

Ep #22: Planning with Total Focus



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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 number 22. Hello, guys, how are you doing? Hey, I have to ask you, are you there yet? Are you one of the lucky ones who is at the end of your school year or are you almost there? So I know for most of you, you're pretty close to the finish line for the school year.

My former district is in their last week of school for students. And even though I know most of you work through the month of June, closing out this year and preparing for next fall, there is that huge sense of relief that comes with saying goodbye to the kids and the families for the year. So I understand that even though you continue to work and close out the year and plan for next year, it does feel so exciting to know you've crossed that finish line.

So congratulations to you if you already have. And if you haven't, you are just days away from the end of your school year, so congratulations. So make sure you're taking time to appreciate the moments and the last weeks and really celebrate your team and yourself for showing up every single day and choosing to be there for kids. I really commend you for the work; it's such an honorable line of work that you are doing and I am so appreciative of all you're doing.

So I also want to take a moment to all of you who are listening and all of you who are taking a moment to leave a review for the podcast. It means so much to me, guys, that you're taking time to do this and letting me know how this podcast is impacting you. It fills my heart with joy. I love doing the podcast for myself, but it's even more amazing to have impact on fellow educators by helping and supporting and cheering you on and leading the

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way and helping you through those tough situations by helping you manage your mind.

So next week, I'm going to be doing our first drawing. So for one lucky listener who's taken a moment to write a review, I will be doing my first drawing for a \$100 Amazon gift card because I know y'all are spending money on your schools and in your classrooms and for your kids and your teachers out of your own money. So this is my way of paying you back and I just really appreciate you all. So be sure to get a review in by the end of this week to be entered into the drawing for next week.

And also, guys, if you can take a moment to leave a review or share this podcast if you've already left a review, please share it with your colleagues so we can spread the support to all those who may need it. This is how we do this. We help each other by sharing the knowledge, sharing the support, sharing the love, and that is one way you can help another colleague, another friend or a person that you know is interested in becoming a principal. This is how we do it; we help each other by sharing. Sharing is caring, right.

Okay, so speaking of the end of the year, we are going to talk about keeping our focus. It is very challenging to keep our focus, right. And I know at some point during the course of the year, or to be honest, during the course of a day, we feel like, at some point, we're being pulled in all directions. And I understand that gosh, even in an hour, sometimes it feels like we've tried to do three or four things, right.

So I'm not talking about the little day to day interruptions; that actually could be a full topic on its own, how you manage day to day interruptions and I'll do a future podcast on that. But today, I'm talking about the big goals, the crème de la crème, the big vision types of goals.

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I'm talking about that feeling you get deep in the pit of your stomach that leaves your brain feeling blank. You know that day when you're like sitting at your desk and you're thinking about how you're going to address everything and you sit back and you're like, "Wait a minute, what are we even doing here? What is going on? We're going in all kinds of directions; I'm not even sure what our priorities are. What did I agree to? What did we agree to? Where am I committed? Where should I put my focus?"

I know, guys, I get it. I'm talking about the big picture focus; the focus on the big goals, not those day to day ones, not the tasks that you're doing. I'm talking about the one goal that takes precedent over all other goals. So let me share with you something; a former superintendent of mine, he always used this analogy of big rocks and pebbles.

So if you take a glass jar and you fill it first with all the small pebbles, the big rocks will not fit in the jar. But if you first put in the big rocks in the jar and then you pour the small pebbles all around, the big rocks all fit in and the small pebbles will fill the cracks. So during his tenure in our district, he called our district priorities the big rocks.

And everybody knew this term, everybody knew what it meant and to this day, the members of the team who were working for the district back at that time still joke about the big rocks because it was so ingrained in our brain to prioritize the big rocks and the rest of it was just pebbles. So for every leadership team meeting, for every site plan that we did, for every district-wide development learning day that was devoted to the three big rocks, everything focused and centered around these big rocks.

And there were pebbles along the way, but the big rocks were the focus. And because they were such a focus, it helped keep these goals – these big rocks – in the forefront of our minds and it allowed us to be able to say no to all the little things that didn't align with the big goals.

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So for example, I'm sure you've had this experience as a leader; you have a vendor who comes in and wants to sell you a product or sell you an after-school program. They want you to jump on board with their product or mission. If it's not aligned with one of your big rocks, you have the permission and you're allowed to say, "Thank you for your passion and interest in our school. That, unfortunately, is not one of our big rocks or one of our top priorities and focuses this year, so we're not going to be pursuing this product at this time. However, we can reach out to you in the future if that becomes one of our big rocks and one of our priorities."

So having a clear understanding of, first of all, having big goals and then knowing what they are can really help you constrain from believing that you have to participate or accept or take on everything that comes your way during a school year. Now, with that being said, not every district is led this way. You may be in a district where everything feels like it has equal priority and it really depends on the leadership.

It depends on the style, it depends on their approach, but you can't control your leader's approach. So when you meet – you know, I can remember having leaders like this. We would meet for district admin meetings and the focus would jump all over the place. One day it's math scores, the next day it's language development, the following week it's, "Oh gosh, we need more PE minutes." Or, "Oh gosh, we're having a bussing issue." Or there's complaints about homework; change your homework policies and all these things, right.

