

Ep #18: Doing Your Best Work in the Face of Criticism



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Welcome to *The Empowered Principle Podcast*, a not so typical, educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy, by refining your most powerful tool: your mind. Here's your host, certified life coach, Angela Kelly Robeck.

Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to episode 18. Hey guys, how's it going? Can I just tell you right now, I am so in it right now. Oh gosh – so for anyone who listens to any kind of life coaching podcast or personal development podcast and thinks that that person talking always has their stuff together, I am here to tell you that I have crazy days just like you.

I am dealing with struggles and confusions and frustrations and I am in it now, in the thick of it. I'm having to self-coach big time. And I'm having some big failures and I'm experiencing negative emotion. I have to tell you, I got accepted into the Author Incubator program where we author and publish a book, which is a dream of mine. I'm thrilled to be doing this. And it's an amazing program; it's very exclusive and I'm honored to be a part of it.

But it's a nine-week program. So you hear that? I'm writing an entire book in nine weeks, not to mention planning our wedding celebration in Tahoe, writing the book, getting ready to go to Sweden. I don't even know if I've told you guys this – my husband's company is sending us to Sweden for three months. I'm serious. There are all good things going on and I'm going back to Iowa to visit my mom in May. I need to see her one more time before all the chaos of the summer begins.

So, I'm in the thick of it trying to do mindset work on my time management and I'm getting – it feels like I'm back in college where I'm writing, submitting, rewriting, getting feedback, having to turn it in, feeling negative

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emotion, feeling frustration and dealing with some, you know, critical feedback.

So, speaking of negative emotion and feedback and criticism, are you ready to talk about getting criticized? It's something that we cringe at the thought of talking about. Nobody likes criticism, but we all know it too well.

Being criticized is just something that's part of being a school leader, guys. Actually, it's part of being a human being, but we're here to talk about school leaders. So I used to get it from all the angles. The kids would come into the office and they would be in trouble, quote en quote, they would have done something that warranted a little visit to the office and the kids would be, like, "Principal Lyon is so mean. I don't want to meet Principal Lyon."

So Lyon is my former name, and I loved it as a principal; it was a great name, Principal Lyon. It was my former married name and I kept it for years after my divorce just because I wanted Alex and I to have the same last name. So anyway, Principal Lyon is so mean and you also – gosh, you guys, as a principal, you get it from all the angles.

You hear it from the teachers, you hear it from the parents, you hear it from central office, you hear it from the community, right. I used to get phone calls all the time, "The school bells are too loud and they ring too often; can you turn them off?" No, we're not turning the bells off. And I had a little gal, so sweet, one of the neighbors would call every year during the walkathon and she said, "I'm calling the police on you."

I said, "I know you are. I understand, you don't like the music." They would have this loud music playing while the kids were running around at the walkathon. And we were done at the walkathon by, I think, six o'clock at the latest, so the music went off at 6PM, but she wasn't having it from two to six, so we'd get that call all the time.

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But we do, like, educators get criticized all the time and you even hear it in your local papers or even in the national news. “Schools are failing. Teachers are assaulting kids.” Education is the target of criticism across the nation. We need to be doing more, all of these things. So being criticized, especially when it’s public criticism, is one of our most common fears as a human.

No one likes being criticized. We all try to steer around it whenever possible. And when it does cross our path, and it will, if we are not emotionally fit and mentally prepared to handle it, it can leave really deep cuts of shame and pain and guilt and it can deter us from being authentic and vulnerable. And that means, if we’re not being authentic or not being vulnerable and not being willing to receive criticism, we’re not standing up and being the most empowered leaders that we can be.

So what I want to do is break down criticism and examine its components so we can find a savvy way to – well, we’ll try to do a savvy way – of handling our emotions around when we receive criticism. So, let’s just get real neutral and think about the definition.

The definition of criticism is the act of passing judgment as to the merits of anything. That’s from the dictionary and when I read that, my brain immediately interprets this as negative because it has the word judgment in it and no one likes to be judged, right. We have this thing in my family where we say, “NJs” for no judgments. Like, when someone starts to pipe up and they’re giving a little criticism or a judgment, we’re like, “NJs.” Just a friendly reminder.

But when you see the word judgment, it immediately signals the brain and red-flags it, like I don’t want that, right. We identify being judged as receiving criticism and we do this and we assume that it will be negative because of our past, right. We have had past experiences that make us feel like the next experience is also going to be painful.

