

Ep #62: Letting a Subordinate Go



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 62.

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.

Well hello there, you guys. Happy March. I hope that wherever you are living it is starting to thaw out, or dry out. For us here in California, we have been absolutely pummeled by rainstorm after rainstorm this winter. You guys, we definitely need the precipitation out here after all the fires and all the drought years, but I am telling you, I am ready for some warmer sunny days.

I know my friends on the East Coast have also been dealing with some wild winter weather over there, and my family back in Iowa, bitter, bitter cold, lots of snow. It's been a crazy winter for everyone. So, let's hope that March puts some spring into our forecast.

Okay, you guys, I'm so excited. This month brings us into our next theme. We're going to talk about issues that come up in your job as it relates to human resources; primarily hiring and firing and dealing with conflicts with your staff, supporting your staff. We're going to be talking about all of the things that are related to the human resources area of your job, but we're going to focus on not just how to do it, but the mindset behind it, so how you set your mind up for handling the human resources that you need to handle in your job.

I want to address these topics from the stance of your perspective and helping you manage your thoughts and emotions when you are dealing with these types of situations, okay. So, be mindful of how you're

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processing these situations and how they will impact your approach and how you experience them.

Today, we're going to start by talking about one of the more uncomfortable topics; letting a subordinate go. What a fun topic, right? Let's talk about firing people... But as a principal, this is part of your role. You have to be able to do this and it causes a lot of distress. And it typically refers to an untenured teacher. Most of the people that you let go are brand new teachers or teachers you've had for one or two years, they're not yet tenured. They're kind of in that practice mode or that contingency year of whether or not they're going to become tenured teachers of your district.

But it also could include, you know, instructional assistants – and I know in my district, we called them IAs – or other part-time support such as yard duty, lunch supervisors, and other roles that you directly assign yourself at your site and evaluate. I'm going to use the example of the untenured teacher for the purpose of today's podcast because that's what you typically will be working with. But you guys can easily apply this work to any situation where you decide you're going to actually have to fire somebody.

I know, it's a horrible topic, right? But I want to address this because I definitely have had my share of these situations, and I can assure you that if you are a school leader, or want to become one, you will find yourself having to let someone go. I can also assure you that these situations never feel amazing. It's going to feel terrible. It's uncomfortable for the teacher, it's uncomfortable for your staff because they're aware of what's going on at some level, and it will be uncomfortable for you.

Before we jump into the how to fire someone, we have to take a step back and start from the beginning. Obviously, your goal is to hire the best teachers you can and support them like crazy to ensure their success. From the very start, you want to have a very effective hiring process and

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mentorship; a system that will greatly reduce the need to fire people in the first place.

We're going to talk about that aspect of the process in next week's episode, but the reason I'm starting to talk with you first about how to let people go is because that's the way that HR works in education. It's different than a corporate setting where people can be hired and fired at any time of the year.

In the educational system, we typically interview and offer positions sometime in the spring. Teachers accept and hire on, they sign their contracts in the late spring and early summer, and then we basically have that teacher on our staff for one full year, one full school year. During the course of that year, you basically have between September and February to make a decision as to whether that person is a fit for your school. If you decide they're not a fit, then you have to let them go.

If they're a fit and they are invited back, pending there is a position available for teachers, right, you have to let teachers go first in order to know what positions you have available on your team. So that's why we're talking about letting people go first. And if you are in this position where you are not quite sure whether or not to hire someone back for a second year – maybe you're not feeling super confident one way or the other – a first-year teacher can be invited back to teach that second year – at least in my district this was the case, it may be different for yours – but you have to decide whether or not to offer them that second year, because eventually, they're going to be tenured.

So you need to decide within basically a two-year window whether or not you're going to keep them or let them go. And again, this process is very different than most other professions. So you have to take into account the way things are done in education.

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So, at this point in your year – here it is the beginning of March – you’ve most likely already completed or you’re very close to closing out your evaluation process and you’re making decisions about who will not return. In the upcoming weeks, you’re going to be holding conversations with these teachers and I want to help you prepare yourself so that you can let your teachers go to another job with love, instead of this feeling of fear and angst about having these conversations about firing somebody.

