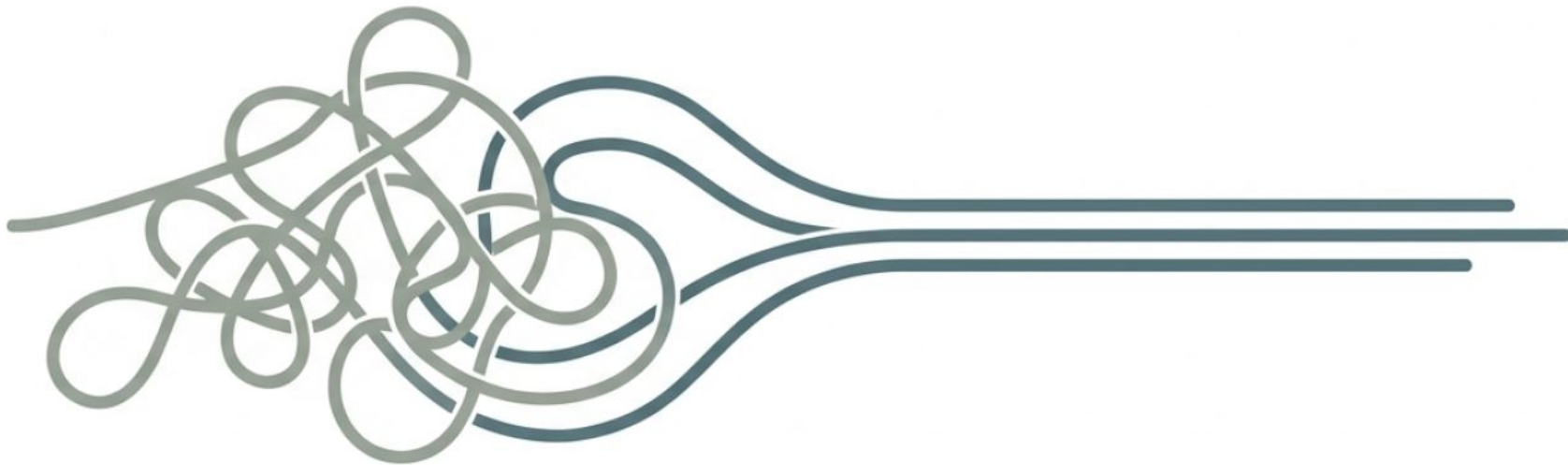


APRIL 15, 2026



Adaptability and Change Leadership:

How to Engage your Community Effectively

Quick Audience Check

Who is joining us today?

Drop in the chat:

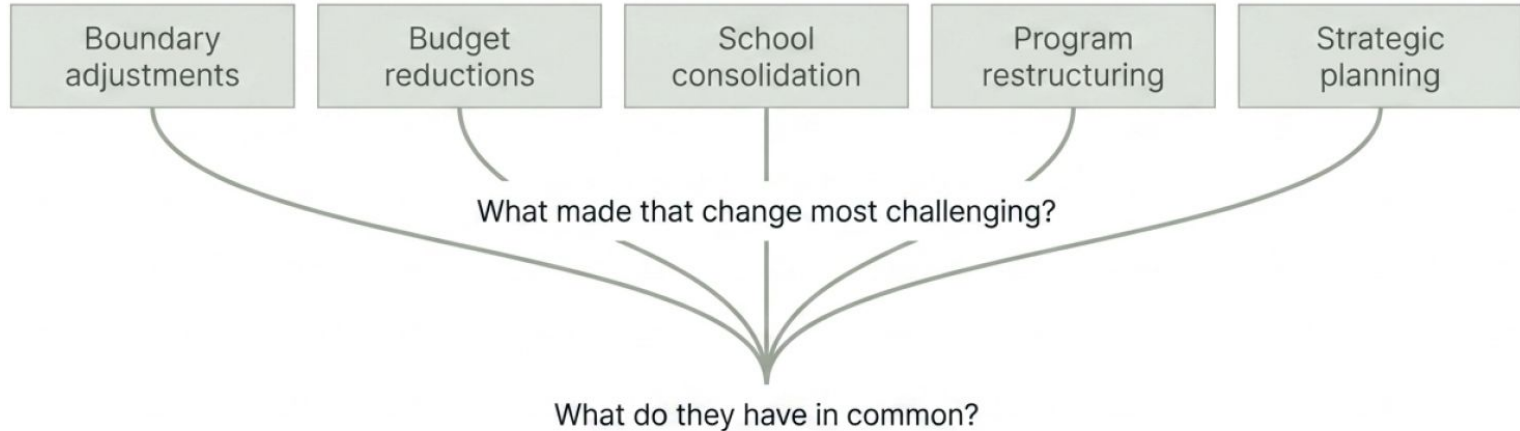
S = Superintendent

L = Leadership Team

Opening Reflection

Think about a major change your district has experienced recently

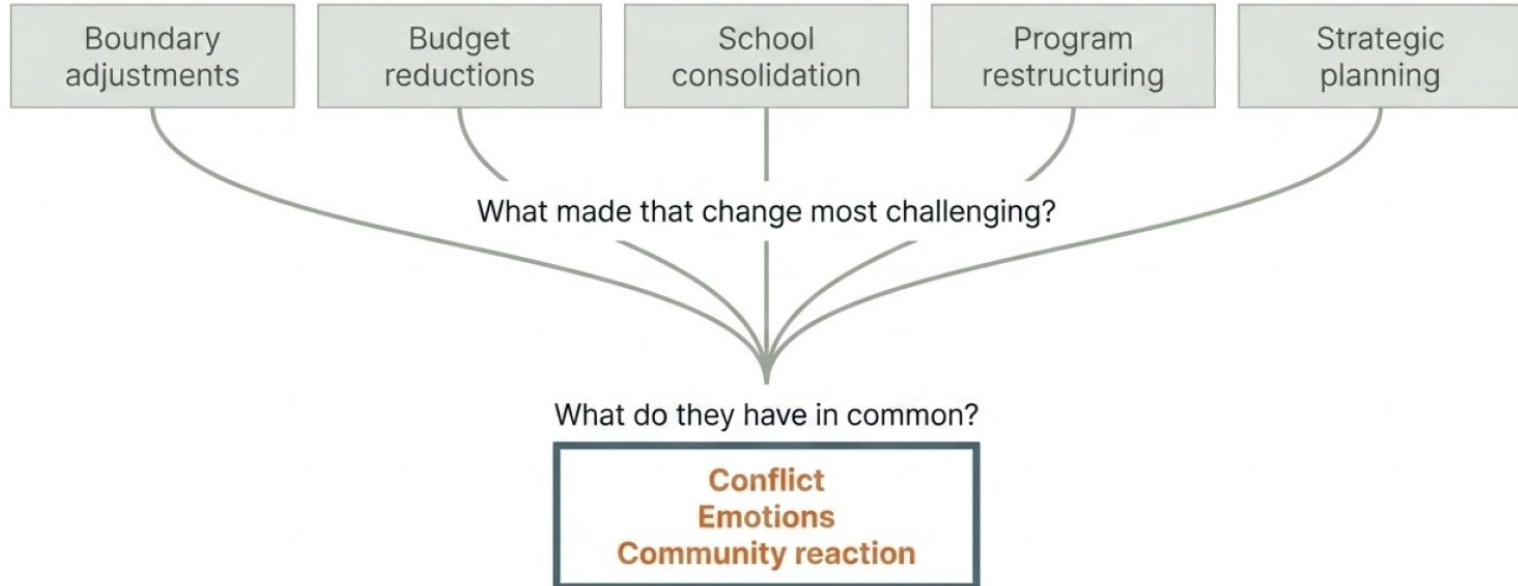
Examples:



Opening Reflection

Think about a major change your district has experienced recently

Examples:



A Moment Every Superintendent Recognizes

Closing an outlying
elementary school

Data and analysis
were solid

Community meeting
reaction

Parents, alumni, teachers
responding emotionally

A Moment Every Superintendent Recognizes

Closing an outlying
elementary school

Data and analysis
were solid

Community meeting
reaction

Parents, alumni, teachers
responding emotionally

Leading change is not
about the decision

It is about what the change
means to people

That realization led me
to a leadership capability
that matters enormously
today: **adaptability**

What We Will Explore Today:

Three Leadership Questions



**Why do
communities
resist change?**



**What does
adaptable
leadership look
like?**



**How can
leaders engage
communities
effectively?**

The Leadership Reality Today

Traditional leadership
assumed stability

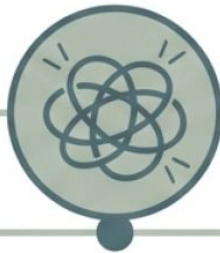
Today we operate in
constant disruption

Communities feel this
uncertainty as well

Leaders today operate in a world many describe as **BANI**



Brittle



Anxious



Nonlinear



Incomprehensible

The Leadership Skill Required

ADAPTABILITY

The capacity to adjust thinking, behavior, and strategy in response to change

Adaptability shapes how **leaders**:

interpret change

respond emotionally

guide others

Adaptability Involves Three Dimensions

Ability

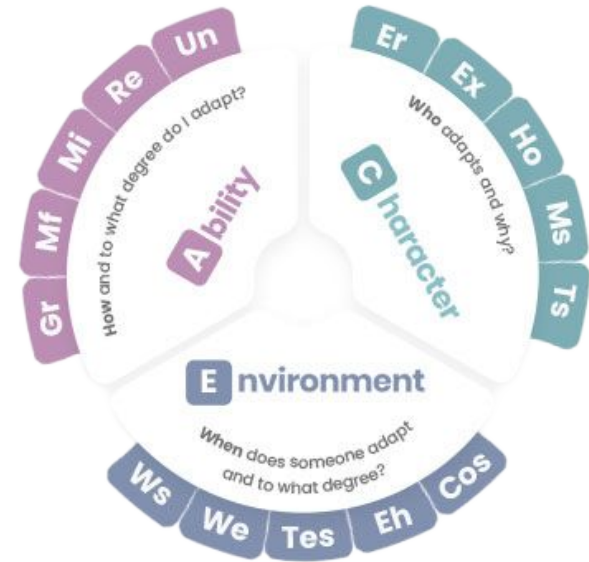
How we think about change

Character

