

Ep #28: Kicking Perfectionism to the Curb



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Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 28.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal 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, hello, hello, how is your week going? Did you have an amazing 4th of July? When this podcast drops, I believe it's right after the 4th of July. So I hope that your 4th of July was filled with all of the summer festivities you love best.

We are currently in the afterglow of our wedding and are just coming down from all of the excitement and fun. And let me tell you, it was amazing. So, by this point in the summer, I'm assuming that many of you, if not all of you, are officially on your break.

Usually, you work until about the end of June, you have July off, then you're back at it. You might be working in July, but many people take this time off, which is a very good thing. And the cool thing about actually having some downtime between the school years is that your brain actually starts to relax.

It momentarily releases itself from the grip of keeping everything growing at school and it's sinking down into a more relaxed and natural state. And I'm guessing that your blood pressure has dropped and your breathing has slowed. Just take a moment now to feel how your body is feeling. Do you notice – is it different than it was during the school year? Is it calmer? Do you feel more relaxed? Are you resting better?

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All of those things are in response to that decreased stress. The body responds to the mind and the mind responds to the body. And when your mind and body are in this relaxed state, you can more easily question some deeply rooted belief systems and start to develop alternate thoughts that move you towards a more harmonious way of just living and being.

So in today's episode, I want to talk again about why we value perfectionism. I want to share with you why we value it, how it cripples us and why it serves us to kick it to the curb. I've been having conversations with clients and it's so funny how often perfectionism and wanting to be just right and do it the best way and know exactly how creeps into every aspect of our lives.

We want to be the best parent and just know all the things to say and do and do all the right things and we cringe when we say the wrong thing to our kids. We want to be the best husband or wife and we want to say and do all the right things there and be the sexy momma and we also want to have all of our personal appointments all pulled together and everything flows. And we just want to cook those perfect meals – it just creeps up in every way, and of course, it creeps up in work.

That's what we're here to talk about. But I can guarantee to you, if it's creeping up in one area of your life, it's creeping up in others. So I know that these tendencies have crept up in some area of your life at some point and it's very sneaky. It's usually in ways we're not even aware.

So let's shine some light on this cultural value of perfectionism and just see it for what it really is, okay. Number one, let's talk about why we value perfectionism. One of the reasons we value perfectionism is because we are hardwired to seek external validation as a confirmation that we are loved and that we belong.

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Love and belonging is one of our most basic human needs and it's also one of our greatest social fears; that fear of isolation is so internalized in us, probably from birth. It's how we evolved as a species and it's very understandable when you think about this from an evolution standpoint.

So back in the day, we needed to be a member of our tribe or our community in order for us to be protected, to be fed, to be cared for. And this holds true in today's society in that we thrive best when we are surrounded by loving and caring and supportive people.

However, we're taught that other people's opinion of who we are, what we do, how we look, what we say, how we engage and interact with others matters more than our own opinions of ourselves. And when we believe this, our approach to every situation in our life becomes – the goal becomes to collect as much external validation as possible to provide ourselves with evidence that we are accepted love and cared for.

So instead of believing in ourselves, believing that we are already enough, worthy enough, of love and being accepted, we are trying to find evidence to tell ourselves that we are worthy of this love and belonging. Number two, we're groomed from birth to please other people. Think about this.

It has been ingrained in our brains to gain positive feedback from the adults in our life since the day we are born. Our adults in our life, our parents, our older siblings, all of those people staring at that little tiny baby, provide us feedback constantly. And when we are young, we seek out that external validation. It's how we learn. It's how the social-self learns; I understand that.

But when we don't do something, we get that negative feedback which promotes feelings of guiltiness and shame when we don't do something they want us to do. So we spend our time trying to please them so that we

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feel good because they're feeling good and we're led to believe that it's our jobs to make other people feel good in order for us to feel good.

And what ends up happening as we grow older, we'd rather just feel the pain of working our booties off to please other people and engage in the activities we believe will make them happy so that we can feel happy, rather than tuning into what internally makes us happy so that we can avoid experiencing those feelings of guilt and shame that are associated with the thought that we've made somebody else unhappy.

Do you see that? We believe that we need to be perfect because we are trying to determine how other people perceive is and we want to connect with other people and we're trying to guess what their definition of perfection is because we believe if we're perfect we're not rejectable. Is that a word, rejectable? I don't know.

We believe that if we're perfect, we believe we are not able to be rejected. I think I just made up a new word, but you get my point. We're trying so hard to not feel rejection and isolation and we base that, our self-worth, on other people's opinions. And if you've listened to this podcast before, we have definitely talked about that idea of valuing other people's opinions and that idea of external validation and our need to seek it out.