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So every time we've been criticized, we tend to make it mean that we aren't enough of something; we're not good enough, smart enough, capable enough. And when we believe and we feel that we're not enough of something, we feel bad. We just feel bad, right. So when you think about the brain, whose job is to protect us from harm, it automatically goes into defense.

And any time it senses a harsh judgment or criticism coming our way, it believes that it's going to be negative and it thinks thoughts based around this overarching thought that the criticism is true. This is important to distinguish because when we believe that the criticism has some truth in it and we feel bad, the approach that we tend to take most often is we start by reacting, right.

The brain wants to react, it wants to puff up. We put up or shield, we deflect, we want to defend ourselves, when we're angry, we want to lash back at that person or we pretend it doesn't matter, even though it hurts inside. We're like, "Whatever, I don't even care what they think." Or we do this – this is something that I do – I want to justify my decisions.

So our emotions can range. They're somewhere in the anger range, right. They're somewhere from being slightly irritated and annoyed by that criticism, all the way up to being completely outraged. And our approach to that criticism depends on the intensity of that emotional response.

You guys, listen, I understand how hard it is to hold back. I still have intense desires. I tend to just want to justify. So here's the thing, for those of you who follow me on Facebook, I told what I thought was a funny story about my reaction and I shared with you in real time all of the reiterations that my brain went through during this thing.

So the bottom line was, someone put a note on, not just my car, but on Mitch's car and told us, "Hey, not cool, you guys are taking up three spots."

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And I was like, “Wait a minute, sister...” first I reacted. I was so angry and I wrote a note and then I was like, “Wait a minute, that’s not the person I want to show up and be in the world.” So I wrote another note and then I was like, if she could just understand that no we weren’t taking three spots, that Mitch was parking out on the street late at night, that’s where his car was, then she would understand.

So anyway, my initial gut reaction was wanting to defend and justify and if only people understood my situation, which really is just a story, it’s my story, then I’m thinking they’d be like, “Okay, I get it now. You’re totally good; no worries,” and they would take back the criticism. That is not the case, people. People do not care about your story; I’m sorry to tell you.

They don’t. They care about their story. So that is how I tend to react, but we also slip into another approach and that approach is inaction. We avoid putting ourselves out into the world and we stop being willing to be authentic and vulnerable. That’s when we’re trying to hide and we’re trying to protect ourselves, because we feel bad. We are typically – that type of emotion is in the sad range.

So we’re all the way from kind of feeling sorry for ourselves – a little pity party – all the way to beating ourselves up and feeling extreme regret. So there’s a range of emotions, and again, the intensity of your emotion will determine the approach that you take.

So if you’re feeling sorry for yourself, you might have a little pity party and move on with your day. If you’re beating yourself up, you might really contemplate like whether or not your actions or what you’re doing or who you are as a person is in check – is it on point or is it not? Or all the way up to feeling extreme regret and wishing you hadn’t done it, and that’s when you recoil. You step back into your shell and you don’t put yourself out into the world.

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Unfortunately, guys, this serves no one for the better. So many times, our brain makes it mean that something is wrong with us and that we are the ones that need to change it and stop the work. What – but if you think about this for a second, we need to change ourselves as human beings or we need to stop the work that we’re putting out into the world? Think about this – if people changed or stopped creating and putting their work out into the world, we’d have no art, no music, no books, no internet, no anything; no clothing, no designs, nothing.

Think about it – if Steve Jobs had stopped creating every time he was criticized – and from what I hear, this man was not a peach to work with – I hear he was pretty rough to work with and he was pretty harsh if you gave him any criticism – but if the man had crumpled down and said, “You know what, you guys are absolutely right. I am being a jerk.” We would not be recording this podcast and listening to this podcast on our iPhones or iPads or Mac Books through iTunes. Those are all because of him – all because of his creations. None of this would be here.

So we have to put criticism in check and put it in its corner and allow it to be only what it needs to be, what it deserves to be. So guys, listen, people are going to be extremely harsh with criticism. They’re going to say painful things about you and your work and it stings. It really hurts. But in the end, all criticism is, it’s simply an opinion. And the reason that the criticism stings is when we highly value the person’s opinion who’s given us the criticism or we choose to believe that it means something is wrong with us, or it means that something is wrong with what we are doing.

Valuing someone’s opinion is okay. It’s fine if you’re taking that criticism for what it’s worth as constructive feedback. And you can adjust your approach, that’s fine, but it’s when we value their opinion to the point that we think that we are wrong or bad or incapable as humans. So in the end, if you are going to put yourself out in the world in any way, you are not going to avoid criticism; you just won’t.