So, first of all, what does it feel so bad to fire somebody in the first place and what makes this process just terrible in general? So, for one, when we think about our role as a school leader, it seems like we personally have power over the careers of our staff. When we’re making decisions such as hiring and firing, it feels like a tremendous burden when we think about our decision and how that firing somebody can negatively impact that other person’s professional destiny.

It feels very personal. It feels like it’s our business and our fault. Many of us school leaders carry that weight of our staff’s careers on our own shoulders. We feel like we’re doing something to them, like something really negative to them. and the reason letting somebody go feels bad is because we believe that we are personally responsible, not only for their career, but for the way they will feel when they are let go and the actions that they take or do not take that led you to this decision to fire them.

We, as leaders, assume that we know how they are going to feel, and then we feel bad about the way we think that they will feel. Basically, we think that they’re going to feel bad, so we feel bad that they’re going to feel bad because we believe that it’s our job and we believe that their feelings are our responsibility.

We basically project our feelings of how firing will feel for them onto us, and then we think and feel and respond based on our projection of those feelings. These feelings stem right back to our thoughts, you guys. You

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know this, but here the thoughts are. This is the line of thinking; I don't want to fire them. They're going to be upset. I don't want them to be upset. My decision to let them go will have a negative impact on their career, and on and on, right?

And when we believe this whole story, this line of thinking, we for sure are going to feel terrible. You guys, here's the other thing; on a deeper level, we have to get real with ourselves. We also might feel terrible about firing someone because we haven't fully done our job of setting them up, supporting them, giving them the feedback. We haven't done our part.

And what I mean by this is there's something that we know inside of us that we didn't do our share of the process, right? Perhaps we didn't observe them as many times as we feel we should have. Maybe we didn't quite support them or maybe we didn't coach them as much as we felt we needed to in order to make a decision, in order to get them on the right track. Or, perhaps we didn't document specific situations that we are taking into account when we're deciding to let them go.

And, this happens more often than now, perhaps we know, at a deep level, we weren't fully open, honest, and transparent in our feedback, our expectations, and our communication throughout the year. And this teacher doesn't see it coming, and that is when you feel bad, because of your own lack of actions or lack of approach or maybe not quite enough of setting up the stage for this person to understand and be aware of why they're being let go.

These situations sometimes feel worse because we know that we did not own our part of the responsibility. And, guys, I'm guilty of this, all of those things. I've been guilty of all of those, and I know how bad that feels. So I want to share with you what I've learned through my own mistakes so that you can setup yourself for a smoother process of letting teachers go.

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So, some of what I'm sharing with you is the pre-work to having a successful year and a smoother experience with firing someone. But I want to share it with you now so that you can implement these strategies as you hire for next year. You may not be able to fully implement the entire process for the year, and that's okay, because any hiccups you meet along the way this year is going to help you adjust your approach into next year.

So, first of all, what you want to do is clear your thinking and set your intentions. As a school leader, you want to start the year by choosing to believe that every teacher has the potential to be an amazing teacher. You want to clear your mind of any preconceived judgments and set your intentions for the year. This you will need to do all throughout the year, not just at the beginning, and especially with teachers who continue to exhibit instruction or behaviors of some sort that do not meet your standards.

So, be aware of the thoughts you are thinking about this teacher. Write them down, notice which ones are factual in nature and which ones are just opinions. Notice which of the thoughts bring you frustration or pain and which ones are more neutral. What you'll notice is that the facts of the situation tend to feel more neutral.

The thought, the teacher called on three students in a 45-minute period, is a fact, You can count the number of times she called on a student in a 45-minute period. The thought, she should have called on more students in a 45-minute period, is an opinion. And be aware that our brains will try to present our opinions as facts.

It will say things like this, "She called on three students in a 45-minute period? Three?" This can seem like you're just reporting a fact, but what your brain is making it mean is your thought or your opinion about that fact. Do you see the difference? So just be aware that the facts are situations and the thoughts are your opinions of that situation. Being aware that, as a

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human, you're going to have judgments no matter what about the observation of your teacher will help you identify those facts and opinions.

