

Ep #51: How to Deal with Challenging Teachers



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 51.

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.

Happy Tuesday. How are you? How is December going? Are the kids going mad? They get so excited. Can you even believe it's December? You guys are almost halfway through. What is that all about? Isn't it wild?

This time of year is so festive at the schools and I actually really miss it. So be sure to get out of that office and go mingle with the kids and your staff. The energy is so electric. I really loved teaching kindergarten this time of year. It was so much fun. We would play Charlie Brown Christmas music in the background where the kids were learning and working and of course we got to do lots of special projects and lots of celebrations and festivities for all of the winter holidays that are celebrated this time of year.

And I just loved as a principal going in and scheduling time for the performances and the concerts and walk through all the classes to see their projects and the hustle and bustle that is the magic of this season. So today's podcast is going to need a little bit of that holiday cheer to lighten the mood because we're going to talk about dealing with challenging teachers.

This topic has come up with a couple of my clients and it's really good material to work through, so I want to share with you some of the tips that I've created on how you can approach a challenging personality that you might be dealing with. Now, we can dive deeper into this topic when we discuss relationships starting in January of 2019, but I wanted to give you this information now so that you've got time to think about it over your

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break and you can approach those challenging teachers with finesse and grace.

So let's start with a teacher whose challenging behavior is lacking a skill set. So if any of you have read Dr. Anthony Muhammad's books or followed his work, he talks about the difference between will and skill in a teacher and how to coach each of those separately. So this is when a teacher has a lack of skill. Perhaps they're a brand-new teacher, they don't have the experience, or even as a veteran teacher.

I would have veteran teachers who never gained the skill set and really struggled even after four or five years they were struggling with management or something like that. So when you have a challenging behavior that is lacking a skill set, the first and most important thing you want to do always before you approach anybody is self-coach.

You need to clean up your mind and what I mean by that is you need to thought dump - I call it a brain drain - write down everything you're thinking about this person, and I guarantee, we're human beings, we have judgments. Don't beat yourself up for judgment. Just be aware that it's there. If you need practice on intentional awareness, listen to episode 49, which talks about how to bring up that awareness.

So all you've got to do is brain drain. Get it down. Look at those thoughts, what do these thoughts make it mean about that person. So you're having thoughts, let's say this person does not have any management skills in their classroom. You might write down things like this person has no management experience, they don't know how to control their class, it's utter chaos, the kids aren't learning, it's a danger zone in there, she does not have their attention.

I mean, you're going to write a whole thing, right? So write down those thoughts and when you see that, what emotions come up for you? When

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you think about this person and you have these thoughts, what do you feel about them? What are you making it mean?

That's an important step because you want to know how you're feeling and what you're thinking about them because that will impact how you approach them. And if you're in a funk about them and you're judging them and you're coming at them with these judgments in your heart, you are not going to approach them in the most neutral, loving way you can. Do you see that?

So you want to clean up your thinking first. And then you want to ask yourself, okay, obviously what's happening, your blueprint, your expectations of what they should be doing is not matching, it's not aligning, so that's why you're feeling the frustration. What you want to know is what is it that you actually want them to do and why.

Now, this is also very important because number one, we oftentimes have a lot of judgments but we're not really clear on what it is we want them to do. We see what we don't want them doing but we're not sure what we want them to do, or we don't articulate it very clearly, or we don't have a very clear sense of ourselves what we want them to do. But not only what you want them to do, why do you want them to do it?

That part, the why, do not skip the why, ladies and gentlemen, because that is how you identify those subconscious belief systems. So if you have a teacher who is lacking classroom management and the children are not engaged or perhaps it's chaotic in the room, when you say to yourself, well, I want her to have better classroom management, number one, what does that look like? Number two, why do you want her to have it?

Do you want her to have it so that you feel better? So that your school looks good? Or do you want her to have it because the children need to learn? Where's the why, and you want to get to a place that's very

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motivating for you. I understand like, of course you want a school - you run a tight ship, you want things to be in place, you probably had a lot of classroom management. If you're leading a school, you probably had very good classroom management.

And when you see somebody that doesn't have it, you kind of cringe, right? But you have to understand your why and that will help you with your approach. So for example, let's do this. I want the teacher to stop sending students to the office. Why? Because it's her job to deal with the students. She needs to have a better management system in place, she needs to be more consistent. She also needs to be communicating with the families and the students way before sending the kid to me.

She's not even trying, she's sending kid after kid to the office, and it's keeping me from doing my work. So can you see how that one question why can unveil so much more? And those reasons, the whys, the answer to the whys are why you are believing the thought, I want the teacher to stop sending students to the office.

So why in your opinion - this is the next question you want to ask yourself. So you want to understand what they're doing, what skill set they're lacking, what you want them to do, why you want them to do it, and then why do you believe they're not doing it. So you want to ask yourself well, why is she not doing it?

