

Introduction

As districts continue to monitor COVID-19 and plan for the 2020-21 academic year, district leaders are beginning to prepare for school reopening. Beyond the specifics of social distancing and other logistics related to school reopening, district leaders are interested in the larger question of how organizations and corporations establish structures and systems that allow for nimble and responsive change during uncertain or rapidly-changing times.

This question comes in anticipation of the need to quickly pivot during the 2020-21 academic year as local infection rates change and schools report suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19. To support district efforts to plan for school reopening, Hanover has prepared the following research brief to summarize characteristics of organizations well-positioned to adapt to change and associated communication practices for spreading change throughout an organization. This research brief includes literature and best practices from the business and organizational management field as well as examples from education-focused organizations when possible. Additionally, the research brief highlights relevant considerations and guidance for the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

- **Coordinate small teams** of trusted faculty, staff members, and administrators throughout the district that can specialize in specific areas of change management.
- **Offer professional development to school and district administrators** targeting flexible leadership for agile organizations.
- **Prepare and regularly update a strategic communications plan** that guides the district in frequently disseminating clear, factual information on the changing environment due to COVID-19.

Key Findings

- **Like living organisms, agile organizations can quickly react and adapt to environmental changes.** Agile organizations are comprised of small, specialized teams that respond to changing needs with expertise and rapid decision-making. District and school administrators can delegate tasks to accountable teams, where only the members of those teams share responsibilities. While shared *accountability* across too many individuals may

lead to little or no action on important tasks, shared *responsibility* can prove more effective under singular accountability.

- **Leaders of agile organizations should guide, enable, and encourage their employees, rather than control, oversee, or direct.** Agile organizations require a modern type of leader that supports flexibility, harnesses employees' strengths, and trusts teams to make effective and expedient contributions and decisions. Successful agile leaders anchor their organizations to a central, foundational mission or purpose. Maintaining stability around a shared purpose allows the leader to ensure the organization is agile in structure, strategy, and process.
- **Strategic communications regarding major organizational changes should answer the following four questions to clarify and simplify messaging:**
 - What were we previously able to do that we still can do now?
 - What were we not able to do before and still cannot do now?
 - What were we previously able to do before and cannot do now?
 - What were we not able to do before, but we can do now?

In addition to touching upon each of these questions, leaders of agile organizations should personally embody and live by the new guidelines and monitor the organization's progress in adopting the new guidelines.

- **Although the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic may be unavoidable in most cases, agile organizations can prepare to address the crisis through means within their control to avoid any unnecessary, lasting repercussions.** School districts should address the changing environment from COVID-19 by communicating regularly, clearly, and often to help the community transition to this new normal. Messaging should be positive and focus on what stakeholders can do to support the changes. School districts can reinforce messaging with frequent repetition and honesty.

The Fundamentals of Organizational Agility

In the following section, Hanover presents a general overview of organizational structures and practices that maximize agility and their ability to adapt to change. Notably, Hanover consulted several resources that offer strategies for organizations such as businesses and corporations in addition to resources that offer strategies specific for school districts.

Characteristics of Agile Organizations

An agile organization is “a network of teams within a people-centered culture that operates in rapid learning and fast decision cycles.”¹ Agile organizations combine dynamic adaptability with the stability necessary to maintain lasting impact. Agile organizations maintain stability by centering around a shared mission or purpose to unify stakeholders.²

