

Ep #48: How to Deal with Confrontational Parents



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 48.

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, how are you doing? Welcome back. I hope you had a lovely Thanksgiving break and you were able to get some rest and spend time with your loved ones for real, with no working involved.

But as I record this, it's actually a couple of weeks before the holiday, so we are all preparing for a family trip to Boise, Idaho. My mother in-law has family up in the area, so we're going to be spending the week with Mitch's side of the family.

Alex is flying up from SoCal the weekend before, and then we'll all be spending the entire week together, and I absolutely cannot wait. I love my in-laws so much and my mother in-law's mother, Mitch's grandmother, lives up in McCall, Idaho, which is this beautiful resort town. She'll be coming down. We're just going to have the best time.

And I know you're listening to this podcast after the fact, so I hope that you had an amazing time and that your Thanksgiving was filled with love and joy and peace and very little family drama and you were able to really take a break from thinking about work and your campus. I know this is the first break that you've had fully since the beginning of the year.

And since you are listening to this podcast right after the break, I thought it would be a fun time to dive into a how-to episode. We've spent a lot of time on thought work over the last few weeks, and some of my clients have been saying, "Hey, can we please do a how-to podcast?"

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And to me, every podcast that I do is a how-to because I believe that managing your mind is the focus of any job on this planet. But yes, yes I understand that my steadfast leaders also want to chat about ways to approach the job, in addition to the mindset work they have to do as a school leader.

So if you're new to the podcast, welcome. Let's dive in. I actually love coaching in this way as well. So as you know, you wear several hats as a school leader. One of those hats actually is a coach, so I hope that you can apply this podcast and its strategies to your hat as a coach.

And as a coach for school leaders, I feel like I wear at least two hats when I coach; my coaching hat and my consulting hat. My coaching hat involves exploring and tapping into your own personal knowledge and wisdom. We take a look at the thoughts that are causing you stress and pain and we seek out thoughts that help you feel better.

So coaching is about guiding an individual to their own answers, their own solutions. It's within them. We tap into that inner knowledge and strength and resource. And typically, my clients just have a few blocks – we all do. That's why we hire coaches. We can't navigate every single thing through our life and through every single block, so we hire coaches.

And on the other hand, this consulting hat that I wear, it's less about helping you find the answer for yourself and it's more of, like, show and tell. It's like telling somebody how to do something versus showing them and allowing them to figure it out on their own.

It involves providing a suggestion or an example of a way to approach something when maybe there's a time constraint. I think of it as the difference between constructive and humanistic education techniques versus the EDI, explicit direct instruction approach, or essentialism techniques. Do you see the difference?

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The good news is this; even that when you're consulting someone on a particular approach, when you've done your internal thought work ahead of time, you realize that whatever approach they choose to implement is okay. Just like when you coach teachers, if you've done that internal thought work about them, you can offer suggestions on how to approach something without attaching to the belief that they must do it this way, the way that you're teaching them.

Sometimes we get frustrated. People ask for our input, we give them the input, and then they're like, thanks, and they do it their own way. We have to detach from that, right? You need to allow them to adapt and adjust based on what works best for them. And actually, now that I'm thinking about that, that's a great podcast topic.

I'm going to have to work on a podcast about that, that covers some strategies for approaching and coaching teachers. I'll do that for you guys. But today, we're going to talk about prepping for a confrontational parent meeting; specifically one that you are aware of and that's on your calendar.

Now, I will refer to both formal group meetings, such as IP meetings or SST meetings, and less formal meetings, such as meetings you have on the calendar for an individual parent who's upset about something and has scheduled time to talk with you. The method I'm going to share with you will also be able to help you with those surprise impromptu meetings; the ones where people run in and say I demand to speak with you right now.

Once you've internalized this process, you will get faster at being able to do this on the fly in your head. Give yourself some grace and patience with this. So I want to walk you through all of the steps from the pre-work, all the way until after the meeting, to get you ready for a confrontational meeting that you are aware of ahead of time.