And you're going to say things like, well, she doesn't know how to manage her class, she doesn't take the time to figure it out and learn, she just wants to send them to me and not have to deal with it. That's unprofessional and lazy. So those judgments are going to come through. That's okay guys, let them through. It's alright, we're human.

And how does it make you feel when you think those thoughts? You're going to be angry and frustrated. Of course you are. That makes sense.

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Now, if you stop there, how are you going to address this teacher when you believe they should be doing something else than what they are? Most likely you're going to be a little dismissive, you're not going to trust her, you're going to not believe that that student is in your office for a good reason or a good enough reason because you don't believe she's done preventative measures.

So you might not handle that situation with as much attention or kind of severity that when a kid who comes from a classroom who never sends students, you automatically think, "Wow, this must be a real issue because that teacher never sends, but this one all the time, I'm not going to worry about it." Do you see how that goes?

So when they're sending kids to the office all of the time, you have to understand what it is that you think they should be doing and why they're not doing it. Why do you think this teacher's not doing it? Personally, what comes up for me is she's not taking the ownership of running her own classroom. So my response is just send the kids back, not take it seriously, and kind of personally hate on them in your mind, right? You're like, jeez, what's that all about?

So that doesn't feel good. Stop it. What you want to do is you want to get through that because you want to be honest with yourself. You're just being intentional about your awareness and hiding your true feelings does no good. So get that out, and then you want to say to yourself like, how do I want to feel about this person?

And what I would want to think is I want to believe she can put better systems in place. I really want to like her and trust her and respect her teaching profession and her management practices. That's how I want to feel, and I want to be able to interact with her in a supportive and effective way to coach her and guide her to build these effective management systems. I want to assume a positive intention with this person, and being

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able to do that will have a better relationship for both you and her and her students overall.

So you get from this place of your thoughts and what you're making those thoughts mean and you clean them up by doing thought downloads, brain drains, get them all out. Notice where it doesn't feel good, notice the judgments. Get to your real why. There's going to be an initial why, kind of these surface levels, but get to the deeper why. It's really about the kids. It's really about serving kids. And when you can get to that place, you will approach the teacher in a much more neutral, compassionate, and supportive way.

Once you've identified these thoughts about the situation and the teacher, then you go ahead and plan your approach based on how you want to think and feel about this situation and about this teacher. From this place, you can neutralize your emotions and choose the specific actions out of love and support versus out of frustration and annoyance.

Second challenging behavior - so that's kind of the low skill. It's actually easier to feel compassion for somebody if they're really, really trying and they just have low skill. You can see through and you might get frustrated at times but you can feel a sense of compassion, especially with those new teachers and they're learning so much all at once.

The second behavior however, like when somebody is defiant, when their will is an issue, so skill just means like, their ability to follow through and to create systems, to act out something. Their will is their ability to be open to change, to try to change, to want to change, the will to teach. There's a skill to teach and a will to teach.

So now we're shifting into talking about the defiant teacher and how you might approach them when they are being challenging for you. So again, you want to always start with a brain drain and self-coaching. I cannot

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stress this enough. You have to clean your thinking before you approach your teacher or it doesn't end the way you would wish it did.

I have practiced this the wrong way so many times so please, clean your thinking up first. Now, when you hear the word defiant, it can stir up some intense emotions for people. With teachers who lack a skill but are willing to learn, it's much easier to feel some compassion for them as I said earlier, but with defiance, and especially adult defiance, we see it as a personal threat or a power struggle.

Like with kids, when they're defiant, we have this like, they're being a kid, they're having a rough day, we're going to hold space for them, we are going to lovingly wait this out. With an adult, we don't have that level of patience because we're like hey, you're an adult, you should have this figured out. Why are you being defiant? You are acting like a child.

We have a whole set of thoughts that are different from when we interact with children. Our defenses go up and we want to either avoid them - and this happens with leaders who are not fans of conflict - or you want to attack back with harshness or punitive measures.

And knowing this is important, the way that you tend to lean one way or the other, either you kind of go fight or flight, if you're a flight person and you avoid conflict, you're going to avoid dealing with challenging teachers. If you're kind of a fight person, you're going to puff up and take them on. You're going to attack. You're going to be harsh or punitive, and you want to know this about yourself because it reminds us that we absolutely need to check in with ourselves on where we are and what our go-to mode of communication is.

Once you've done the work on your thoughts, it's time to decide if this person has violated a boundary. Now, when we think of boundaries, our brain tends to think of physical or emotional boundaries. Like, your home is

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a boundary and if someone violates a boundary, they've come into your private property physically and they've entered your physical space. Emotional boundaries are when somebody is attacking you verbally and they have - they're saying things that are way out of control.

In this case, what I'm referring to is a professional boundary. Things such as not adhering to the contract, not responding to requests, mistreating a student, a parent, or a staff member, including you, by the way. But I'm talking about professional, respectful boundaries and this happens more often than we realize because adults are just grown up children and we engage in childhood emotions at times and we overstep boundaries, either physical boundaries like perhaps you have a teacher who's going into another teacher's classroom and borrowing things, or emotional boundaries where you've got somebody who's overstepping the way that they're treating another person.

