

Ep #21: Compassion Vs. Condoning



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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 21. Hey, you guys, what is going on? By now, I'm sure that you are in the last weeks of school. Some of you are very close to the end by now. I want you to take some time and breathe it all in and celebrate that you are almost to the finish line. It feels so good.

I can remember that feeling; it never goes away. For as long as you are a principal, you will always be excited about the end of the year; it's just such an accomplishment. And I'm sure that the kids are getting antsy and the team and yourself are getting antsy for summer. Just enjoy it. Take this time before the end to have fun with the kids. Get out of the office and spend some time with them.

Hang out with them at lunch, go out to recess, get some sun yourself. Get some fun and play with them. I used to go play basketball with the kids. Or just even sitting back and observing their joy of playing outside, getting some fresh air in the sunlight and think about some ways that you can fit a little bit of play into your personal day as well.

Alright, so today, I'm going to bring up what I consider somewhat of a heavy topic. It's a topic that many of us have a hard time thinking about because it brings up strong negative emotion for us. So I invite you to sit back, listen to what I'm saying and consider just trying on some of these ideas to see if they feel better for you in any way.

Ep #21: Compassion Vs. Condoning

If they don't, you're welcome to go back to your way of thinking. Either way is okay; I'm simply sharing these thoughts with you because for me personally, it brings me a sense of peace and calm. And that's how I want to feel when I'm working and when I'm thinking about education and schools and school leaders and all of that.

So, let's dive in. When we are frustrated in our jobs, we tend to be frustrated at other people. Have you noticed that? The things that we say we don't like about our jobs, they tend to be about other people or other people's actions. And sometimes that person is ourselves, we might get down on ourselves, but more often than not, it's really about other people.

So think about the things you say about the job, like what the superintendent or the district office is doing or the parents or the students or the teachers or maybe your instructional aides, your yard duty or whomever. But when you think about your conversations you have with friends, family and colleagues, you're typically talking about conversations or including people that you work with.

Can we agree on that? When you think back, you're having coffee with someone or you're out for cocktails or something and you're talking about work, almost always it's about other people at work, right. Okay, if we can agree on that then we can jump into where it gets a little more tricky.

So where this gets tricky for me is where we truly believe that the actions of others and whoever we're focused on at the time is the cause of our unhappiness, our frustration, our anger, our disgust, whatever we're feeling. When we believe that what that person did or said is why we're dissatisfied in some way, we tend to view them as the culprit of our negative emotions and ourselves as the casualty of that behavior.

Ep #21: Compassion Vs. Condoning

So when we believe they're responsible for wrongdoing and our approach is to decide to talk about them negatively, we are actually becoming the culprit and they are becoming the casualty. We flip it when we choose to condemn them.

Now, how can this be? I know your brain is going, "What? What is this?" Stay with me, okay. Think of it this way; I'm going to come up with an extreme example so that you can experience how your feelings will determine the approach you choose to take.

So let me share – this actually happened with me more than once on my campus, but this one person in particular. So I was walking on campus. My campus is an open campus; it's not one building that's covered. I know in the Med-West, buildings tend to be covered, like the hallways. My campus in California, very open, so there are like pods of different buildings and the walkways, hallways, are outdoors.

I'm cutting through the campus. It's in the morning before school and I witness this parent berating her child. So imagine, you're approaching, you're kind of in the distance and you're approaching and you see something going on. You're still too distant to hear what's going on, but you're observing.

And this parent is chewing her kid out in front of others to the point that other kids around are watching in disbelief. And she grabs his arm pretty ferociously and moves him around the corner – kind of notices people are watching, grabs him, takes him around the corner. But you can still see from an angle what's going on, so you stop for a second to observe from a distance what's happening.

She continues to verbally scold her son and you can see that he's crying. So you start to walk a little closer, hoping that maybe your presence will

Ep #21: Compassion Vs. Condoning

stop the parent or at least de-escalate the situation. And before she is aware that you are nearby, she hits him; full on smacks the kid.

Astounded, right, that jolts your heart and your body. Astounded you walk up, like, “Whoa, is everything okay here? What’s going on?” And the parent, of course, is surprised because they’re in the moment talking to their kid, jumps up, kind of says, “No, everything’s fine,” and walks off and the child’s left sobbing, crumples down next to the building, he’s leaning next to the building.