Third, we also believe that doing things perfectly will result in goal achievement. Oh my gosh, you guys, I see this so many times. Take this for example; I'm in masterminds with fellow coaches who are building businesses. We, all the time, are sitting around asking how do we do this? How exactly do we do it? What's the best way? What's the right way? What's the fastest way? We just want to know the perfect way to do something in order to achieve our goal because we believe that if we do it right, we do it the best, we do it the fastest, we do it the most perfect way, that will be the path to goal achievement.

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And we teach our children this in school. We teach them that there is one way to accomplish a goal. There's one way to write, there's one way to read, there's one way to do math problems, there's one way to play duck, duck, goose. Or if you're from Minnesota – which I've lived in Minnesota – it's called duck, duck, grey duck. Shout out to all my Minnesotans out there.

But you get my point – we teach children that there's a right way to play, there's a right way to run, there's a right way to do all of the academic work, all of the social work. And because of the way we teach our children in school, we teach them that there is a perfect way of being, even down to our language.

I catch myself doing it still to this day, like that's perfect or I would work by a kid and say, like, perfect job. You're doing great. That's perfect. The word perfect, we give it as the highest level of positive feedback and we wire that brain to seek out that external validation. It's in our teaching repertoire. We influence the children to believe the thought that doing all the right things will get them the results that they want which really comes down to the results that we want for them.

We're not teaching them how to know what they want for themselves. We're teaching them to people-please and teacher-please by telling them this is the right way and this is not. So how does perfectionism cripple us? One, it takes away our time as we choose to work on things that we think are going to bring us that external validation.

Think about this. Think about all the times you've said yes when you've wanted to say no. For me, it was PTA events for my kid or church festivities or events or watching the neighbor's dog when you had ten other things on your plate that week or baking cookies for some fundraiser. You want to be seen as that supermom and you do it because you also believe it's the right thing to do.

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I should bake the cookies for my kid's fundraiser. I feel obligated to go to the PTA meetings because I'm spending all my time at work and I need to do this for my kid; it's the right thing to do. It's being the best mom. It's being the perfect mom.

And day after day, week after week, year after year, we're doing these things because we want other people to see how superhuman we are, right. I cannot tell you how many times I stayed up way past midnight. And you know, if I had my way, nine o'clock would be my bedtime. But I would stay up way past midnight working on a project for work or school because I wanted it to be just perfect.

And basically, when I think back to that, what I really wanted, I wanted others to ooh and ahh over my efforts. So I used to love to bake and when it was my turn to do treats, oh no, no I couldn't just pick up some snacks at the grocery store. I was doing full on baking, decorating, all the snacks, all the things. That was before Pinterest, but definitely trying to make them magazine perfect and putting out all of the platters and the linens. It wasn't just paper towels, right, it was the real deal.

But I look back and I'm like, I was crazy to do that. I would stay up for hours perfecting all of these snacks. In my mind, I was perfecting them, because I really wanted other people's attention. I wanted to people-please. And the more we need external validation from others, the more time we spend attempting to get it. And this, my friends, is that hamster wheel that is perfection.

Number two, perfection cripples us because it takes away our power. It takes away our power because we're valuing other people's opinions over our own. We disempower ourselves completely when we believe that we can only put out A-plus work to the world.

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And by the way, guys, you already know what I'm going to say; there is no such thing as A-plus work; that is totally a falsehood. But in our minds, we've created some euphoria that is perfect A-plus work. But you want to know why we do that? It's because we tell our kids. We start with students and we tell them, there's this A-plus work, this is the goal you're trying to achieve, this is the exemplar you're shooting for and we basically tell them this over and over to the point that after a few years of formal schooling, we're totally left with this belief that only A-plus will do and that's the standard and that's what we must achieve and that the only person who gets to determine whether our work is A-plus or not is another person. And usually in school, it's the adult authority figure in our life. It's our parents, teachers, mentors, right.

And there's nothing wrong with having a high set of standards, but when that standard is always coming from another person and not from our own expectation or our own set of criteria. We are basically telling ourselves that we don't matter.

When we believe that it's other people's jobs to grade us and their opinion of our work creates the value of our work, we are basically putting it out to the universe that we don't value our own efforts, so why should other people value our efforts? We're putting out a message about how we treat ourselves, and that's teaching other people how to treat us.

And I've said this many, many times before in past podcasts and I will say it again; when you are seeking external validation and you give other people the power of their opinion as having more weight than your own, you are completely giving away not just your power, but your energy, your time, your creativity, your contributions. You spend your energy chasing a finish line that is a mirage. It's not real, because other people's opinions are not facts. They're not facts of the world; they're opinions.

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So you're living in a dream world when you're chasing perfection, when you're chasing the A-plus. Perfectionism and perfection does not exist. Other people's opinions are not reality and the only way to become empowered is to value your own work and value your own opinion of your work and what it means to you.

