

Ep #64: Supporting Your Staff



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Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 64.

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. Happy Tuesday, everybody. How are you all doing this fine week? I am getting ready to head to Dallas Texas for a business course with The Life Coach School. I leave this coming Thursday, so I'm recording this at the end of February. I am so excited to go see all of my fellow coaches and friends, and I'm really stoked to learn from my mentor coach. She is amazing.

And as most educators are, I love, love, love learning new things. I love being with other people who are in the same boat as me so that we can talk about what we're doing and how we're problem-solving and how we're learning together.

You know that feeling when you attend a conference or a workshop, especially when you go with a group and that energy is super high and really invigorating and you're so excited to be there and you're so excited to learn and apply this new knowledge and then go back and share it with your team? That is how I feel whenever I get together with my friends and colleagues at The Life Coach School. I love it so much. We are such an incredible force; it's amazing.

So, I am doing that at the end of this week and I am happy to be here with you guys today. If you are new to the podcast, welcome. We are so happy to have you here, school leader. We are just thrilled. So, on with the show. Today, we are going to talk about the ways in which you can support your

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staff from an emotional standpoint, and how doing so will positively impact the way your staff views your leadership.

Now, on the surface, supporting your staff sounds like an obvious part of your role as a school leader. It makes sense to the brain that we would naturally be supportive of our team. However, I can attest to this personally, when you are in the throes of dealing with all that comes at you in a given day as a school leader, it is not as simple as it sounds.

Our goal is to bring awareness to how we are currently supporting our staff members and the ways in which we can improve this practice, because on the day to day, it is not as easy to come across as being supportive, especially when you are having a rough time, a rough day, something's coming at you, you got angry parents or you've got a crisis situation on hand. It can feel like you are not being supportive to the needs of your teachers, especially when they come to you and they see something as an emergency and you don't.

So, we're going to talk about that. We're going to talk about how you can openly and lovingly support them while maintaining your integrity and your calendar and your schedule and attending to all of the other needs that you must do in the workweek.

I recently spent some time with a group of teachers and I asked them what types of support they most appreciate and look for in their school leader. And I guess I wasn't surprised by this, but it made me really think. Their overwhelming response was this; we want our principal to have our backs.

Teachers want to know that when they come to their principal with a problem, that the principal is going to authentically listen to their story. They want to be heard and they want to feel as though the principal actually cares about their problem and believes what they are saying.

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As I was listening to this conversation with the teachers, I initially thought to myself, what school leader doesn't do this? Who doesn't support their staff? But, the more I listened and the more I thought about it, I reflected and realized, wait a minute, I too have been guilty of not listening, truly listening, plenty of times.

Perhaps a teacher caught me at a time when my brain was just completely occupied by something else, or I was really rushed, I was busy, I was running from one thing to the next and I didn't have time to stop and really take a moment to listen. Or even worse, and I say this with complete vulnerability and honesty, as I know I have former teachers out there listening to this podcast, so I'm being honest with y'all; there were times when I just didn't fully believe in their story.

I either didn't believe their version of the story or I didn't feel like all the parts of the story were there, or I didn't believe maybe they had really tried or done everything in their power to resolve this problem on their own, like they were kind of being lazy and coming to me just wanting me to take over for them and not taking care of it themselves.

You know, it's easy to want to think that when you yourself, as that school leader, are feeling so busy and so overwhelmed and over-burdened. And this was really hard for me to admit to myself. Of course, I wanted to believe all of my teachers all of the time and I wanted to support them, but in truth, when I got really deep with myself, I have to admit, I was often consumed by my own problems and my own schedule.

And I also had judgments about some of them as teachers. I also wanted to be liked by the entire outside community. So, when you think about your teachers and then the parents and then that greater community, what ends up happening, it's kind of like your family versus acquaintances or colleagues, right?