Number two, clearly communicate expectations and give open, honest, and consistent feedback about her actions as they relate to your expectations. Remember, new teachers are so new at everything. They are trying to learn it all at once, just like you are in your role as school leader. They are too juggling student management, parent management, curriculums, lesson design, lesson planning, lesson preparations, grading, feedback for kids, feedback for families, work-life balance, all of it, just as we are, you guys. So, keep that in mind.

And when they're brand new, they need to know what's expected of them in their first year and what to prioritize. They aren't going to have the skill set to manage it all, so it is very helpful to tell them, just directly tell them, this is what I'm looking for, this is where you go for help, and this is what to do if you don't get the help you need.

This means you need to be clear on what it is you are actually looking for. That's very important. You have to know what it is that you want from them in order to communicate it to them. So you need to set your intentions and believe that all teachers have the potential to be amazing and then you need to know your own expectations, and you need to communicate them clearly and consistently to your new hires, right?

And if you do this, you will be amazed at how few leaders take the time to clarify, in their own mind, what they're looking for, let alone tell the teachers what they're looking for. So this is a very important first step. You need to know your own ground rules, and then you need to communicate those ground rules to your teachers.

Once they know what is expected, I want you to support the heck out of them. Check in with them. Ask them what they need. And, most

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importantly, give them honest feedback. Where many of us go wrong is that we tread lightly or sugarcoat our feedback to them. We sidestep the hard conversation because of the way it makes us feel and the way we think it will make them feel.

But think about this; how much harder will it be to have that conversation at the end of the year when they haven't heard it from you sooner? I have made this mistake. So, when you are open and direct with them from the very beginning, they have the opportunity to adjust their approach to teaching and try and meet the expectation you've given them because they know the expectation, right, because you've clearly identified it.

So, this one practice alone, you guys, will help reduce the number of times you need to let someone go because you have given them very specific supportive feedback in what you are looking for in them as a teacher. And basically, that just means, what's the criteria by which you are deciding whether or not to keep them on your team? Let them know that. This is not a test or a secret. They need to know so that they can meet the expectations.

And once you have been clear, open, and consistent in your feedback and you're still feeling like someone's not a match, then you need to start spending a little more time making a final decision and communicating your decision to them personally.

So, how do you make this decision? When you're faced with deciding whether or not to retain a new teacher on your staff, you need a process for deciding. The question that helped me most with this decision was this; am I prepared to commit to this person for 30-plus years? For those of you who have tenure in the district, you need to think past the next one or two years, or even past your own tenure as this school leader of this particular school, because education is different in the sense that when you hire a teacher

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and they're receiving tenure, you are basically entering the district into a lifetime contract with that teacher. It's like a marriage, you guys.

You are offering them a position for better or worse because once they're tenured, they are going to have to do something completely egregious in order to be considered for termination. It's not like you get to fire them for just not doing their job, like in other careers. But you have to really have something horrible go wrong in order for them to be considered for dismissal. It's not like private sector, you can't just be fired for not doing the job.

I don't want to put this additional pressure out there, but you need to know the outcome of this decision. Hiring someone for tenure is a lifetime contract. Now, other questions you can ask yourself before making this decision are things like, does this person exhibit the drive and the attitude required for continually learning and growing as an educator?

Another question might be, are they here to serve? Are they in the business of serving students? Are they in it for themselves, or for kids? That's important to know. And, I love this one too, if that person were to work into your office and say I quit, I resign, would you fight to keep them? If not, that may be enough for you to let them go.

Anthony Muhammed, who is an educational consultant that I have had the privilege of working with personally when I was a principal, he says that you want to observe not just their skill as a teacher, but their will. You will find it much easier to teach the skill of things like classroom management and lesson design to a teacher with a really high will to learn and grow versus a teacher who's got a negative attitude or a fixed mindset.

Now, it's not that a person's mindset can't change. I mean, that's what I'm in the business of, helping people shift their mindset. But you have to decide, where do you want to spend your time and energy and where

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would you rather be spending your time and energy? Would you rather be helping a teacher who's eager to learn new skills and who tries new things, or do you want to spend your energy spinning your wheels coaching a resistant person and trying to get them to see why they need to adjust or try something new?