Number three, it takes away our ability to achieve our goals. So we cripple ourselves because we want to believe that there is a right way to do something, there is a best way to do something. And I know this feels counter-intuitive because we want to know how. The brain immediately wants to know how. We have this big goal we want to accomplish personally, professionally, but we want to know exactly what – what's the first thing we ask? How, how do we do it?

And that stalls us in inaction. We're stalled in inaction because we believe that we don't know how, we don't know the best way, the right way, to reach our goals so we either do one of two things. We stall in an attempt to perfect the work because we believe it has to be just right in order to accomplish the task, or we don't do it at all because we get overwhelmed and we think, I don't know how to do it, I don't know how to do it right. I'm just not going to do it at all.

And even if we get started, we get caught up in the details. We start to edit, change, fix, we start to correct or adjust our work and we just spin in that cycle of trying to complete it, perfect it, finish it and we never get the job done.

These actions are what I call indulgent actions and they're basically excuses for not achieving our goals. We're just either spinning in I don't know how, I'm not going to get started, or I've done all this work but I have to fix it, change it, correct it, improve it. It's not good enough. The quality is not there. This is a big huge mistake.

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It tends to be that the bigger the goal, the more we tend to focus on perfecting it because it's such a big goal we want it to matter, right. And this is massive mistake land. So, how do we kick perfectionism to the curb, ladies and gentlemen? How and how should we do this? Number one, we must gain back our time. This is why we need to kick perfectionism to the curb.

We need to get back our time because here's why, if we want to live a life we love, we have to take ownership of our time. We have to say yes when we mean yes and we have to say no when we mean no. We have to limit our focus to the things we truly love to do and in the ways we love to contribute. So if you're not a baker and somebody asks you to bake cookies or cake or pie or whatever for the bakeoff and you hate to bake, why would you say yes?

You're going to be miserable doing it, you're going to waste time doing it, you are telling the universe, "Oh I'll take on things I hate to do because I want other people to feel good, but I feel terrible." That is not how we gain time. We're losing time; we want to gain that time back. So what you have to do is be aware of your visceral reaction to a question.

When you are asked to do something, you will always have that body visceral reaction. It's subtle but it's there. When you want to do something, you get asked to do something and you actually want, you will feel this burst of excitement and energy. You'll start to pay closer attention. You'll feel this vibration in your body that excites you, it ignites you, it kind of alerts you.

You get into what's going on with that conversation and you're like, yeah, sure. You can feel it. But when you don't want to do something that you've been asked to do, you will mentally, emotionally, and physically be repelled by the request. Your energy will drop, you'll sigh, your shoulders will slump, your body language will go down. You might even make a face or roll your

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eyes. If you're on the phone, you're definitely going to make a face, but even if you're in front of a person, you'll feel yourself trying to resist the temptation to make a face when you don't want to do something. You know what I'm talking about. You're consciously going to try to keep yourself from not making that face.

So in order to gain back time, you need to use your body compass to help you determine whether something is a yes or a no. and once you do know then you need to rely on your courage at that point and say no thank you, I'm not able to take this on at this time; as simple as that. And you don't even have to say that; you can just say no thank you. But feeling it in your body, deciding whether it's something you love to do, want to do in a way you want to contribute out to the world, feel it, own it and then communicate yes or no. that's all it takes to gain back that time. You will feel so empowered when you do that.

Number two, you need to step into your power. And you can do this by deciding ahead of time your expectations of yourself. I also recommend deciding ahead of time the time limit to complete any given task. So if you are given a task and you say yes to the task, I want you yourself to decide what is your criteria, your expectations, what's good enough in your eyes? And then I want you to set a time limit for completing that task.

So for example, when I write podcasts – when I started writing my podcasts, I was spending an entire day writing them, perfecting them in my mind. And I think back, I'm like, those were some of my worst podcasts because I was trying too hard. I was giving it too much time. I was putting in too much focus and energy on the little things and not just going from a state of flow.

Now what I do is I decide ahead of time, I'm going to outline this, I'm going to make my points and then I'm going to give myself a time limit. And I'll admit, even my podcast director has given me feedback on this – I've had a

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few where he's like, "Well something's missing there." Well that was because I was transitioning into taking less time and being okay with putting out B-plus work in the world.

So one thing I do for myself is I ask myself this question; what would I expect from one of my friends? How much time and energy would I expect one of my good friends to put into this designated task? Would I expect her to do it perfectly? Would I keep sending her back to the drawing board to fix this, change that, improve this? No, I'm going to treat myself in the way that I would treat my friend.

I'm going to decide what's good enough, I'm going to draw a line in the sand and then I'm going to give myself a specific timeframe to complete the task. And this is something I had to learn; I'm not going to ask for input. I'm going to practice valuing my own opinion of my work. How do I feel about the work?

