

Ep #38: Why a Vulnerable Leader Is a Good Leader



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 38.

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. How are you doing today? I am thinking about you. By now, you are about one month into the school year and I am sure that, by now, you have been through the full range of emotions that a school leader can experience. It starts with that anticipation of meeting your new teams.

You get that exhilaration of the first day with students and the joy of all the hugs and the welcome-backs; I love that part. And then the work comes, the exertion of getting those new systems and routines into place, the frustration of all the hiccups and unanticipated issues that arise and the defensiveness that comes up the first time a parent comes at you sideways, and by now, for sure, the exhaustion that comes with the start of every single school year.

I know, you guys. I have been on this ride with you before and it never fails to throw us around every curve like a wild rollercoaster. This spectrum of emotions is what brings me to today's topic; our vulnerability as a leader. When you accept the position of school leader, what you are agreeing to is the willingness to be more vulnerable than you were in your prior position as a teacher, or perhaps an instructional coach.

The definition of vulnerability is this; the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally. Whoa, no wonder vulnerability is scary, people. When you take on the role of a school principal, you are stepping into a title that, by nature, brings

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about more controversy, more judgment, more opinions and more criticism. Yay for you.

But it also has the capacity to bring about more influence, more admiration, more networking, more recognition and more legacy. Think about that. That's amazing. But what I have learned in my experience is that those long-lasting benefits of becoming a school leader, they occur after you have been in the position.

You don't feel legacy in the moment. You might not ever feel legacy. Other people might experience your legacy long after you're gone, but you are engaging right now, in the moment, in order to create legacy for yourself. My admin coach back when I was a brand-new principal – I call her Coach Fran – she always told me that I am going to see my impact most clearly after I am gone from that site.

I saw this to be true after I moved from my first tenure as principal. I did not experience the long-term benefits of my work at that first site. I set up systems at a brand-new school and it took a lot of grit, a lot of perseverance, a lot of effort and I was proud of the work I did, but I didn't get to feel the benefits of that work because I moved onto a new site. However, the new principal who came in after me was sure to acknowledge me for the work I did so that he can then come in and do the work he needed to do, which was maximizing instructional impact.

So I didn't feel like I was making a significant impact on kids while I was in the midst of doing the work of setting up school-wide systems, but I did get to take pride after the fact as I could see how much it helped my good friend and colleague take over my school and continue building his own legacy as a school leader.

And the reason I bring up both of these ends of the emotional spectrum is that in order to create the most lasting impact in our schools, we need to be

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able to tolerate the full spectrum of emotion that comes with being an empowered school leader. We will not experience the joys of a long-lasting legacy if we're not willing to be vulnerable and be challenged and judged.

I know, I said it. You're going to get judged. But listen, the amount at which you are willing to be vulnerable to the negative emotions associated with the job will also be the capacity at which you can be an influence and experience the positive emotions in the job.

I think back to a time when I chose to avoid taking care of an issue because I thought it was not a big issue. I figured I could just deal with it later or maybe things would even calm down and just resolve themselves and go away. That always happens, right? No...

Unfortunately, my approach did not create the results I wanted because it ended up turning into such a dramatic situation that I easily could have avoided the pain of all the drama by just taking care of the problem when it was in the moment and much, much smaller.

I was so rattled by this that after processing what happened, I decided to go and share the story with my staff like a week later. I was in my first or second year in my second school and I just openly shared this story with my staff. I was still feeling the burn on vulnerability and shame and I wanted my staff to see that I'm human, I make mistakes, and I'm sharing it with them so that they can see me in this moment so they would allow me to see them in their moment.

And at the time, I wasn't really trying to seek support from the team, I just wanted them to notice, hey, I'm human. I made mistakes, I shared it with them and I wanted them to understand that as teachers, we often feel too busy to take care of something small that is brewing, so we brush it off. And sometimes – not always, but sometimes – it turns into an issue that

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requires much more of our time and attention than if we had just dealt with it in the moment.

So that was kind of my intention upon sharing the story initially, but what came out of sharing that story with my staff was a major trust and bond that I did not anticipate having with my team. My willingness to share my mistakes and model fully owning my actions helped those who were most skeptical of me and actually became more likely to trust my leadership.