Be aware of this as you observe your new teachers in a variety of situations and notice how they engage with others, how they respond to feedback, and whether or not they attempt to implement the feedback they've been provided. If you've asked yourself these questions and that the answers are that you don't really feel comfortable offering them a 30-year contract and you're not seeing signs of high will to learn and grow, then you need to ask yourself a few more questions to resolve your decision and make it complete.

Number one, is it for students? Is letting them go for the benefit of your students? Will students actually benefit by having somebody else in that role as their teacher? Number two, is this decision to let them go made out of love? You make decisions out of two emotions, either love or fear. You're either letting them go because it's the right thing to do, and that's love, or you're letting them go out of fear, which really often masks itself as anger or frustration, you guys. Like, if you're really angry at a teacher for their behavior, you're basically really fearful that they're not going to be able to either do the job or they don't want to do the job. And in the end, you're very worried that they're going to cause problems for your kids, your students, your fellow staff members, or you.

On the flipside, when you don't let them go but you feel you should, many of us want to be nice and will go to the extreme of keeping somebody on the team when we really don't believe they should because we believe the fear of fallout that will happen when we let them go. I'll touch briefly on how to deal with this in a minute, but I want you to be aware that our need to be nice and be liked can override our instinctive decision about firing

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somebody. So you need to make this decision out of love for your students and not out of fear, either what that person will say or do so you avoid firing them, or out of fear and frustration because of who they are as a teacher.

Number three, is it in their best interest? And I'm talking about the teacher's best interest. When someone is not meeting the criteria you have established and they do not show the will to adjust their approach, you are going to choose to lovingly let them go. This means that you are doing it not just for your students, their peers, and the district. You are letting them go in their own best interest.

Not letting somebody go who is not meeting the teaching standards is dragging them along, and that is totally unfair to them. You want to view letting somebody go as a blessing, perhaps in disguise, but a blessing for them.

Now, they might not see the benefit now when you tell them that they're not coming back, but you will know in your heart that keeping them in a position they aren't able to manage effectively will only cause them more pain in the long run. It's like parenting; sometimes, you have to say no or set a boundary because it's beneficial for your child. The same is true for our new teachers.

And here's another thing to keep in mind; you aren't saying to them they aren't fit to be a teacher. You are saying that this particular placement is not a fit for them. You are releasing them so they can find the right fit for them. It may be that another school setting works beautifully for them, and that's awesome. I've done this many times. Or, perhaps sometimes they do some self-inquiry because they've been let go and they decide they don't really love teaching and they're actually relieved that you let them go so that they can shift into a better fitting career.

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You cannot assume, as their principal, that you know what's best for them and their career and that you know what they're thinking or what they're feeling. You don't really know. So just know this; you're not ruining their career or their life when your decision is made out of love. The goal in the decision-making process is to decide with clarity based on your criteria, manage your own emotions over firing them, and then having the conversation from a place of love.

So, once you've completed the decision-making process and have self-coached yourself on your own emotions regarding letting them go, it's time to have the conversation. How you set this up will be dependent on your district's protocol. So be sure to check with your HR director and follow your district's particular process. They, for sure, are going to want to know your plans about your teachers ahead of time so that they are prepared as a district for any follow up conversations that might take place.

They may even have a very specific wording that they want you to use when you're letting somebody go, so be sure to follow the guidelines of your district over what I'm about to say. I am not claiming to be an HR expert, nor do I know the laws or specific rules and policies that your district must follow. What I'm sharing with you is more about how you prepare yourself and manage the conversation emotionally versus the exact wording and how you're going to do it specifically.

So, number one, I want you to clear your own thinking and emotions. Do any thought work you need to do prior to that meeting, that conversation, and come from a place of love. And if you can do this, this will be amazing; stir up some feelings of gratitude for the service they provided this year. Think of some things you like about that teacher and that you like about them as a human and come from a place of love and gratitude.