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Okay, so step one is the pre-work. As soon as you know that meeting is on the calendar, your mind is going to go into thought download. What we're going to do is we're going to do a thought dump. When that meeting gets scheduled, as soon as you learn about it and you have a minute, I want you to stop.

I want you to write down all of the thoughts you have about that meeting. What are you thinking? What are you thinking about the people? What are you thinking about the purpose of the meeting, the location of that meeting, the time allotted, the outcome of this meeting? What do you expect is going to happen during this meeting? How do you visualize the meeting going? What do you hear people saying? What do you see them doing?

Be specific and think of every detail. You know, I want you to get real with yourself on this. I want you to get judgy. I want you to think about that parent who always rolls her eyes, and picture her doing it. Write that down. I want you to think about the dad who smells funny and makes inappropriate comments during meetings. Write it down.

Write down every real thought that's coming to you, like, god I don't want to meet with this person because of X, Y, Z. You have to mentally live that meeting out and write out the honest to gosh thoughts you have about the meeting. Do that. Take five minutes. Don't stop writing until you've exhausted your paper or you've exhausted your thoughts.

And then I want you to, number two, look for patterns. See if you have thought patterns about a particular person, or perhaps a particular style of communication they have, or maybe eye-rolling super bugs you – look for particular patterns of thought that keep coming up. You'll see them. And see if your thoughts, which are just sentences in your mind, see if those lean to a less hopeful solution when you think about that future meeting.

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So do you generally think, you know, this is going to turn out okay? Or are you, like, dreading that meeting? Number three, find a couple of sentences in your thought dump that really stand out to you. I want you to run a STEAR cycle on the ones that stand out.

There's going to be like 20 or 30, maybe even more, who knows what you're thinking. Choose one of them. Run a STEAR cycle on it, and I want you just to notice, what results do you get when you think those thoughts? That is really important because you need to see that the results you're getting in your leadership role are a direct result from the thoughts you're thinking.

No judgments, not beating yourself up, it's just a simple fact. It's just a neutral situation; thoughts create results. Now, here's the fun part; when you take one of those thoughts and run a STEAR cycle on it, you're going to see that you get probably a less than stellar result or a less than desired result.

So what you do is to really shake your brain up is you try the opposite thought. I learned this from Byron Katie, and she asks us in her work, who would you be without the thought. Now, think about this; when you take the opposite thought and you run a STEAR cycle on it, you're going to see what would happen, or what might happen, if you never had ever thought that thought. If that thoughts had never occurred to you or it had no meaning to you, you're going to see how it might play out.

So let me provide you an example. I had a parent who would get so fired up during meetings. She would raise her voice as loud as she could. I'm talking screaming at the top of her lungs, and she would curse us up and down; every word you could think of that we cannot say on this podcast, she would say, in a school office.

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And every time I heard her voice in the main office – so I would be sitting in my office, she would come into the main lobby and I could hear her voice. Even when I didn't have a meeting scheduled with her, I felt myself clench up. It just brought me to shudders.

I immediately had the thought that she was going to blow up at any moment and I was going to be stuck trying to calm her down. So when I think about that particular parent, I can do a thought dump and I can write down all of the thoughts I have about her.

Now, I'm not going to tell you all of them, but I'm going to tell you a few of them. And what I do is I write those down with zero judgments as if somebody else is looking at my paper and has no idea what I'm talking about.

So you can look at your thoughts from an observer's standpoint, and here were some of mine; she's going to yell. She's so unpredictable. I don't want to deal with her. She upsets my office staff. I need to protect them. The kids should not hear this. She should not be allowed on campus.

And I probably had 50 more thoughts about this situation, right? So I can take any one of these thoughts and I can run a STEAR cycle. How I choose which thought I want to select and focus on is simply just the one that impacts me the most.

So in this case, when I looked through those thoughts, the thought that struck me the most was, I don't want to deal with her, because it impacts me personally the most. All of those thoughts were important to me and I had attachment to them, but that one really stood out to me, so I just did the work on it.

And, guys, all roads lead to Rome, so it doesn't matter which one you pick. You're not going to pick a right or wrong one. You just choose one that

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stands out to you the most in that moment, that you believe impacts you personally the most. So even though the thoughts all feel true, when I thought of having to stop my day to deal with her, I, for sure, was irritated.