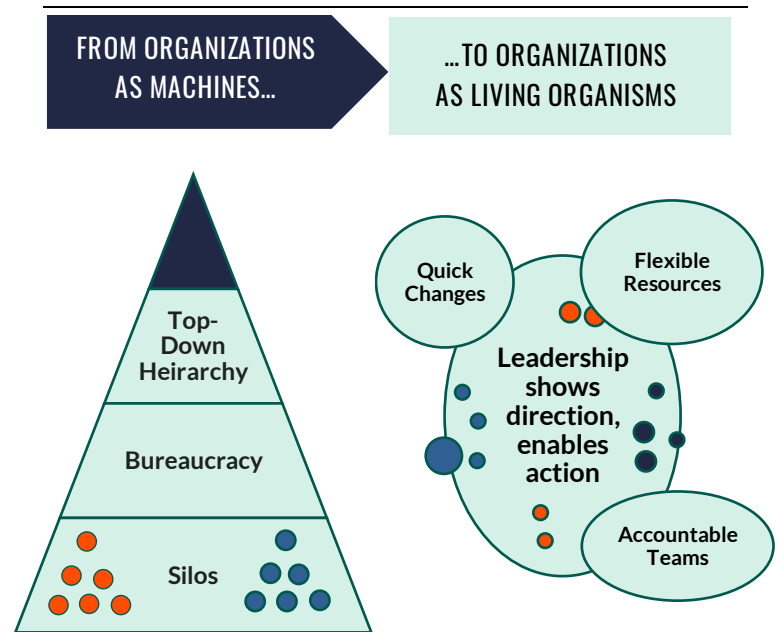
The structures, operations, and employee hierarchies are the components of agile organizations that adapt to changing environments.³ Organizations aiming to become more agile can preserve their original core missions or purposes while evolving organizational structures to fit changing needs.⁴ There are five adaptive components that embody agile organizations, as described in the following figure.

STRATEGY	
North Star embodied across the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared purpose and vision Sensing and seizing opportunities Flexible resource allocation Actionable strategic guidance
STRUCTURE	
Network of empowered teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear flat structure Clear accountable roles Hands-on governance Robust communities of practice Active partnerships and ecosystem Open physical and virtual environment
PROCESS	
Rapid decision and learning cycles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rapid iteration and experimentation Standardized ways of working Performance orientation Information transparency Continuous learning Action-oriented decision-making
PEOPLE	
Dynamic people model that ignites passion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cohesive community Shared and servant leadership Role mobility
TECHNOLOGY	
Next-generation enabling technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evolving technology architecture, systems, and tools Next-generation technology delivery practices

Source: McKinsey & Company⁵

When organizations maximize adaptability for organizational strategy, structure, process, people, and technology, the organization can shift from a “machine” to a

“living organism.”⁶ The following figure illustrates the difference between a traditional organizational model, where organizations function as machines, to an agile organizational model.



Source: McKinsey & Company⁷

Agile organizations can quickly react and adapt to environmental changes as living organisms. As environments change and create added pressures for organizations to adjust, “the agile organization reacts by being more than just robust; performance actually improves as more pressure is exerted.”⁸ Notably, agile organizations tend to exhibit strong organizational health and stability, which can promote lasting outcomes in performance and success.⁹

Maximizing Agility with Technology

Technology, in particular, has prompted and aided in the transition from “organizations as machines” to “organizations as living organisms.”¹⁰ Organizations can leverage technology in four distinct ways to shift from more traditional, hierarchical structures to more adaptable, agile organizations:

QUICKLY EVOLVING ENVIRONMENT	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholder demands are evolving rapidly, and they have pressing needs. Greater demands for growth, progress, improvements, which may require restructuring and adapting. Collaborators demand action to accommodate fast-changing priorities.



CONSTANT INTRODUCTION OF DISRUPTIVE TECHNOLOGY

- Established processes and structures are being replaced or disrupted through digitization, innovation, and automation.
- New products and opportunities arise that can improve systems and outcomes.



ACCELERATING DIGITIZATION AND DEMOCRATIZATION OF INFORMATION

- The increased volume, transparency, and distribution of information require organizations to rapidly engage with stakeholders and meet their communication expectations.
- Organizations should adapt to technologies that allow multidirectional communication and complex collaboration with partners and colleagues.



THE NEW WAR FOR TALENT

- As creative knowledge- and learning-based tasks become more important—and more rooted in digital environments—organizations must prioritize recruiting and retaining top talent.
- Technology-savvy employees often have more diverse origins, thoughts, composition, and experience.

