

Ep #35: Dealing with Interruptions



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 35.

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, my lovely friends. How are you doing? I am so fabulous. I wrote this while I was on my flight back to San Jose from Austin, Texas and I'm returning – for those of you who don't know – I'm returning from a stay in Austin Texas. I went to my business retreat that my coach held for our VIP mastermind business group.

And let me tell you, I love me some Austin, Texas. It had an incredible music scene, tons of great restaurants and bars, lots of outdoor activities and it just – it really just has this overall very cool vibe. It reminds me a lot of Portland, if you've ever been there.

But it's also got some amazing heat. It was hot. Oh my gosh, you guys, it was so hot. I love warm summer mornings and evenings and all that, but I have to tell you, it was blazing hot during the day and it was a little more than my Irish skin could handle. So I got a little bit of sun, my nose is burnt and we pretty much spent our days by the pool, but I had to opt out and be in the shade for most of the day after that first day in the sun.

So even with the heat, the retreat, it exceeded all of my expectations. This group of women entrepreneurs have been working together for almost a full year. We meet weekly through these Zoom conference calls. And if you're not familiar with Zoom, it's just an online group video conference call where you can see all of the participants at once, so it feels like you're physically sitting in a room together having this meeting. It's so much fun.

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And during the course of the year, everybody has shared their ups, their downs, both in their businesses and in their personal lives. And I'm pretty sure, at some point, each of us have had some painful moments to deal with. I know we've been through grief, we've been through business failures and we've been through quite a few sucker punches along the way; you know, those unexpected blows in life that bring you to your knees every now and then.

This group of women have just been there through it all and it's been really fun to share the journey with them. I believe sharing your journey with as many people as possible, it actually enhances the entire experience and it brings so much more joy and liveliness to the process.

I am honestly truly and eternally grateful I met this group and I feel so much love for them. I hope each of you out there have someone or a group of someones to share your journey with because it is so powerful to have friends along the ride.

Alright, guys, let's get to talking about something I know that you deal with at work every single day of your life and probably multiple times a day, and that is interruptions. I hate them. I'm sure you hate them. They're so annoying. Interruptions distract us and they keep us from staying in the flow of our work. That bothers me so much. I had to really self-coach on interruptions while I was a principal.

You guys, how many of you have heard this line? The line that I heard every day, multiple times a day for six years of my principalship was, "Do you have a minute?" I would say, like, "I have lots of minutes; how many of them do you want? They were one of the things I disliked most about the day, meaning the interruptions, but it wasn't until the last couple of years of school leadership that I really started directly addressing them and my thoughts about them.

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So this is going to be short and sweet, but I want you to be thinking ahead of time about how you are going to decide to think about interruptions, how you want to approach interruptions, and here's some of the tips that I learned along the way that worked for me.

So number one – you just have to plan on them occurring. They are the reality of life, the reality of life as a school leader, and I want you to just accept that they're going to happen. And when you accept that they're going to happen, you can add some buffer time into your day. So plan a little more time than you need to get projects done knowing there will be interruptions. I want you to schedule some unscheduled time in your day and just plan.

Also, this is one thing that worked really well, plan a time in your day for people to contact you so they are less likely to feel the need to interrupt you. When you have open office hours or you're sure to be available before and after school for your staff or for parents, if you do not use those times of day to try and get your work done then you can be available for them.

And one – it helps you know that you are giving yourself time to allow for those interruptions, but two – it really gives people who need contact with you and they need you face to face, it gives you some relief in knowing there is a time and a space that you are planning to attend to them. It calms them down. So plan on interruptions, put them into your schedule, know that they're going to happen, no matter how much you dislike them.

Number two – you can also create some boundaries around interruptions. You can decide not to be interrupted at certain points in your workday. This was something that was really hard for me. I wanted to be available, open door policy 24/7 and it really led me down a path of being disgruntled because I ended up then having to do the work I needed to do outside of the entire school day, and that just didn't end up working for me.

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So it's not possible to be available to everybody 24/7, even though everybody's expectation is that you should be available 24/7 because in today's age, it seems like we should always be available via email, by phone, by text, phone calls. It feels like you can never set a boundary around your time and protect some blocks of time in your day where you can get into flow and really get a project going and get it done.

So even though this is a radical thought, it is possible to not be available to everyone 24/7. If you want to complete tasks without interruption, you need to create boundaries around them and basically, what that means – and my secretary was the person who taught me this; she was excellent at this. She would say, Angela, from nine to 11, you are going in your office, I'm going to guard the door with my life and unless there is a life or death situation, I need you to get this report done or you need to work on your PowerPoint for your board meeting or whatever it was.

She would help me create boundaries for myself and she would literally just say, "She's not available." And think about it – it feels like that might not be possible to do because you want to be very available, but if you were sick or you had an emergency in your family, your personal life, and you weren't technically physically available for them, they would make do.

They would get by; they would find another way to solve the problem. So you can create strong boundaries and still have time to meet with your people and love on them and be available. You can do both. Your secretary can handle those minor emergencies.

Or another thing to do is have a designated person in charge. We called them TICs, or teachers in charge. I had two staff members who were available and ready to support minor interruptions or emergencies or student behaviors so that I didn't have to deal with every little thing. It worked like magic, guys. Give it a try.

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Number three – do the mindset work. The reasons interruptions bother us so much is that we believe they shouldn't happen. And when we believe they shouldn't happen, what emotions emerge for you?

So when you get interrupted and you're thinking to yourself, "I shouldn't be interrupted right now." How do you feel? What emotions come up for you? For me, it was definitely frustration and pretty much annoyance. And when we feel these emotions, how do we tend to react? We tend to take our frustrations out on the person who's interrupting. And does that serve us well – us or them? No.

I would overreact. I would be like, I'm really busy right now, I can't meet with you, or what is it? And then I was not fully attending to them or to my project, so it was kind of wasted time, right.

So you may tend to overreact. By saying I'm not going to be interrupted, you might overreact, right. Or you might allow it to continue to happen, which then impacts your ability to complete the task during your workday. So sometimes, we go one way or the other. We become a doormat and we don't allow ourselves to get our work done, or we get really stingy about our time and we don't give people the time, or we're just kind of rude to them because we're frustrated that we're being interrupted when we believe we shouldn't be.

So what can you do when you're having thoughts that you should not be interrupted and you are? Run a STEAR Cycle on it. The situation is the interruption, what is your thought about that situation? What is your emotional response to that thought? How do you approach the situation when you feel you should not be interrupted and you are and what's the result you get?

Are you showing up as the person and the principal that you want to be? If not, you need to shift that thought. So what thought might feel better and

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more true for you? You have to decide for yourself, but it is possible to accept that interruptions are a part of your leadership role.

What if you just tried that thought on? If completely accepting them is not an easy transition for you, that might be too big of a gap to close, is there a bridging thought that you can lean on or that can get you closer to accepting that interruptions happen?

Perhaps something like this; I'm able to manage the interruptions, or I will schedule time for interruptions, or I don't really like interruptions, but I understand they're a part of my job.

Some thought that helps you get closer to the acceptance that the reality of your life is a series of interruptions. That's really the job when you think about it, right, guys? So if you can get yourself closer to accepting and understanding that interruptions happen, you're going to feel less of a victim to the interruptions and more empowered in the way that you handle them, so give that a try.

Alright, have an empowered week and take care.

Hey, Empowered Principal, have you signed up for my weekly newsletter yet? I sure hope so, because if you sign up, I will send you a free copy of my new book *The Empowered Principal*. I take all of these concepts that I talk about on the podcast and I bring them down to you in everyday life situations in the life of a principal.

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