To be honest with you, one of my biggest critics on the staff came and told me this directly, how much I impacted her by sharing that story and how she valued my vulnerability and it allowed her to trust me. This profoundly impacted my willingness to share as much as possible with my team.

More recently, I had the experience where my coach lovingly and strongly coached me on something I had been struggling with for a while. So I'll be vulnerable again. So in addition to privately coaching one on one with her for over two years, I'm also a member in her business mastermind that she leads.

It has been a year-long commitment, which is only one meeting a week for 90 minutes a week or so, and it doesn't sound like much until life starts to happen and you find yourself missing a call here and there. That was me. I was really good about going back and listening to all of the replays, but when I thought about this on a deeper level, because she brought it up in a topic of conversation as a group, there was a part of me that was finding reasons to miss the calls live.

I replayed them, but I wasn't jumping on live, and I realized this; I was avoiding being coached in front of my fellow colleagues. I didn't like to be coached in front of other people. There was a part of me that found I was finding reasons to miss the call because I was avoiding being coached in front of my colleagues, in front of other people at all.

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I had learned to be vulnerable on private calls, but I was less willing to be open and willing to be vulnerable amongst colleagues, especially those that I really highly admired. My coach and I had established a significant trust with one another and I have shared very private and painful moments of my life with her; moments that prior to my coaching were holding me back.

I'd made significant strides with her through private coaching, yet when it came to group coaching, I found myself holding back. My thoughts around this were tricky because I was telling myself excuses that felt altruistic in nature. My thoughts were things like, "I don't want to take up time when other people need coaching. I have her attention on one to one calls, so I can just talk about things over there."

Or, like, "Some people in this group don't have private coaches, so I will let them have the time because I have the luxury of having a private coach" I was basically giving up my time and space and energy to other people because I was telling myself I felt that they needed it more than I do when I had a coach, but in reality, I was downright avoiding being vulnerable.

What my coach reminded me was that in order to be in full alignment, I had to show up in all areas of my life the way I wanted to live and be perceived. I could not show up fully as a coach then not show up fully as a client. That doesn't align.

That's the same as showing up fully as a teacher but not as a leader, or expecting our students to show up fully when learning but us not fully being present when we are a student at a professional development conference. Do you see that?

The alignment wasn't there. I was showing up halfway. So what does this whole story have to do with vulnerability as a leader? Number one – we need to be willing to share the parts of us that are not perfect, just like the time I shared my mistake with my staff – and I shared many more, by the

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way, I didn't just have one – but showing your team, your parents, and your students that you are human does not make them think you are not capable.

It does just the opposite; it allows them to connect with you and understand that you too make mistakes, that you own your mistakes, you're not blaming others, you're taking responsibility for them, and you are going to learn from them, just as we ask our teachers and our students to do.

So number two – you have layers of vulnerability. You will never arrive at a place where you don't have to experience feeling vulnerable. There will always be new situations to address and new people to interact with. You will constantly be gaining awareness of yourself and the ways in which you hide and protect yourself from feeling vulnerable.

Just continue to notice, self-coach, and allow yourself to expose these new layers gently and authentically. Number three – being vulnerable is your ninja strategy as a leader. The key to unlocking your leadership superpower is to experience vulnerability as often as possible. Trying new strategies, experimenting with new approaches, putting yourself in front of others, sharing those innovative ideas you have and being completely genuine builds your leadership skills faster than any seminar or online course you can take.

The reason that these acts of vulnerability are exponential in strength-building is because they require intentional action versus passive action. It's the difference between reading about how to be vulnerable and actually putting yourself in situations where you feel vulnerable.

Reading and researching requires a certain level of action, but the learning is through the mind only. It is theoretical in nature. On the other hand, intentionally choosing to expose yourself to situations that could result in feeling exposed and vulnerable actively build your resilience muscles. It's

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like boot camp for the soul, you guys. It burns at the time, but it feels so good afterwards. And it's the only way to know that you can become more resilient.

Look, I know it's not easy or comfortable to purposefully put yourself in situations that cause temporary distress, but if you are willing, you will gain more empowerment than you ever, ever imagined. So go for it, you guys. Be vulnerable. That leads to empowerment. Have an empowered week. I look forward to seeing you next week. Take care, bye-bye.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *The Empowered Principal Podcast*. If you enjoyed this episode and want to learn more, please visit www.angelakellycoaching.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.