Source: McKinsey & Company¹¹

Leading Agile Organizations

Agile organizations require modern leaders with flexible styles. Leaders should refocus their strategies from the traditional leadership needs of machine-like organizations to the changing needs of agile organizations, as listed in the following figure.¹²

FROM ORGANIZATIONS AS MACHINES...

- CONTROLLING
- OVERSEEING
- DIRECTING

...TO ORGANIZATIONS AS LIVING ORGANISMS

- GUIDING
- ENCOURAGING
- ENABLING

Source: Deloitte¹³

Shifting to an agile organizational structure “requires leaders to present a compelling future and establish an authentic dissatisfaction with the status quo.”¹⁴ Leaders of agile organizations should be able to do the following:¹⁵

- Think beyond individual functions;
- Operate without command-and-control behavior;
- Create diversity;
- Stimulate collaboration;
- Coach employees; and
- Enable teams to succeed.

There are three types of leadership styles that have important places within agile organizations: **Entrepreneurial Leaders**, **Enabling Leaders**, and **Architecting Leaders**. Together, these types of leaders—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.”¹⁶ The three types of leaders for agile organizations are described in the following figure.



ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERS

Entrepreneurial leaders sense and seize **growth opportunities**, lobby for early-stage **resources**, pull colleagues in with their **vision for moving forward**, and fully **exploit the opportunities** that pan out.



ENABLING LEADERS

Enabling leaders focus on **helping** project or department leaders as individuals, **navigate organizational hurdles**, **connect** with others, and **stay in touch** with larger organizational shifts.



ARCHITECTING LEADERS

Architecting leaders not only **respond to external threats and opportunities** but also serve as **caretakers** of internal operations. As such, they might **amplify a move** that originated from below, **fill** unforeseen gaps, or **improve** efficiencies.

Source: Harvard Business Review¹⁷

Accountable teams are key components of agile organizations as organisms. Flexible leaders should prioritize team accountability strategically to maximize responsibility and effectiveness. Indeed, shared accountability across too many individuals may result in “social loafing”—a phenomenon “in which people put less effort [into] a task when they are working in a group, compared to when they are working alone.”¹⁸ Delegating tasks to specialized teams targets accountability to one team lead and responsibility only to those on the team.

While shared accountability across too many individuals may lead to little or no action on important tasks, shared **responsibility** can prove more effective under **singular accountability**. That is, there is a significant difference between those who have accountability or authority over a task and those who apply hands-on task execution. Additionally, those accountable and responsible for tasks should identify how to communicate progress or outcomes. Leaders of agile organizations should organize these roles using a RACI matrix.¹⁹

RACI stands for: Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed. In a RACI matrix, leaders list pressing tasks and relevant team members as rows, and assign team members (listed as columns) to the appropriate role for each task.²⁰

- R** Responsible for doing the work to complete the task.
- A** Accountable for the work (approves the work that R provides); final decision-making authority.
- C** Those **consulted**; two-way communication
- I** Those **informed**; one-way communication

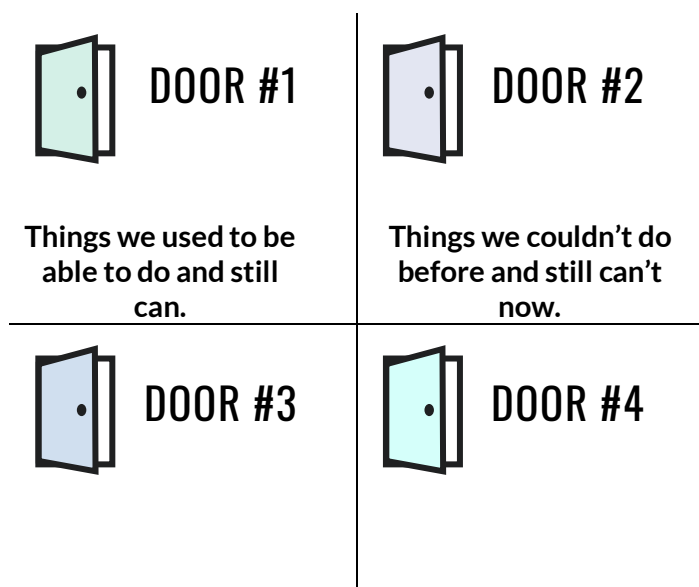
Leaders should ensure that each task only has one assigned "A." There can be multiple people assigned "R," "C," or "I." An example of a RACI matrix is illustrated below:

ACTIVITIES:	TEAM MEMBERS:			
	Anna	Kathy	Carlos	Owen
Prepare field trip itinerary.	R	A	I	C
Distribute permission slips.	I	A	R	C
Schedule bus for day-of.	C	R	A	I

Source: RTI International Center for Education Services²¹

Communicating Change

Leaders of agile organizations should always be prepared to communicate changes to relevant stakeholders. Communicating change requires leaders to be exceptionally clear and deliberate. Leaders of agile organizations can use the "4-Doors" approach to change communication to ensure full transparency and clarity.



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 Services²²

The "4-Doors" should tell stakeholders exactly how organizational changes may affect them. Leaders should unlock each door in their change communication efforts so stakeholders can access these four distinct types of important information.



Please follow [this link](#) to view a TEDx Talk from Jason Clarke on "Embracing Change." This video describes the "4-Doors" in greater detail.

Leaders of agile organizations that aim to clearly communicate changes should take their communication efforts one step further by staying mindful of three key signals to their stakeholders. First, rather than communicating or assigning the tasks required for change, leaders should explain intended outcomes. Second, leaders must personally embody the changes they expect of the entire organization and its stakeholders. Third, leaders should be able to allocate the necessary resources for change and measure relevant outcomes.²³ These three signals are described further in the following figure:



SIGNAL #1: TELL YOUR ORGANIZATION WHAT YOU WANT

Leaders too often express what they want in terms of tasks rather than outcomes, and they rarely clarify the *full extent* of the change they are expecting. Leaders should prioritize answering the following questions in order to clearly signal what they want:

- Why do we need to change, and why now?
- What is the full extent of the change we need?
- What should improve as a result of the change? How will we measure the improvement we have been targeting?
- How does this new strategy or change link to previous strategies?



SIGNAL #2: PERSONALLY LIVE THE CHANGE YOU EXPECT

"Living the change you want to see" means much more than modeling behaviors; it also means making a myriad of decisions that support the change.

If a leader does not give time to the change that they have asked for, followers will interpret this as the latest change being unimportant and will act accordingly.



SIGNAL #3: RESOURCE AND MEASURE THE CHANGE YOU EXPECT

Organizations signal importance through the ways they spend resources (capital, people, capabilities), and what they choose to measure.

This means that leaders must find the resources needed to deliver expected changes. While financial resources are important, leaders must also allocate necessary people (with the right levels of seniority, experience, and connections) to work on the change.

Source: Harvard Business Review²⁴

School District Communication







Frequent, thorough, and transparent communication efforts are required of school districts during times of change. Further, as school districts face significant organizational changes, they should prioritize communication strategies as the *foundation* for any planned change.²⁵ School and district administrators should consider the following three questions when planning change communications:²⁶

- What information can I share that stakeholders need to know?
- What information can I share that stakeholders want to know?
- What information might we be taking for granted internally?

School and district administrators—those who are generally accountable for district-wide changes—should serve as the point-people to deliver communications frequently and with transparency. Indeed, “the person who is accountable for the change will be viewed as the ultimate champion and should regularly author or present communication” regarding the implementation of changes and the progress toward change.²⁷ Communications regarding district-wide changes should be:²⁸

- Delivered consistently;
- Targeted to the intended audience;
- Focused on simple and repeatable points;
- Appealing to emotion, such as through the use of stories; and
- Offered in clear terms that the audience can relate to and understand.