Every week there was a new big rock, a new big focus and your brain is left into mush trying to decipher it all, trying to do it all. And it basically, at least for me, my brain would lock down from all the competing priorities and it would be thinking to itself, "How can I do any of this or any one thing well if I'm suspected to focus on everything?" And that's that day you find yourself staring blankly at your laptop. You're like, "What are we doing here? What's going on?"

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So what can you do? Now, I want to remind you, even if your district expects everything to have equal importance, you have a say in how you are going to approach this job. You get to decide how you are going to think, feel, and act in your day to day operations so you can be the role model of what it is to keep focus in constrained efforts.

Your brain can only focus on one thing at a time. Multitasking is an urban legend; that's what I tell my clients. You cannot do two things at once, although it is urban legend that you can. What really happens is that your brain switches back and forth very quickly between the two tasks. So it makes it appear to your brain that it is simultaneously working on two tasks at once.

You guys, warning, do not take the bait on this. Multitasking and thinking you can do everything equally all at once with A plus effort is not true. But, when you sink into the belief that you can only do one thing at a time and you believe that and you function and focus in that way, then you can start to say to yourself, "What is the top priority for this year?" And that can lead to the questions, "What's the top priority for the month? What's the top priority for this week? What's the top priority for this day?"

So if you created goals with your constituents, those are your top priorities. Now, if you haven't done that or if that is not a practice in your school or your district, I highly recommend adding this practice of developing sight goals with all of your constituents; all of your stakeholders.

And I recommend doing it at the beginning of the year because – you can do it at the end of the year. I know some districts like to try and goal-set for the upcoming year at the end of the year so they can hit the ground running. What I have found is that your mental capacity, your teacher's mental capacity, everyone's mental capacity is about at a two out of 10. You're exhausted, you're tired, you're trying to cross the finish line and you're not necessarily focused.

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Now I remember, as a leader, I was already six months ahead in my brain. I was thinking six months ahead because that was my job; to be visionary in my planning. My teachers however, they're trying to get to June 1st. they are thinking about spring break or summer school or their vacation plans. Their energy level is kaput.

And typically, parents are about there too. Even your really high-involvement parents, they're getting burnt out from all the PTAs and social events and the end of the school year festivals and all of those things. So end of the school year, your brain is on high-gear but theirs aren't. So you can prepare to have those conversations with your stakeholders in the beginning.

So that's just a little side-tip, but I highly recommend having some type of process where you implement creating your big rocks or your top one, two, three goals at most. So either way you do it, setting that clear focus and openly communicating it to all involved. So not everybody will get to have a say or be present during this planning process, but it is imperative to communicate it to all involved and it will help you stay on track for the year.

So once you've determined this big goal or your maybe two or three goals, you can start to brainstorm the approaches and the solutions to meeting that target. So let me address something here; the big rock is like a north star. It is what guides you to the destination. So you have this big goal and it's been determined and then your brain's going to kick into the how.

So first, you have the what and the why, which is the goal, the big rock, the north star. And then your brain's going to want to know how to solve the problem, how to brainstorm all these ways of accomplishing this goal. And oftentimes, this is where we get hung up and we stall in inaction.

So we spin on the details of how to reach the goal and definitely in our conversation with others, we try to juggle everyone's opinion in and then

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we all worry about how we're going to reach it; this is where we get stalled. We try to do all of the approaches at once and we end up feeling unfocused. And I'd say about nine times out of 10, we don't hit the target.

So when we're trying to do everything and we're trying to have multiple approaches, we spread ourselves too thin and then we miss and we typically blame this or that. But on top of it, we actually don't know what did or did not work because we were trying to do all of the things at once. Your brain will say, like, "Well I think it was that. I think it was that part of the approach that didn't work." And somebody else thinks it's your part of the approach that didn't work, so you get convoluted in your analysis of what worked, what didn't and what can you do differently.

So one way to keep focused is by keeping your eye on the goal, then you choose an approach with as little mind drama and chatter as possible. Stick to that approach for a period of time. This is key.

You're going to brainstorm and you're going to need to decide and be very decisive on the approach and you need to stick with that approach for a period of time. So I highly recommend hustling and doing everything possible to make that approach work. But here's another catch; within your primary approach for the top priority goal – so you've got your big rock, you've got your primary approach – you will still have to make adjustments along the way.

No plan that I know of has ever gone exactly as planned, right. You have to be willing to shift, flex, adjust, and try some things within that decided approach. This is how I think of it; when you take a plane to Hawaii from California, there's a direct route. You could draw a line with a ruler from San Francisco to Honolulu.

So the airline, of course, it wants to take the shortest route possible because it's the most time and money efficient for everybody involved; for

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the company, for the pilots, for you as a consumer, right. You want to get there as quickly as possible and get your vacation started.

However, the planes are designed to adjust as needed to the conditions that arise during flight. So they're never 100% of the time following that one line, that one approach to Honolulu. The route takes them up and down and around and eventually they land exactly at the destination, but the route isn't ever, to my knowledge, direct – absolutely direct – right.