When I believe the thought that I don't want to deal with her, I get irritated. And if I'm irritated, I am more likely to approach her with impatience and frustration. The words I choose to speak when I'm frustrated are not the same words I'm going to choose to speak to her when I feel more loving, or at least more neutral about her.

So as you can imagine, if I approach this situation being irritated, not wanting to deal with her, believing I don't want to deal with her or I don't have the time, the end result for both of us is less than a desirable morning.

If I change the thought to the opposite in the STEAR cycle – and this is just for fun, guys. We're just playing, calm down, we don't have to stress. We're just playing. If I change the thought to the opposite, to I want to deal with her, and I run the cycle through, I can see on my paper how that thought might end up in a more loving result.

I am not saying that I believe the thought. I certainly don't believe that thought. I'm only saying that you observe how the opposite thought plays out on paper. It allows you to take a thought and see what it might look and feel like before you have to put it into real-time practice.

This is such an interesting way to play around and try on thoughts without having to deeply believe them, because it allows you to entertain the thought of believing them. You just get to look at it, play on it. It's just on paper. Nobody else knows about it.

So you get to say whatever you want. You can put down your honest thoughts and then flip them to the opposite and see what it might feel like if that thought weren't true for you.

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So in my example, the opposite of my belief, I don't want to deal with her, the opposite of that is I want to deal with her. Now that doesn't feel true, but let's play this out and see if there's any truth. So the situation is, I hear Mrs. Martin's voice. The thought is, I want to deal with her.

If I really sunk into that thought, I want to deal with her, how would I feel? And the first thing that pops into my mind is open; I would feel a little more open to her. And if I'm feeling more open to her, my approach might be, I might walk out and smile at her. I might greet her. And if she wants to talk with me, I will gladly take the time to listen openly. I'm going to try to hear her perspective. I'm going to try to listen and try to seek to understand.

So the result of that is, Mrs. Martin feels heard and you are definitely proud of yourself for handling the situation with a little more openness. Here's the caveat, guys; Mrs. Martin will get to do whatever she is going to do. She is going to be Mrs. Martin.

You cannot know the results. You cannot say, well I'll just approach her this way and for sure she needs to behave that way. That is what we call a manual for other people.

She still might yell, curse, and storm out. You don't get to control Mrs. Martin. But what you can control is the way that you think, feel, and act, and how you approach her, and how, in the midst of her cursing and screaming and yelling, how you handle yourself.

And when you do the pre-work of clearing any judgmental or presuming thoughts, your chances of getting to your desired result is much more likely. So once you've worked through your cycles and you've decided the approach you want to take based on the way you want to feel, then you can get into the technical preparations.

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So, once you've done the pre-work then this is what I recommend just before the meeting; like 30 to 60 minutes before the meeting. With a big group meeting, I highly advise having an agenda planned out with time guidelines for each item. So, maybe introductions, five minutes.

You know, if this is an IP meeting, you're going to have like parent input, 10 to 20 minutes. You're going to do proposed goals, 15 minutes. You're going to set aside a certain amount of time just to give people an idea of about how much time everyone should be expecting to spend on each agenda item. That really helps with facilitation.

In addition to that, you want to gather all the information you need ahead of time to be prepared, so that's definitely a before the meeting kind of a thing. You want to plan on who's going to take the role of facilitator, note-taker, and timekeeper, because it's too tricky for you as a principal to try and do all three things at once.

The note taker should not be a person who has a major role in presenting information because they need to be present and speaking. They shouldn't be typing and paying attention to are they getting the notes correct. So the note taker tends to be someone who is not actively presenting a major part of the meeting.

In a less formal meeting, it's usually just you and a parent, or perhaps you, a parent, and a teacher. And in that case, you can be that if you're the facilitator. You can take the notes if the conversation is primarily between parent and teacher. But if it's primarily between you and parent, you can scribble some notes down and then you can finalize those notes after the meeting.