So you lean down with them, comfort them, console them a little bit and then walk them out to the playground next to you, keeping them close by, keeping an eye on them to make sure they’re okay. This situation happens before school. Later that day, you go on with your day and you happen to have lunch with a fellow principal.

Now, usually what our brain does is, like, “Oh my gosh, I have to tell you what happened today. I was horrified by this parent. I cannot believe the parent was treating this child this way. I am shocked. What an awful thing to do. How could she do that? It’s so mean.”

What is happening is that you start berating the parent for acting that way and you’re thinking, “Wow, especially on a campus in front of other people, like.” You talk about how awful it is and how horrified you were and how mean she was being and what kind of parent would do that to their kid, right.

So can you see this? At this point, the parent, who was the culprit and the child who was kind of the casualty of this situation, the parent becomes the casualty because you are now the culprit. With your words, you are the culprit or the villain.

Ep #21: Compassion Vs. Condoning

You are doing the very thing that you did not like about what she was doing as a parent. But what she was doing is the same thing that you end up doing to her, can you see that? So even though you're not telling her to her face, like she was with a child, about what you witnessed, you are feeling terrible about it. And your decision to discuss the situation as though she is the culprit and the problem makes you the new perpetrator.

It's a cycle. So whenever we choose to approach a situation that feels extremely negative to us by condemning another person, we are actually putting that same energy out into the world. It's like fighting hate with hate. It's like saying we don't want guns, but we're using guns. It's contradictory.

And here's the thing; that person that we're talking about and we're so angry and we're feeling so horrible about and then we're telling other people about it and then we're continuing to perseverate on this, that person doesn't actually know that we're feeling badly about it.

That person doesn't feel worse because we've condemned them to somebody else. They don't even know we're saying it about them. And even if we did directly say it to them, they may not care or feel badly because our opinion of their behavior is just that. it's an opinion, it is not a fact.

People who even kill other people do not care that most people find that approach, killing other people, unacceptable, right. People who kill other people, they're not caring what you or I think because they're not caring what we're thinking about. They're thinking about what they are thinking and feeling.

So when you condemn someone for their actions, you are the one who feels bad. They aren't feeling bad because you believe they should feel bad. They're just feeling whatever they are feeling. They're just being

Ep #21: Compassion Vs. Condoning

human beings; thinking, feeling, and acting and getting the results they're getting because of their own thinking.

So your opinion and negative emotions, as strong as they might be, they're only occurring in your mind and body and in your life. And I use this example because I see this kind of thing going on in schools all the time.

Principals are frustrated with the teachers and we talk about them. District office staff are frustrated with the principals and they talk about us. Teachers are frustrated with the district staff and talk about them or the teachers are frustrated with the kids and talk about them or the parents and the cycle goes on and on and on. I used to call it the three-ring circus.

It goes on and on and it's because we are sitting around talking about others, doing the very thing to them that we have been saying we don't agree with or we don't like. And this is where it gets uncomfortable.

So I'm going to suggest something – and I want you to hang with me here. Try it on for size. If it feels better to you – because I'm here to help you feel better. That's why I do this podcast. And I'm showing you the ways that our brain makes us feel bad and stay in negative emotion.

So, consider this option. I'll start with a question: Is it possible to, instead of choosing condemning others, we consider trying to understand where they're coming from? What if instead of talking badly about their bad behavior, we try to understand from a human being perspective of what might be causing this person to behave in this way.

What thoughts, what feelings, what prior situations have they been exposed to or experienced that have them feeling and thinking and believing that this path of harm, in some way shape or form, is their best

Ep #21: Compassion Vs. Condoning

approach, is their best choice? Could we come from a place of understanding versus condemnation?

And when we understand or we try to understand at least why someone would do something that we believe is horrible, we can start to feel a sense of compassion for them. Now, it might not be complete compassion and complete empathy, but we might be able to see, like, “I can see how this happened. I can see how they lost their cool. I can see how they got to the point of desperation.”