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In your family, you might treat your family members not as respectfully all the time as you would somebody on the outside. We're really good, as a society, about being very polite and intentional and kind and courteous with people we know less well and we want their approval. It's interesting; we want the approval of strangers almost more than we want that approval of those closest to us.

And teachers are like family. We're working together every day trying to serve kids and serve families and we can get a little jaded once in a while about each other or what we think about one another. So, when we're working with a community, we want our image on the outside to be very positive. And so, sometimes, we will lean to supporting those on the outside versus those on the inside.

And I say this not to make me look bad or you feel bad. We're both human beings, first and foremost, and we're school leaders second. So we are going to have judgmental thoughts about the people we work with. We just do, you guys. That's just what brains do. The key is not to stop and try to prevent your brain from thinking judgmental thoughts. The key is just to be aware of them.

When a staff member approaches you, you just want to notice if there's any resistance. And that feeling of resistance, it often comes from thoughts such as, "I don't have the time right now, I'm busy doing something else, I don't want to be interrupted, this person is always coming to me for help. Why can't they solve their own issue? I'm not sure they're being totally honest. What's really going on here?" We have this whole list of thoughts that come up when we're feeling some resistance to meeting with a teacher or a staff member.

And basically, the thoughts produce this feeling of being imposed upon, like you are feeling that you're being burdened and this burden has come to

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you upon your shoulders because your brain is basically making it mean that now you have to go and take time to solve their problem.

And a common example of this is when a parent and a teacher have a disagreement. So, you've got someone in the family having a conflict with somebody on the outside, right? It can be really challenging to support that staff member when the parent is mad and they're threatening to go public with the conflict if you don't side with them. This happens to school leaders all the time. It definitely happened to me.

I've seen school leaders who will consistently side with the parent. And not because they don't want to support their team, but because they want to be liked and they fear what will happen to them if they receive public criticism for standing behind their teacher, because parents can really rally up some intense support on their side from other parents or community members, or they go to the district office, right?

So they can really rile up some intense emotions around this, and it can feel easier to just side with the parent versus backing up your own team. And what happens is that your actions become all about what others will think of you and how you are feeling versus listening to that situation as objectively as possible and coaching our teachers through the process knowing that we are in integrity and supporting them as our team.

Not that we're not listening to parents, but we want our teachers to feel like they have someone on their side who they can go to and get the support and coaching they need to help them problem-solve on their own. So, how do you hack your own thoughts and judgments when something like this comes up?

This is what I suggest; when a staff member needs your attention, you have to hear why they need you and decide if you can take them in immediately or if you truly need to hold onto your tight schedule. And this is

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important because knowing the topic and knowing what's going on can help you decide this in a moment.

Sometimes a teacher comes to you and it's a true emergency and you are so happy they came to you and you want to drop what you're doing in order to help them take care of this problem. Other times, a teacher will come to you and what they feel is an emergency is not exactly an emergency in your eyes.

And you do have the right to decide if their issue is going to become an emergency for you. I remember so many times saying to my staff, "A lack of preparation on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part." So you have to be able to decide this. So you'll need to know what's happening. If you have something you need to address or complete and a teacher comes to you with an issue, you need to know whether that issue warrants immediate attention or is one that can wait until you're able to give it your full undivided attention.

So, first, decide if it's an emergency on your part, not on their part. And this is a very empowering piece of leadership. If you allow anyone and everyone to come to you with every problem they have, they will become dependent on you to solve their problems. You do not want to encourage this behavior.

You want to support them by choosing a time that works for you to listen fully and help them. But if you hear the situation and you decide that in fact they do need your immediate attention, allow this person your full attention. It's all in or all out. And if it's not an emergency, tell them you want to meet with them and you're going to schedule a time within the next 24 hours if possible.

And this is why; you want them to know that you care and that you are open to meeting with them at your earliest availability. So, make that

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decision, put it on the calendar within 24 hours, if possible, and then prior to meeting with them, you want to notice any thoughts you are having about them or this situation.