There's just conditions and situations that arise during flight that require the pilots, or the autopilot, to adjust and get you to the target but maybe not as exactly planned. Okay, so the same holds true for your big rocks at school. Your big rock doesn't change. You're not just going to throw out the big rock and put in a new big rock midyear, but you will have to make adjustments along the way. So don't lose your focus on the big goal because small steps change during the course. Don't let those small changes distract you from the goal itself and why you created the goal in the first place.

So my coach and I were just talking about this today; I had an intense coaching conversation. And I love my coach to death and she really challenged my mind today. I shared with her something that came up in my life that might cause me to have to adjust my approach to one of my top priority goals in my life.

So we had this really intense conversation about being committed to the goal and not letting anything distract me from achieving my goal. So I had to step away from that conversation and really ponder this and I definitely 100% completely agree with her and I highly approve of the constraint mentality where you keep your focus and your energy limited to a finite number of things.

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I also believe that if you are deeply committed to a goal and things throughout that process in reaching that goal come up in your life that distract you from the original goal, if you're seriously committed to that goal, you can reach the goal even when you have to adjust along the way.

So you're not changing the goal or you're not dismissing the goal because something came up and now you blame the situation that came up – the wind shifted north, therefore you're not going to make it to Honolulu. Too bad for the clients in the airplane, right? No. the goal stays the same, but the way you get it done might have to adjust, or you might have to 10X it and do 10 times more work than you thought, but you never took your eye off the goal.

So this happens all the time in schools, right. We set a top priority goal, we commit to an approach to achieve a goal and a situation outside of our control arises that impacts the original game plan. So here's the subtle difference; if you allow that situation, or quite honestly, any situation that comes along to distract you and you use that situation as the reason why you didn't achieve the goal then you didn't fully commit to reaching the goal.

You allowed outside circumstances to impact your willingness to achieve the goal. If, however, you do stay committed to the goal and situations arise outside of your control – and they will, I promise you – you keep your eye on the prize and you adjust, adjust, adjust but stay committed to the goal, you will get on the goal, you will hit the goal or you will get very close to the goal.

So for example, if your school goal was to decrease the number of tardies, let's say, and your approach – let's say – I don't know if you guys have this, but we had community liaisons and I would use that person's role in our school to really stay on top of kids, especially kids who are at-risk for either grades or behavior or emotional issues or, you know, at home situations that were impacting their ability to be focused and present at work. And

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tardies were one of our issues, so we wanted to decrease the number of tardies.

I used my community liaison to meet with these children who were consistently tardy. So if they had three or more tardies during the month, she would meet with them. So what happens though if your person you assign to this role has to take a medical leave or is expecting a child or is getting married and they're taking some kind of personal leave?

You're going to have to adjust your approach to meeting that goal of decreasing the number of tardies at your school. You're not just going to say, "Well we can't decrease the number now because she's on leave." So you might adjust your approach by deciding that you're going to take it on or you're going to assign it to a different person or maybe your secretary says, "You know what, I can quickly send messages to these folks in lieu of you taking time to meet with them in person."

You can adjust the approach, but the goal doesn't change. Do you see that? So you are going to make adjustments without losing sight of the goal. Goals get met not because you create them. They don't magically happen and you don't magically achieve them. And they're not met because you developed a planned approach.

Goals get met because you commit to them no matter what. You are willing to take on unforeseen situations and you adjust your approach as you see the goal ahead of you and you have the mindset that you're going to hit the target, even when outside situations arise. And this is the funny thing; even if you don't 100% hit the target, you will have kept your focus. You will be closer than you would have if you let other things distract you. And keeping that focus will help you keep a clear mind, help you hold aligned conversations around the target goal, help you make very intentional decisions about what to do and what not to do, what to take on and what not to take on. And really, overall, you'll feel a sense of being grounded in your work as a school leader.

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So, to summarize, having those big rocks go in first and then all the little things filter in after the fact is a much more efficient way to stay focused and keep focused. Keeping your eye on the prize, keeping it visually present in your mind, allowing the pebbles to fall where they may, allowing yourself to adjust, but not adjusting the big rocks; you're simply adjusting the pebbles, the approach – and that's okay.

Alright, this is what I've got for you today, my fellow educators. I want you to carry on, celebrate your successes, your failure, celebrate it all. Celebrate the hard work you've done, the commitment you've made to kids and to families and enjoy the end of your year.

If you guys have any questions, please, you can drop me a line down below in the podcast comments or reviews, you can drop it on my website. I'm highly active on my Facebook coaching page at AKellyCoaching. Let me know what's working for you. Let me know what I can help you with.

I know that these concepts take time to understand and process through and then put into motion. This stuff doesn't happen or change overnight and I'm here for you. So if you want to dive deeper, please reach out to me and let me know how I can help you. Alright, my friends, have an amazing end of the school year. I will talk to you all week. Take care, bye-bye.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *The Empowered Principle Podcast*. If you enjoyed this episode and want to learn more, please visit www.angelacoaching.com where you can sign up for weekly updates and learn more about the tools that will help you become an emotionally fit school leader.