In an individual meeting, ask your secretary to ask the parent what the meeting is in regards to so that you have some idea of what you are walking into. I've also requested this information via email or over the

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phone. It kind of depends on the situation and the parent. But it can really help that parent feel that you are concerned and caring about their needs.

If you can't or you don't get to this, do it at the very beginning of the meeting. But you want to check in with that person from the beginning, especially if they've asked to have this meeting. It's fair to you to say, okay, what's this meeting about so that I can be best prepared to chat with you?

Second of all – I found this to be really helpful – you want to have the basic comforts available in the room, especially in a more formalized meeting, like an SST or an IP. You want to have things like cups of water.

I actually purchased one of those water coolers because I used to buy the bottled water and I didn't want to have all that waste, so I bought one of the water coolers, and I can't tell you how many times people really appreciated having water to drink during a meeting. It had a hot and a cold switch, so they could have hot tea or they could have water. It was great.

I also always have tissues in the room very available for any tears that might come up, because people do get emotional when talking about their children. Definitely have some tissue on hand. Pens and paper, for people to be able to take notes, coffee and tea are really nice gestures, and definitely some napkins or snacks, that kind of thing.

Be as welcoming as you can in your conference room. I feel like that really takes down the energy and the formality of the meeting and it makes them feel like they are part of the team. Be sure that there are enough chairs for all attendees.

Check the temperature in the room beforehand because it's amazing how sensitive people are to being overly warm or overly cool. You want to err on the side of a little bit cool. People can always put a sweater, a jacket, a scarf on if the room's a little cool. But when it's really hot, you do not want

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irritated people to also be temperature hot. You want them to be as comfortable as possible.

Now, another idea is, when you're having sensitive conversations, be sure that privacy is the utmost. You want to make sure you have doors closed, perhaps even shades closed on windows, closed blinds, closed doors. Help people feel more comfortable and up for deeper discussions.

Now, back to you – I want you to decide ahead of time how you want to feel at the end of this meeting. Don't decide what result you want, because you don't get to control the outcome. And if you try to control that outcome, you're going to feel badly if it doesn't go the way you want and you will end up kind of subconsciously forcing that outcome to happen, which is not what you want.

You want to focus on how you want the meeting to flow and how you want the relationships to go; attached to the relationships and the feeling you want to feel, not the outcome. You also, right before that meeting, I'm talking five to 10 minutes before, prep your brain. Clear your heart. Take a moment just beforehand to clear your mind. Take slow deep breaths in and out to calm that body.

Remember that their emotions are not caused by you or your team. They are not your fault. That person is choosing to feel and behave the way that they are based on a belief that they have. It is as simple as that. You are just fine. You are in control of your own emotions. You are simply here to serve them as the leader. And you are going to lead them through the problem-solving process.

You as the leader are in charge of the energy in the room at all times. When a parent loses it, similarly to when a student loses emotional control, you can lovingly hold space for them, set appropriate boundaries if

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necessary, and know that there is always a solution. And remind them of that, there is a solution.

So let's step into during the meeting. You're going to welcome them with a smile, with direct eye contact and a handshake. Now, keep in mind, different cultures have different views and opinions about eye contact. Be mindful of that.

If you are meeting with somebody who culturally does not approve or appreciate eye contact, be aware of that. But definitely a handshake and a smile helps you connect with them through touch and through visual contact and a smile is just universally welcoming to all.

If this is a group meeting, allow everyone to introduce themselves. You want to make sure you establish personal connections with lots of smiles and a warm fuzzy feeling as much as possible. Review that agenda and ask if anything else needs to be added. Don't assume that you've covered everything. There might be something glaring that, in their eyes, you have missed.

No problem, allow for a few minutes of input if needed. If it's just you and the parent, you can say something like, hey my understanding is that we are meeting to discuss X, Y, Z based on your secretary asking what this is in regards to. That's why you need to know this.

So my understanding is that we're meeting to discuss Johnny's math scores. Can you share some more with me? What are your thoughts on this? And then here you go, you focus on listening.