Ask yourself that; how do you feel about this? Is it good enough for you? And if it's not good enough for you, why? What about that work is not good enough, really? And what's the worst-case scenario that happens if you put out B-plus work?

Notice whether you're just nitpicking or if you're allowing yourself to question something that's very fundamentally wrong. There's a difference. You don't want to put crappy work out there into the world, like you want to do a good job, so if something is fundamentally wrong then go ahead, make some changes, adjust your approach. However, if you're just nitpicking at little this or that or it's starting to creep into your head, what will people think, that's where you draw the line. You put it out there and allow yourself to do B-plus work.

Just do it because, number three, you have to allow yourself options for completing your goals. This kind of goes into number two as well, but do

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not get set on one specific approach. So many times, we believe there's this one way to do it, it's the right way, it's the best approach. That will absolutely derail your success because you could perseverate on a particular method or approach and get stuck in a rut and spin your wheels.

You need to be able to allow for adjustments and shifts in, "Wow I never saw that coming." There might be a better approach out there; you have no idea if you don't allow yourself to be open to changes and adjustments. You'll never know and you could just get stuck in never getting it done because you think this approach is the best when it's not. There might be a simpler, faster, better approach that you're not yet aware of. So open yourself up for adjustments.

Accomplishing the goal is the goal; not looking perfect while accomplishing the goal. So done is better than not. Accomplishing the goal is the goal. Do not focus on trying to do it perfectly the right way. The process doesn't have to look good, and in fact, probably the messier the better, but focus on the goal being done and be committed to the goal but not rigid about how you get there. You want to commit to achieving a goal versus locking into a certain way of achieving it. Do you see the difference?

And I cannot tell you how many times – think about this, how many times do your teachers not want to implement or try something new in their classrooms because they're so afraid of doing it wrong? One, they're afraid of your opinion. They're afraid you are going to give them feedback that is negative and tell them it's wrong. They want to do it right.

Teachers want to do right by kids. You've experienced this, I'm sure, in your classrooms or in your schools. But the same holds true for us as school leaders. I believe the majority of our stress, especially if you're a new principal, comes from wanting to do the job right, wanting to be perfect, wanting to do your best job. And we hold ourselves back because

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of these fears of rejection and judgment. But in the end, it never serves our students, it doesn't serve our staff and it doesn't serve ourselves.

This is the ultimate compelling reason why we must kick perfectionism to the curb. It's not serving. One, it's not real, two, it's not serving, three, it's causing you stress and it's actually blocking you from achieving your goals. So while you are in your relaxed state over the summer, I want you to notice – just observe yourself and notice – if you partake in any perfectionistic tendencies that aren't work-related.

Do you find yourself over-scheduling yourself or your kids to keep busy, to kind of keep that high vibe that you have during the school year? Some of us do that, right. Do you try to make up for all the lost time during the school year and say yes to everything because you don't have time to say yes to everything in the school but you're doing it out of obligation? Are you doing that? Stop it, just stop it.

Are you stressing about wearing a bathing suit? Are you being harsh on yourself and trying to be perfect? Or are you doing the flip? Are you noticing that you're completely relaxed when you're away from work? You kind of just like, messy hair, don't care and you are just letting it all hang out? Some of my clients are able to do this.

They're able to turn off those perfectionism tendencies during the summer. Quite frankly, I believe it's because they're just so exhausted from trying to keep up the perfectionism all school year. They fully let go. They don't care if they get anything done. They say no, they take care of themselves, and actually, I think it's a beautiful thing. But I notice this, when the school year ramps back up, they jump right back into wanting to do it all and wanting to do it right.

So let me ask you this in closing; what would it feel like to go back to school this fall and not feel the need to do it all perfectly and do it all right? What

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would that feel like? What if you set a baseline expectation, you gave yourself timeframes to get certain tasks at work done and what if it was just good enough and whatever got done during that timeframe was enough? How would that change the way you feel and approach about your day? How would that shift the way that you spend your time at work and what you think and believe about how busy you are and your time management?

And how would you feel at the end of the day if you actually completed all of the things you wanted to do because you were not wasting time trying to perfect them? Wouldn't that be amazing? It is possible, ladies and gentlemen, to take back your power from perfectionism.

Kick perfectionism to the curb. Give it a try. Notice, observe yourself and let go. It's such a beautiful feeling, my friends. You need to try it out. Alright, give it a try, observe yourselves, enjoy yourselves. Happy July – enjoy the rest of the month. I will talk with you all next week. Take care, bye-bye.

Hey, Empowered Principal, if you are enjoying this podcast and want to dive even deeper, check out my website at angelakellycoaching.com to schedule a free no-obligation discovery call. It is so much fun to connect with you over the phone and chat about what's going on so that I can find out how to best serve you. I am here for you. I have your back.

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