Number two, this is super important, you guys, be prepared. Have the documentation ready to go and know what you're going to say. Be

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prepared. Don't just walk into this meeting like, "Hey, I'm letting you go." Be prepared. Have a process.

Number three, have the meeting with them as soon as possible. Be humane. Do not drag them along. Treat them as if you were the one being fired. Treat them as you would want to be treated if you were the one being fired. And with that said, number four, be as honest as you can be.

I realize different situations call for different messages, and in some districts, you're only allowed to say something like, "It's not a fit, sorry, not a fit." And you're not able to give very specific reasons. And I know, if this was us and if this is you, having had open and honest conversations prior to this firing conversation, like back to the observation meetings, will have been extremely helpful so they can grasp as to why they're being let go.

The more direct you can be with them ahead of time will help you in the situation when you cannot be as direct. This is why setting up from the very beginning is so important. If you haven't done that at this point, don't worry about it, just know, be as honest as you can be because you would want that same courtesy.

Also, number five, be very clear that they will not be coming back to the district next year. So not allow room for interpretation. This is so important. oftentimes, we want to beat around the bush because it's uncomfortable and it becomes very confusing for that other person. Some teachers actually think that you're just not having them back at your school, but that they can go apply to other positions that are posted within the district.

So, if they're not coming back at all, they're not welcome at any position in the district, you need to state that directly, that they're not a fit for the district and that you encourage them to apply to outside districts so that they can find a better match for them.

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And finally, number six, allow them time to process and answer any questions that they have. Be as open as you can. Hold lots of space for them as this is going to be an emotional time.

Now, how do you handle the drama that may ensue between the conversation and the end of the school year? Again, I want you to remember, letting go a teacher is different than in corporate or a day job because you have to let them know that they're being fired months before they actually are fired and leave the position and the campus.

It can be extremely uncomfortable for both them and for you. You guys, think about it. They're often feeling embarrassed and ashamed in front of their peers. Their peers know what's happening and so you want to be as supportive as possible and continue to help them in any way you can.

Expect them to go through a range of emotions. Some people will go through the typical grief process. They'll be shocked, then they'll be angry, they might talk behind your back or blame you as the reason for their being fired. This definitely happened to me. They may sometimes try to bargain with you or beg you for another chance, but they'll definitely, at some point, be sad and they'll be down. They'll be depressed, right? And in this stage, they might ignore you or be rude to you. And hopefully, eventually, they will come to terms with it and finally accept the decision and move on.

Once in a while, you'll find someone who appears to be apathetic about the whole thing. These people are often those who, deep down, are somewhat relieved that you made the decision for them, or they weren't even planning to come back in the first place, they weren't planning to come back to your school anyway, so they're happy that you did the work. You could be the bad guy, they don't have to feel bad, and they're just apathetic about the position and maybe they don't feel like it's a good match for them.

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So, that happens once in a while, but most people tend to get very angry before coming to terms with it. Your job during this time is to be able to hold space for their emotional outburst. You hold firm to your decision and you're going to love them as you would a tantruming student.

You have to be really strong and empowered during these last few months of school. Be sure to manage your emotions throughout this period, because it's painful for you as well. It doesn't feel good to let somebody go, especially when they're talking trash about you, or even worse, when they talk trash about you and other staff members buy in or take sides. So this is a very critical time of self-awareness, self-management, emotional fitness on your end.

Ultimately, you guys, if you follow these steps from the very beginning, you can take faith in knowing you did all you could in your leadership to support and to guide them towards a successful tenureship at your site. You've taken all the things into consideration, communicated openly, and made the decision to fire them out of love and respect for them as fellow humans.

It is not always easy to have these conversations, but following a process that includes emotional clarity and stamina will set you up for the most successful conversation possible. I hope this information has been helpful for you. I know this was along podcast, but there was a lot to cover.

If this has been helpful for you, will you please do me a favor and share this podcast with fellow colleagues and peers. Please, spread the word that there is support for school leaders out there through your professional groups, your social media groups, and your fellow school leaders. We need more empowered school leaders out there who can hire and keep the best teachers for our students. Have an amazing week, you guys. I'll talk to you next week. Take care, bye-bye.

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