] Figure reproduced verbatim from: Ibid.

[15] Activity adapted from: Ibid.

[16] Attar and Abdul-Kareem, Op. cit., p. 183.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Figure content quoted with adaptions from: [1] Attar and Abdul-Kareem, Op. cit., pp. 185–186. [2] Originally developed by: Josephs and Joiner, Op. cit..

[19] Attar and Abdul-Kareem, Op. cit., p. 183.

[20] Josephs and Joiner, Op. cit., pp. 6–10.

[21] Ibid., p. 10.

[22] Figure contents quoted verbatim from: Joiner, B. and S. Josephs. "The Five Levels of Leadership Agility." American Management Association, 2019. https://www.amanet.org//articles/the-five-levels-of-leadership-agility/

ENDNOTES

[23] "Learning About Learning Agility." Center for Creative Leadership, October 2014. p. 2. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266852352_Learning_About_Learning_Agility/link/543d3e310cf2d69 34ebae6ba/download

[24] Ibid., pp. 3, 12.

[25] Figure contents quoted verbatim from: Ibid., pp. 3–4, 10.

[26] Tool reproduced verbatim from: Burnison, G. "The Tuna Fish Sandwich Test." Korn Ferry. https://www.kornferry.com/insights/this-week-in-leadership/burnison-learning-agility-test

[27] [1] Edney and Baker, Op. cit., p. 15. [2] Johnson, Op. cit. [2] "6 Lessons for Leading Change in Schools," Op. cit. [2] Bendixen et al., Op. cit., pp. 11–13.

[28] [1] Sutton, R.I. "How to Be a Good Boss in a Bad Economy." Harvard Business Review, June 2009. https://hbr.org/2009/06/how-to-be-a-good-boss-in-a-bad-economy [2] Allen, T. "Layoffs On The Horizon? How To Lead Through A Reduction In Force." Forbes, November 28, 2018. https://www.forbes.com/sites/terinaallen/2018/11/28/do-all-of-this-before-you-lay-me-off-how-gm-and-others-can-get-this-right/

[29] Allen, Op. cit.

[30] Bulleted text reproduced verbatim from: "Change Leadership - A Guide for School Leaders," Op. cit., p. 30.

[31] Kuria, G.N. "Literature Review: Leader Communication Styles and Work Outcomes." *International Journal of Scientific & Engineering Research*, 10:1, 2019. https://www.ijser.org/researchpaper/Literature-Review-Leader-Communication-Styles-and-Work-Outcomes.pdf [2] "Change Leadership - A Guide for School Leaders," Op. cit., p. 30.

[32] Edney and Baker, Op. cit., p. 15.

[33] Figure contents were quoted verbatim with modifications from Ibid., p. 15.

[34] Kolzow, Op. cit., p. 131.

[35] Figure contents were quoted verbatim with modifications from Edney and Baker, Op. cit., p. 15.

[36] Activity reproduced verbatim from: Ward, A. "7 Targeted Active Listening Games, Exercises and Activities for Adults." The GLS Project, July 29, 2020. https://www.goodlisteningskills.org/active-listening-games-exercises-activities/

[37] [1] "The Factors and Qualities Needed to Boost Nimble Leadership." For-Managers, September 10, 2019. https://for-managers.com/nimble-leadership/ [2] "The Nine Principles of Agile Leadership." Agile Business. https://www.agilebusiness.org/static/2dad89f2-331e-4f12-a081cff090e7f8d1/9d0c99b5-193e-4fc3-bec3dd4367ebfa91/The-Nine-Principles-of-Agile-Leadership-Poster.pdf [3] Kolzow, Op. cit.

[38] Kolzow, Op. cit., p. 264.

[39] [1] Yukl, G. and R. Mahsud. "Why Flexible and Adaptive Leadership Is Essential." *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 62:2, 2010. p. 86. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rubina-Mahsud/publication/232567495_Why_flexible_and_adaptive_leadership_is_essential/links/572e91e608aeb1c73d 1297c6/Why-flexible-and-adaptive-leadership-is-essential.pdf?_sg%5B0%5D=started_experiment_milestone&origin=journalDetail [2] Dunn, R. "Adaptive Leadership: Leading Through Complexity." *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 48:1, January 2020. p. 36. Accessed via EbscoHost.[3] Kolzow, Op. cit., pp. 26–27.

[40] "The Nine Principles of Agile Leadership," Op. cit.

[41] Kolzow, Op. cit., p. 257.

[42] Bullet points quoted verbatim from: Ibid., p. 267.

[43] [1] Kolzow, D.R. *Leading from within: Building Organizational Leadership Capacity*. 2014. pp. 26–27, 303. https://www.iedconline.org/clientuploads/Downloads/edrp/Leading_from_Within.pdf [2] Hannon, P. "How to Gain Staff Consensus in Meetings (and Why It Matters)." ASCD, January 19, 2023. https://www.ascd.org/blogs/how-to-gain-staff-consensus-in-meetings-and-why-it-matters [3] "What Is Consensus Building?" Harvard Law School, April 3, 2023. https://www.pon.harvard.edu/tag/consensus-building/

[44] Figure text reproduced nearly verbatim from: Rothstein, E., E. Worlein, and A. Murphy. "Change Management Designed for Schools." Atlas, March 2018. pp. 8–9. https://www.managebac.com/files/Change-Management-Guide-for-Schools.pdf

[45] Activity developed from: Wentworth, M. "Forming Ground Rules (Creating Norms)." School Reform Initiative, 2021. https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/download/forming-ground-rules-creating-norms/ [2] "What Teachers Need to Know About...Creating Norms." National Staff Development Council. https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2006/09/nsdc-tool.pdf [2] "Norm Setting Protocol Instructions." Data Wise, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2013. https://datawise.gse.harvard.edu/files/datawise/files/norm_setting_protocol_instructions.pdf