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You're going to receive some kind of criticism. You guys, everyone has an opinion and especially in this era of social platforms – they're global at this point, right. Anybody in the world could listen to our work or review our art or read our book and provide anonymous criticism. And they can be as harsh as they want. There's very little, you know, recourse for being nasty to somebody.

It's easier than ever to give and to receive criticism. But remember this, you can choose what you make it mean because, you see, criticism is about the other person. It is a reflection of the person who is giving the criticism. That opinion is just a lens of their world. It's through their lens. It's coming from their own set of intentions and how they are choosing to show up in the world.

It is not about you or your work. It's how they are interpreting you and how they are interpreting your work. It's just that – it's simply an opinion and it's their viewpoint. It does not have to mean anything more than that. and what I suggest is that the opinion you should be most worried about is your own.

Take this podcast for an example. I say it every time and I mean it with the most genuineness I can. I love creating this podcast for you guys. I love reading and researching the topics. I spend so much time working on this podcast to the point my producer is all, "Let's speed it up and get on it."

I love this. I want to do my best work. I aim to provide you thought-provoking content and I want to contextualize it in a way that's easy to understand and digest because some of these concepts are like, what is going on here? And I have to say, "Stay with me people," and it takes time to really understand that we actually have control and we can manage our thinking and that our thinking is what's really causing our feelings, not circumstances.

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That's a hard concept to grasp and so I have to explain it through lots of examples, lots of detail and showing you over and over again in different sets of situations how it holds true. So I understand that some people are going to be totally into this work and others will not. That's okay. Some people are going to love what I put out into the world and some people will love how I put it out into the world.

I'm grateful for that, I'm honored by that, I treasure that. I'm so appreciative of all the support from people who love me. And we call it the tribe, right – I'm good with it. But I'm also okay with people who don't. There are going to be haters. There's going to be people, like, "You're crazy." There's going to be people who are offended by my questioning of the educational system or some of our practices. I'm not okay with the status quo. I want to challenge.

I want to challenge your thinking. I want to challenge who we are as leaders. I want to challenge the entire system. My goal is to start bringing emotional fitness, not just to school leaders but everybody who touches lives in the field of education. We are not emotionally fit, people. Look at what's going on in our systems. It's a problem. And I just want to be here to invite you to consider thinking in a different way.

If you don't like it, I'm good. If you do like it, I'm good. And you know why? Because I value my own opinion and my own criticism of my work. There are times when I call my producer and I'm like, "I don't think this was very good. It's not my best work but I need to get it out." And sometimes, B plus work is okay. B minus work is okay. Like, you know what, C work is okay.

I don't want to be average, I want to be extraordinary, but I'm also okay with that. So you have to value your work. If you love what you do and you're putting it out into the world and somebody criticizes it, okay, that's their opinion. And if you value their opinion, you can adjust if you want to, but you don't have to.

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So guys, you can care about other human beings without caring about their opinion. Like, I'd rather have some people not like my work at all than stopping creating it and wondering who I could possibly have impacted had I been brave enough to handle the critics.

So you don't need to change who you are or the work that you do. You don't have to take criticism as truth. You can make criticism mean that it's about them and it's not about you. And that, my friends, is the difference between empowerment and disenfranchisement.

Do you hear that? It's the difference between empowerment and disenfranchisement. So get out there, people, and show the world what you've got. Let the critics be critics. You get out there and be a player on that field and give it everything, because that is the true meaning of empowerment.

Alright, my friends, go get it, go be empowered, I love the work you're doing in the world and hey, guys, listen up, if you have not left a review, please do that. I'm waiting for more reviews so that I can do the drawing. I have \$100 Amazon gift cards waiting for you. I also have a weekly newsletter. It's short and sweet and to the point.

Please sign up for that. I'm actually learning how to do my own website, so I would love it if you guys could sign up for the newsletter and I will figure out how to get it all out to you. I'm working on that and it's hard. I'm sure I'll get some criticism and that's okay because I'm trying to do my best work for y'all.

So, give it a try, sign up. I will get that newsletter out. It's really short and sweet. It's just my random thoughts on education, it's what's going on in my life here at the beach, my wedding celebration, my trip to Tahoe – I give it to you all and it only comes once a week, so it's not going to crowd your inbox.

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Alright, guys, have an amazing week. I'll talk to you next week. Take care; bye.

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