School districts can effectively communicate district-wide changes using strategic communication plans. School and district administrators should consider “how stakeholders what to hear from the district, the challenges schools face, and what messages are important to administrators” when they prepare strategic communications plans.²⁹ Strategic communications plans should have six sections that detail the information presented in the following figure:

 AUDIENCE	Who will be impacted by the changes and thus need to be aware?
 KEY MESSAGES	<p>What does each audience need to know? Keep in mind that the information may not be exactly the same for each stakeholder group.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Creating awareness of the change ▪ The risks of not changing ▪ Identifying “What’s in it for me?” for each stakeholder group ▪ Any training and development needs ▪ A means for stakeholder feedback
 DELIVERY	<p>Consider the impact of the people you choose to provide this information. Is the intended audience more likely to respond positively to communication from teachers, principals, or the superintendent?</p> <p>It’s also important to decide on the best communication tools and a timeline for imparting messages.</p>
 REINFORCEMENTS	As critical as it is to introduce the change in the correct manner, planning for its future adoption is equally important. Creating strategies for mitigating resistance at the beginning of the change effort will help ensure successful adoption.
 CELEBRATING MILESTONES	<p>Given that change can be difficult, stakeholders will feel appreciated if thanked for their efforts.</p> <p>It is also a good idea to think about recognizing individuals who served as champions throughout the change.</p>
 METRICS	A strong change management plan should include metrics for measuring the success of each component. Determine what success looks like for each school and the district overall. Monitor which metrics exhibit success or challenges for the district.

Source: Hartman Executive Advisors³⁰

Agile Organizations and COVID-19

Organizational agility has become more pertinent now that school districts work to respond to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their communities and to transition to responsible reopening. In the following section, Hanover

reviews change management strategies for agile organizations during this time of uncertainty surrounding COVID-19.

Adapting to COVID-19

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly impacted how businesses, schools, and other agencies and institutions now operate. The new restrictions and guidelines surrounding COVID-19 have posed major challenges for organizations as they adapt to necessary changes. Importantly, the “need for continuity in spite of unnerving disruption falls on the shoulders of organizational and community leaders.”³¹ Leaders of agile organizations must adapt to this changing environment constantly and seamlessly as new developments arise. Furthermore, organizations overall may need to shift into new dynamics, so that different teams can collaborate in new configurations. These shifts to adapt to COVID-19 are made possible in agile organizations when the main focus and motivation is the foundational, central mission, or organizational purpose.³²

Although the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic may have been unavoidable in most cases, agile organizations can prepare to address the crisis through means within their control to avoid any unnecessary, lasting repercussions.³³ Additionally, the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic indicates a possible resurgence of the virus, for which organizations must be prepared. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) prepared the following list of considerations for adapting to COVID-19:³⁴

- 1 Prepare for a resurgence or additional “waves” of the virus and identify mitigation measures.
- 2 Continue utilization of telework and other workforce flexibilities.
- 3 Incorporate social distancing measures, including limiting building capacities, closing common areas, and installing physical barriers.
- 4 Allow high-risk/vulnerable individuals additional flexibility or continue isolation without repercussions.
- 5 Acquire cleaning supplies, masks/face coverings, and gloves, and implement personal protective policies and measures.
- 6 Conduct health screenings to monitor employee and stakeholder wellness and prevent further infections.
- 7 Intensify cleaning, sanitizing, disinfection, and ventilation activities according to federal guidelines.

FEMA’s considerations for adapting to COVID-19 require organizations to make swift decisions and restructure their models to build the capacity required for implementing new strategies. As discussed above, agile organizations are experimenting with the living organism model made of smaller teams accountable for major projects. Some suggest

that “nimble teams built in a hurry to deal with the COVID-19 emergency made important decisions faster and better.”³⁵ Leaders of agile organizations are primarily responsible for delegating tasks, being accountable for major changes and decisions, and maintaining the organization’s focus on the central mission.