This meeting is not for you to do the talking. It is for the parent to do the talking. So you plan on asking lots of questions and listening to the answers. Your goal is to learn the thoughts the parent is having behind the upset emotions.

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What are they thinking that has them so upset? Be curious about this. What are their expectations? You're not problem solving at this point, you're just seeking to understand. You're trying to gain some perspective and hear their point of view.

It's like when you go to the doctor and you have a pain. They're not trying to solve the problem or tell you what's wrong with you; they're trying to dig as deep as they can and ask you what's going on. Be that doctor for them. just listen.

Remember that every behavior and emotion that a human being has has a thought driving it. The same is true for every parent. So seek to understand their thoughts. It doesn't have to mean that you agree with them. It just simply means that you are seeking to understand why they're feeling and acting the way they are.

Now, once they've shared and you have clarified to the point that you understand them on their terms, and this means you've clarified your understanding with them and they say, yeah that's how I feel, that's how I see it, then you can ask them what their thoughts are on the solutions.

See, here's the thing; you want to understand what their expectations are because they came to you with a solution in mind almost every time. Sometimes they'll say, well I have no idea. That's rare. They really do have something in mind and they believe you're not doing what they want. So they are upset about it because they have a solution in mind that's not getting resolved in the way they think it should. That's why they're coming to you in the first place.

So they have an idea of what they want to happen, and when it's not happening, they come to you. They're not always intentionally aware of this, so you can simply ask them, how do you see this issue getting

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resolved? I personally have some ideas, but I would love to hear your thoughts first.

This little prompt allows them to get it all out. And just let them speak, it's okay. They're not hurting you. What is important here is that you don't want them to walk away with the belief that you're going to do exactly what they say. So you can preface this conversation, or this piece of the conversation, by saying you're simply trying to get an understanding of their thoughts because you are working towards a solution that is going to work for everybody involved.

Saying this is helpful because sometimes a parent will want you to do something in regards to another child – they want you to give that child a particular punishment and then they want to know what the punishment is, or they want to get the phone number of a parent so they can call and talk with them directly. That parent is not privy to another child or another child's information in any way.

So you need to preface it. So their solution may not be viable. And you'll want to be listening to what they're saying and as they share those solutions, notice those suggestions, sometimes they're reasonable, other times they're not. When this happens, it's usually because they are approaching you from their only little perspective.

Like, when people are upset, they have a very limited lens. Their intense emotion narrows that lens so your job is to guide them back to the bigger picture.

Sometimes the solutions they say are not really what they want. They don't really want to have some other child suspended for life. They might say that when they're angry, but really, the truth is that they want the children to stop arguing or they want them to stop fighting or they want them to stop name-calling.

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You've got to get them back to the bigger picture, like what is it that they want for the long term. And listen for those retaliation type solutions versus the big picture solutions and keep guiding them back to what it is that they really want, which is a long-term solution.

And once you've heard them thoroughly, depending on the energy of the meeting, you can either continue discussing the problem with them and come to a resolution together, or if reasonableness is not happening, you can thank them for their input and you can let them know when a resolution has been reached.

Again, your goal is to keep them focused on the big picture solution and keeping them as calm and you want them to feel as heard as possible. So after the meeting's over and you've dismissed them or you've come to some level of agreement, take 30 seconds and just decompress. Write down your thoughts. Write down the thoughts about what went well.

Focus on what went well and, by gosh, celebrate yourself for a job well done. You did something really hard and scary and I want you to appreciate yourself for getting through those challenging moments.

And only after you self-care – give yourself some love, treat yourself, go get a coffee, something – only after that can you go back and then analyze what you feel did not go as smoothly, and you want to separate that analyzing to a later time, because what you want to do is you want to look at that from a less emotional state.

You want to look at it from a learning perspective, like, okay this is where we took a left turn. I wanted to take a right turn. What can I learn from this for next time? But don't do that right away. I want you to decompress, write down what went well, celebrate yourself, let it go for a while. You can come back and analyze it at a later time.

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But what I do recommend to do within 12 to 24 hours is write a summary of email meeting. This is so important. The reason it's important is because it highlights your conversation and any agreements that you made.