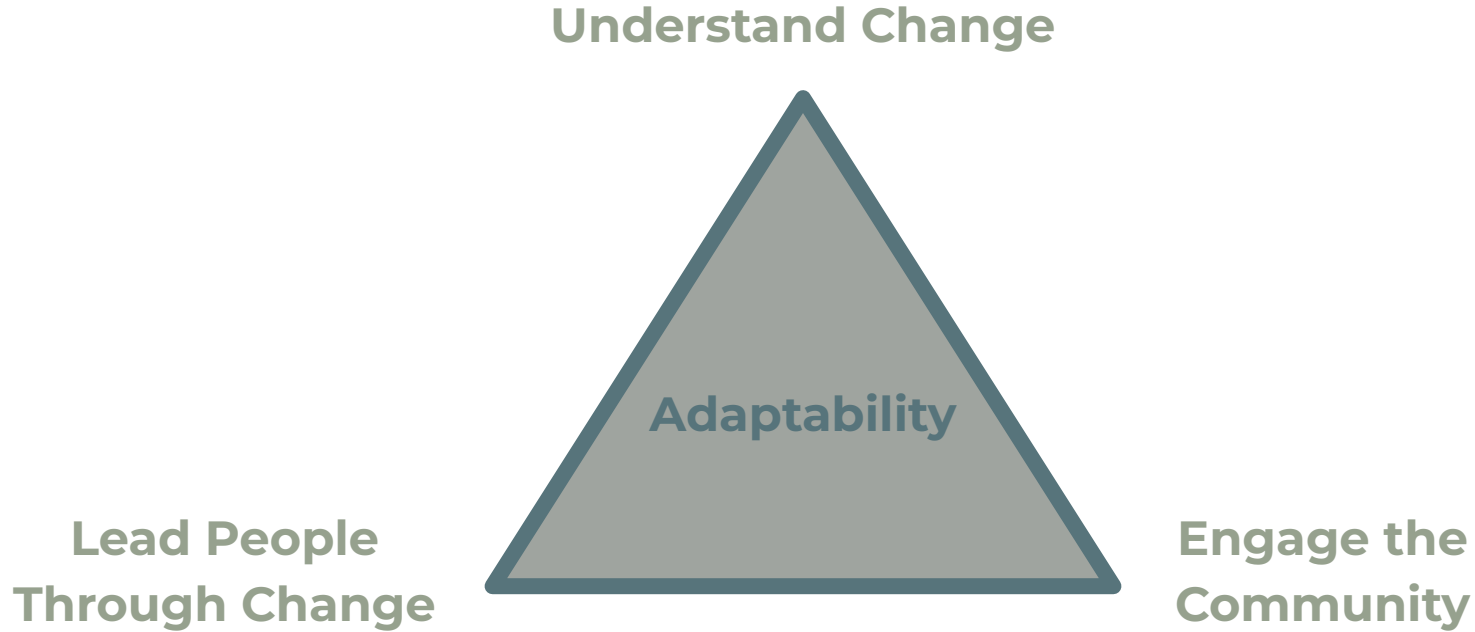
How we respond emotionally

Environment

How we shape conditions around us



The Adaptable Leadership Model



Change vs Transition

Change = External event

Leaders implement change

Examples:

school consolidation
boundary adjustment

Transition = Internal process

Communities experience change

Examples:

emotional adjustment
identity shift

Technical vs Adaptive Challenges

Technical Problems	Adaptive Challenges
Clear solutions	Require people to adjust beliefs, values, behaviors
Community change is usually adaptive work	

Engagement Poll

Which change is hardest to lead?

- ☐ Budget Reductions
- ☐ Boundary Adjustments
- ☐ School Closure
- ☐ Program Elimination

Why Communities Resist Change

Resistance usually occurs when people fear losing something important

Four common drivers:

Loss of identity	Loss of trust
Loss of voice	Loss of stability
Resistance is often emotional before it is rational	

Leadership Behavior That Builds Trust

Adaptable leaders:

- explain the “why” repeatedly
- acknowledge uncertainty
- invite perspectives early
- communicate consistently
- demonstrate humility

Leadership Poll

A major district change rumor spreads on social media

What is your first move?

- ☐ Issue a statement
- ☐ Meet with stakeholders
- ☐ Post a clarification
- ☐ Gather more information

The Human Side of Change

Community reactions often include:

uncertainty

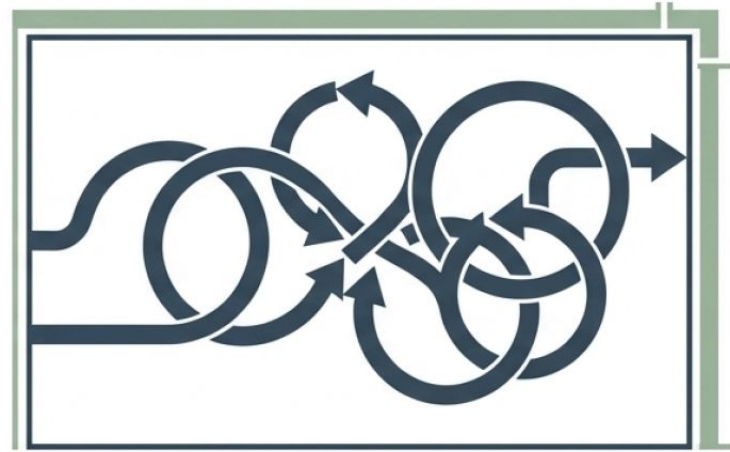
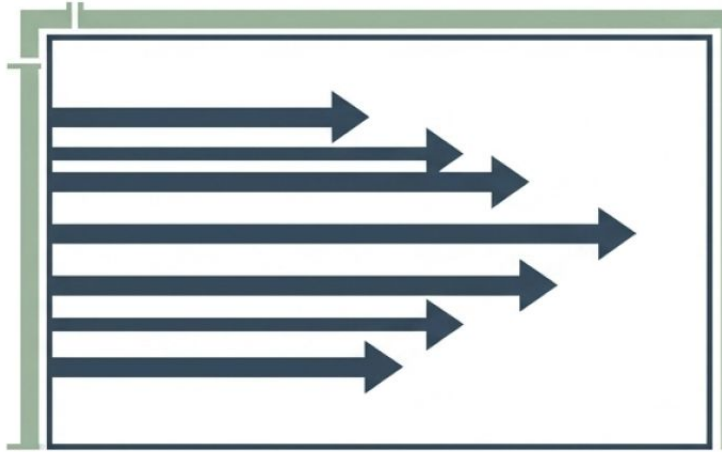
fear

frustration

misinformation

These reactions are normal

Engagement vs Communication



Communication = **telling people**

Engagement = **involving people**

Effective change leadership requires both

Engagement Framework

Effective engagement includes three phases:



Engagement Framework

Effective engagement includes three phases:



A practical engagement example

Listening Sessions

Community advisory group

Public feedback period

Transparent decision explanation

Community Perspective Poll

Imagine your district announces: *We are exploring significant boundary changes.* From a community perspective:

What is the first question people ask?

- ☐ Why?
- ☐ Was this already decided?
- ☐ Why weren't we told earlier?

Communications Systems Matter

Communities expect:

Timely updates

Clear explanations

Consistent
messaging

Accessible digital
communication

Communications Systems Matter

Communities expect:

Timely updates

Clear explanations

Consistent
messaging

Accessible digital
communication

Leadership Reality Check

Superintendents often lead change while:

trust is fragile

social media spreads
information rapidly

communities are
polarized

Adaptability helps leaders navigate this complexity

Reflection Poll

Which leadership practice could strengthen engagement in your district?

- ☐ Listening structures
- ☐ Transparency
- ☐ Proactive communication
- ☐ Stakeholder engagement

Three Responsibilities of Adaptable Leaders

1. Understand the change
2. Lead people through the change
3. Engage the community throughout the process

Three Responsibilities of Adaptable Leaders

1. Understand the change
2. Lead people through the change
3. Engage the community throughout the process

Leadership Commitment

What is **one leadership move** you could take in the **next 30 days** to strengthen community engagement during change?

Final Thought

Adaptable leaders do not fight resistance

They understand what is underneath it

Effective change leadership combines adaptability, engagement, and transparent communication

Selected Resources for Deeper Learning

Adaptability

- [AQai](#)
- [U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute](#)

Change Leadership

- [The Wallace Foundation](#)
- [The Carnegie Foundation](#)

Education Leadership

- [AASA The School Superintendents Organization](#)
- [EducationWeek](#)

Community Engagement

- [National School Public Relations Association](#)
- [Edlio](#)

[“Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail”](#) — John Kotter

[“A Survival Guide for Leaders”](#) — Heifetz & Linsky

[“The Hard Side of Change Management”](#) — Beer & Nohria

[“Strategies for Learning from Failure”](#) — Amy Edmondson

[“Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change”](#) — William Bridges



Stephen F. Murley
Managing Partner
sfm consulting group, llc
4426 Tempe Place
Iowa City, IA 52246
715-212-5107

sfmurley@gmail.com

[Schedule](#) a time to meet with me