So I want to be very clear what I mean by a boundary. A boundary is something you create in response to a boundary violation. You do not create boundaries with a teacher unless an action that they've taken is in direct violation of their professional contract and their responsibilities, or if they have crossed a personal boundary with you such as losing their cool and screaming at a staff meeting or something like that.

People usually think that a boundary means that are you telling somebody what they're going to do if they cross a boundary with you again. So they violate a boundary and you're like, hey, you need to stop that right now. That's usually what we think or I'm not going to allow this to happen anymore.

Well, that doesn't work because it relies on them taking the action, taking different action. And I know it sounds funny but it's not about what they should or shouldn't do because when you decide that you're going to

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control their behavior, this gets into sticky situations because guess what guys, you cannot ever control another person or their behavior.

And I find this very interesting because I think many leaders believe that they should be allowed to control any subordinate's behavior. We think because we are their boss, they have to behave in the way we want them to. Now, this thought does not serve us. It's not true and it will not get you far as a school leader. We can never control another person's behavior.

Now, this may be a new thought for you and I strongly encourage you to try it on. Play with that a little bit. Is it true that you can control another person's behavior? No. Work through that. Your staff does not have to behave the way you want them to, ever. They're going to do what they want just as you are going to do what you want.

So when you set a boundary, the little shift in your mind needs to be that it's about what action you will take if somebody crosses the boundary. It's very subtle. So let me give you an example. Let's say someone loses it at a staff meeting. They blow up. You're like, what just happened? So you end the meeting and you take some time to do your own thought work about that situation and get to a place where you can approach them calmly.

You do not want to attack back in that moment unless it's an emergency or you feel like you have to protect another individual. But if you can, step back and take some time to clean your thinking. Then the next day you can approach the teacher and ask them if you can check in with them. You may want to ask them what was going on for them at the meeting and what happened, what triggered them, why the outburst.

After hearing that, you may gather some more information to guide that conversation, however, you still will want to set a boundary so that your staff meetings aren't an open invitation for everyone to have an emotional outburst. And this is how you state a boundary. The first step is the request.

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If you have another outburst at the staff meeting, I will ask you to leave immediately. That's the consequence.

So the request is not to have the outburst, the consequence is I will ask you to leave immediately. And then I always follow up with a second request consequence. If you do not leave, then you will not be allowed to attend the meetings and I will schedule a conversation with the superintendent.

So here's what's happening. You're asking them not to have an outburst, or you will ask them to leave immediately. If they do not leave, you're telling them you're not going to allow them to attend the meetings and your action step is to schedule a conversation with them and the superintendent. So you're asking them to honor your request or you will ask them to leave, and then if they don't follow up, you're giving them a second consequence of what will happen in terms of what you will do personally if they don't follow through.

You're stating the request and the action based on what you will do if the request is not honored. Now, keep in mind that you're asking them to take some action, but the responsibility for the consequence falls on to you. This can be tricky because it feels like we are manipulating behavior. But the person is in full control of whether or not they honor the request. It is free will at this point.

All you are doing is neutrally stating the request and the consequences. The ball is completely in their hands, and the beautiful thing about this is you've stated something neutral. You don't have to be mad about it or you don't have to approach them with any type of negative emotion. It's simply here's the request, here's the consequence, here's the request, here's the consequence.

So you create boundaries from a very loving and compassionate space and finally, I want you to know you do not ever need to justify your boundary.

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Your boundary is your boundary. It doesn't need justification. When you get into justification, you kind of open it up for attack and questioning. I don't think it's wrong to rationalize, or I don't even know if rationalize is the right word, but you can give them a reason why you're setting the boundary. That's okay, right? People like to know the why. But you don't have to do that. As long as you've created it out of love and out of compassion and it's not an attempt to manipulate their behavior, the boundary is worthy in its own right.

And one final, final thought here, guys. As leaders, it is not our job to control others but to inspire them into action. When you believe that thoughts and emotions impact the way people choose to behave, then you can see how powerful shifting your focus is from influence their behaviors to influencing their thoughts, and that can create significant changes for your school.

So I invite you to consider this. Focus on influencing their thoughts and feelings over their behaviors. Have an empowered week, my friends, I'll talk to you next week. Take care. Bye-bye.

Hey, get ready for a deeper learning experience with *The Empowered Principal Podcast*. Beginning in January, I will record the podcast for each month based on a theme. The theme for January will be relationships. We'll cover things under the umbrella of relationships such as building relationships, maintaining relationships, handling difficult relationships, and how to end relationships, not to mention, building a relationship with yourself.

You, my friend, are in the business of people and it is important to discuss the problems that arise and build your skill set in managing people and relationship. If you have a specific topic that you'd like me to address, email me right away at angelakellycoaching@gmail.com or you can find me on your favorite social media platform at A Kelly Coaching. Drop me a line

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and let me know what you most need to lead your school from a place of true empowerment.

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.