So what I would do is I would title it summary of meeting and I would put the date and then I would say, hello Mr. and Mrs. Smith, it was lovely meeting with you. Thank you so much for taking the time. I really appreciated your input. Here is my interpretation of our meeting today. Please send me back any corrections or additions you'd like me to add.

So what you do is you just summarize the meeting. You can bullet point, you can outline, however you like to do it, but doing this does a few things. When you put it in an email, you are documenting the meeting. You're putting it in writing. It's on email forever. You've got dates, times, topics, discussion highlights and any disputes and facts. It's all not documented on email.

Number two, they love the follow up because it feels like you took them seriously. They feel it's important. You're acting on behalf of a follow up – it's part of the follow up conversation is reaching back out to them and thanking them, acknowledging them, and letting them know you are on top of coming up with a solution.

And I believe that it has saved me from so many arguments, the he said she said kind of arguments where that's not what they walked away with understanding versus what you walked away with understanding. So it's very important to, in some way shape or form, have a summary of meeting. I prefer to do it in email because it's always there.

Finally, one last thing to keep in mind; you are going to get caught off guard sometimes. Do not panic. Take a deep breath and you can just shut down into listening mode. So when someone gets like that, you can stop and just listen.

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You can ask questions, but inside yourself, tell yourself this is about them, not me. And if they get too out of control at the meeting or the meeting is just spinning and going nowhere, it is okay to end that meeting and tell them you are willing to reschedule when everyone can participate calmly and with the intent of creating solutions.

Having confrontational meetings never gets more fun, so for you veteran listeners out there, you can relate to this, having a confrontational meeting, it doesn't get more fun the more you've done it. But what you can gain is more confidence in how you handle them. They will stress you out a lot less once you've done a few, and practice is what makes you stronger, just like anything else. This is no exception.

When your mind and your belief in yourself is grounded, that's why I highly recommend the thought work beforehand, the conversations will become less stressful. You will feel more confident in your ability to handle them regardless of somebody else's emotional energy.

So please, my friends, hold the space, stay empowered, know nothing has gone wrong here and you've got this.

Hey, I've got amazing plans for the podcast in 2019. Beginning in January, I will record the podcast for each month based on a theme. The podcast during that month will relate to the topic of the month.

My aim is for each theme to correlate to what is happening during that time of the school year for you as closely as I can. As a bonus for my clients who work with me directly, they will receive an e-booklet that corresponds to the monthly theme in addition to private coaching with me.

This allows them to use the podcast as a guide to dive even deeper into each episode and do the work on a personal level.

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The only way to receive the booklets is to personally coach with me. If you have been curious about coaching, now is the time to sign up for a free consult call with me.

You guys, it's so fun to connect with my listeners over the phone. And for most of us, we're a perfect match to work together and I love helping you at that individual level.

And hey, one more fun announcement for the holidays. In December, for every person between now, today, and December 17th, anyone who writes a five-star review of the podcast is going to be entered into a drawing for a free six-week coaching package with me.

This means, if you win the coaching package with me, you will also receive the e-booklets that go with the podcast. How cool is that?

But wait, there's more. You can also enter your name multiple times into the drawing by doing the following; so if you write a five-star review on the podcast in iTunes, you can also add entries by doing the following. You can also write a review on my Facebook business page.

And hey, all you've got to do is copy and paste from the podcast to the Facebook. That's so easy, right? There is a second entry. You can also sign up for my Empowered Newsletter. You can do that on my website. That takes two seconds. You just enter your name and email and you're on for the week.

Every person who signs up, that's another entry. You can also download a free copy of my new book, *The Empowered Principal*, on my website, no problemo. Just let me know and it's yours for free – another entry into the drawing.

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But you've got to act now. I'm going to post this on social media December 1st, but you listeners get a heads up on everybody else. So go right now. Write the reviews. If you've already written a review, just write another one. I'll enter you because I love you. That's how we roll around here, you guys.

So, happy holidays. I'm so glad your Thanksgiving was fabulous. I'm looking forward to December. I want to celebrate you. Thank you so much for listening and take care.

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.