And when we feel compassion for them, we can choose to approach them and our own lives with less anger and less hate because when we feel compassion for someone whose behavior we disagree with, we’re not condoning the behavior. And this is what I want to highlight – compassion for a human being and the situation that they’re in does not mean we are condoning their behavior or their decision and their approach to something.

We’re simply attempting to understand the source of their actions versus condemning the outcome or the symptom of their behavior. The behavior is the symptom of the cause. Does that make sense? I wish we were talking live here. I’m trying to check for understanding here.

So because we know – think about it this way; because we know that their thoughts and feelings are creating their actions, we know that they’re having painful thoughts and painful emotions. People who inflict pain are actually in pain. People who feel judged and are being judgmental are feeling judged. People who condemn feel condemned.

But the reverse is true. It’s also true that people who choose compassion and to feel that others are being human beings and doing the best job they can in the world are coming from a place that others are being

Ep #21: Compassion Vs. Condoning

compassionate and believe that our choices, our mistakes, are coming from a place of good intention and trying to do the best we can.

So I know it seems like choosing compassion for somebody else who's done something you do not approve of, it feels like you're condoning the behavior. But the opposite is true; you're not condoning or allowing their behavior, just being neutral about it. Like, "Whatever, they do what they do, I do what I do and who cares." It's not that.

You're attempting to understand that behavior in order to understand the source of the problem so that you can approach the situation and the person from a place of wanting to solve and support the source, not just condemn the symptoms, right. So, for example, you don't like the way your boss handles herself, try to understand why she's handling herself that way. What could be the cause of this behavior in her?

If you're frustrated with the teachers, maybe they're not turning things in on time to you, instead of saying, "Oh my god, my teachers are so lazy or they're so late. They can't pull themselves together," try to seek to understand what's going on for them.

Maybe there's something you're not seeing or realizing that's going on in their life. And back to the parent that I described earlier; instead of seeing her as completely crazy as a super mean mom and assuming that she's abusing her kids, see if you can find somewhere a source of compassion in your heart for her.

Choosing to believe that people who are hurting lash out at others, you can start to feel a sense of compassion for her without condoning the mistreating of her son. So you can approach her with concern and support versus adding to her wounds.

Ep #21: Compassion Vs. Condoning

Guys, the reason I believe this approach works beautifully is that when I observe great leaders, all the great leaders in our world that I can think of, people like Mother Teresa, Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr, Anne Frank, Mandela – all of these people all had the ability to separate human beings from their behavior.

So, being human does not equate to our behaviors. So people would call out the behaviors, but not the person. So you see the difference. We are separate from our behavior. And these amazing leaders believed that compassion was the way to create real change. It's not that they condoned hurtful behavior, but instead, they chose to approach those who engaged in hurtful behaviors with love, kindness and understanding.

Now, does it seem like choosing compassion is a weak choice? Does it feel like – gosh, that's not what powerful people do. Empowered people get on their pedestal because it feels right to condemn humans and condemn their behavior and talk badly about people who are harming others.

I know that feels like the more empowered thing to do, but I disagree. I don't see that approach working. I don't believe that we create change by pointing out other people's faults. I believe that what makes us better as a human race is to approach people with compassion and kindness and understanding that we all make mistakes, we all have bad choices, we're not either a good person or a bad person.

We're all just human beings trying to get through. And our thoughts and our feelings, as intense as they are, do create those actions. And those actions are separate from the body and soul that is that human. I certainly don't see calling out people's faults working in our schools, and I certainly don't see it happening in our nation, right.

We have a lot of people calling each other out; good, bad, this, that, yay or nay for political leaders or whatever, but I don't see it creating positive

Ep #21: Compassion Vs. Condoning

lasting change. So for me, I think it's worth trying this on, seeing how it plays out and just try it on.

Okay, that's my mission for you this week. Try compassion on for a week when you have circumstances or situations that come up and see if you find yourself approaching your work and your life from a different angle. See if it feels better to you. That's really what this is about. If it feels better to you, carry on. If it doesn't, go back to the way that you were handling people that you didn't approve of. It's totally fine.

I want you to see if compassion feels better than condemnation and I also want you to observe yourself and see if compassion and condoning feel the same or if you can start to separate them out. Okay, alright, have an empowered week, my friends. I'll talk to you next week; take care, bye-bye.

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