Communicating Change During COVID-19

While all organizations should prioritize clear communication strategies during times of change, the COVID-19 pandemic requires more frequent, informed, and understandable communications than most organizations are typically used to.³⁶ Communities and stakeholders need information in quick, digestible bites. Change communications during COVID-19 should be “simple, to the point, and actionable,” so stakeholders can absorb the information and feel comfortable moving forward within new restrictions.³⁷ As detailed in the following figure, communications surrounding COVID-19 should be positive and repetitive.

Keep it positive! Communicate what we CAN do, rather than what we CANNOT do.



People tend to pay more attention to positively-framed information; negative information can erode trust. Frame instructions as “dos” (best practices and benefits) rather than “don’ts” (what people should not do, or debunking myths).

Repeat, repeat, repeat.



Communicators regularly underestimate how frequently messages must be repeated and reinforced. Typically, an audience needs to hear a health-risk-related message nine to 21 times to maximize its perception of the risk. During COVID-19, repetitive communication is critical.

Source: McKinsey & Company³⁸

Agile organizations may assign COVID-19-related communications tasks to a nimble team that specializes specifically in preparing and disseminating change communications.³⁹

School District COVID-19 Communications

As districts continue to manage the changing environments in response to COVID-19, they must create communication strategies that “stay true to their vision, systems, and stakeholders, while challenging themselves to be flexible, collaborative, proactive, and transparent.”⁴⁰ As COVID-19 first took hold in the United States, school districts created communication strategies for their immediate needs, which included what announcements they needed to make to the community, where they should post announcements, and the information they needed to learn about pandemics and virus crisis procedures.⁴¹

Moving forward, as districts continue to change and adapt post-COVID-19, administrators should continue preparing communications strategies that address the constant changes required of this new normal. The National School Public Relations Association outlines 10 COVID-19-specific communications tips that K-12 public school districts should consider as they adapt and change. These 10 tips are outlined in the following figure.

COMMUNICATE EARLY AND OFTEN

- The ongoing spread of the disease and changing guidance is a developing situation that requires frequent and relevant updates. School districts should commit to providing clear, factual information while maintaining a sense of calm.

LET YOUR LOCAL PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT TAKE THE LEAD

- Closely follow the guidance of public health authorities. Share public health recommendations with school and district staff and the overall district community. Rely on expert recommendations in the face of any potential pushback.

DON'T BE OVERLY CONFIDENT WITH REASSURING MESSAGES

- It is tempting to exhibit confidence by reassuring the community of school and district safety. However, if a community member tests positive for COVID-19, the community may lose trust in the district's confidence. Remain realistic, express concern, and take the situation seriously.

BE HUMAN

- Acknowledge that public schools are in uncharted waters. Assure people that the district is doing its best with the available information. Thank the community for its patience and partnership.

BE FLEXIBLE AND ADJUST MESSAGING

- Be prepared to adjust messages and decisions based on changing information. Yesterday's message may need to be updated today. Remind the audience that the situation is evolving. Keep the dates on all posts and announcements for clarity.

ACKNOWLEDGE, APOLOGIZE, AND REPHRASE WHEN INFO IS NOT CLEAR

- COVID-19 communication is moving fast. Sometimes a message raises more questions than it answers or results in unintended consequences. If that occurs, apologize, reevaluate, and clarify.

PUT CORONAVIRUS INFORMATION FRONT AND CENTER

- Sharing accurate information during a time of heightened concern is critical. Rumors and misinformation can distract from the facts that help contain the spread of a virus. Commit to being transparent with your community about COVID-19 cases in schools.

STAY ORGANIZED

- With so many moving parts, it is critical to stay on top of what you have communicated, when you communicated, and to whom you communicated. Identify an organizational process and stick with it.

BRUSH UP ON YOUR HEALTH AND SCIENCE VOCABULARY

- While public health officials should take the lead in discussing the new coronavirus disease, school communicators must understand the lingo so they can clearly articulate messages to their communities.

LEAN ON PR PROFESSIONALS

- Ask for help, rely on colleagues, and re-share or re-use public resources as needed.

Source: National School Public Relations Association⁴²

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