If you are experiencing negative emotion about having to meet, just know that you're simply having negative thoughts about that meeting. You just need to be aware of what the thoughts are. And if you're in really strong resistance, like you're feeling super annoyed at the thought that you're having to meet over this, you need to do a brain drain of all that you're thinking, because it's just your thoughts creating those emotions.

You will see those thoughts, which are going to be judgments and opinions, pop up. And then, you can just self-coach yourself and tell yourself you're going to meet with an open and clear mind. The goal is not to burden teachers with your thoughts about them.

Think about this; they're busy worrying about themselves and their students. So don't add to their plate what you're thinking about them, even though they're adding to yours. This is a part of being a leader. Step up and be the leader. They're coming to you because they need help with a problem. Don't burden them by being annoyed at them because they're coming to you as their leader.

Let them come to you knowing you are the leader and that you are capable of listening to this story. Now, it doesn't mean you have to own their story. It means you are agreeing to listen to it without judgment, or as little judgment as possible. Clear up your mind before you meet with them, and then when you meet with them, be fully present.

Listen to that story, take notes, and, guys, believe what they're saying. Assume positive intention. Assume they are telling the truth to the best of their ability. And when something sounds off or you don't have all the details you're looking for, be curious. Ask them questions. Try to

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understand their line of thinking and what's going on with that situation in their eyes by asking lots of great questions.

Keep asking questions. It might feel like an interrogation, but you're really trying to get to the bottom of where they're at, what's going on, why they're thinking the way they're thinking, and you want to hold space for their emotions and believe to the fullest intent that they are coming to you in good faith.

So, I tell myself things like, "I hire capable teachers who want to do their best and be their best. My teachers are capable and confident and are coming to me because they don't know how to solve the problem on their own, or they would have done it in the first place. Teachers mean well and have positive intentions and they want to solve this problem."

So, keep this in mind. Use those thoughts to drive your emotions into positive energy. And keep this fully in mind; the fact they are coming to you indicates, one, their trust in you, and two, in their belief that you can help them. This is a good thing, you guys. You want your teachers coming to you. You want them to trust you and believe that you will do what it takes to help them, even when that means coaching them to their own conclusion or coaching them that they have more action to take on their own because you're going to step in.

But giving them that time and space to hear them out, and to help them come to a conclusion and knowing the next step they need to take will help them feel supported. And then, finally, you just want to help them as best you can.

After you hear what's going on and you've asked all the questions and you feel like you have a strong understanding of what's happening, you want to help them. You want to say yes whenever possible. Sometimes, this means talking it through and helping them come up with a solution on their own.

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The goal is for staff members to feel that you care about them and that you're interested in helping. And part of supporting them is helping them see how they can help themselves whenever possible. You are empowering them when you help them see how they can solve their own problem and the time it takes to coach someone through a problem-solving process.

And through a couple of sessions of problem-solving, that can ultimately reduce the time you spend solving other people's problems. Do you see that? Other times, you are going to determine that it is best that you step in and handle the situation from here on out. But taking the time to hear the details will make this determination easier for you, and it can also help you in the long run, because sometimes what happens is a teacher will try to handle something on his or her own without telling you anything, and it ends up making the situation more complicated than if they had just come to you for help in the first place.

So, you want teachers to ultimately feel comfortable running things by you so that you get to decide who should handle it. When teachers experience you being this open and helping them decide who and how a situation should be handled, you are going to earn their trust and faith in you as a leader.

Also, know this, teachers want to teach, and they want you, as their leader, to lead. Leading involves knowing when to make top-down decisions and when to take more time for input or consensus. There are plenty of decisions that you just need to make as a school leader for the sake of your teachers.

Believe it or not, teachers want you to be decisive, even when they don't necessarily agree with or like your decision. So this means that you must be willing to let people not like your decision. You have to be able to not be liked or have them not like the decision, because what this does is it takes

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the burden of input and consensus for every single little decision off of their plates so that they have time to make decisions for their students and their classrooms.

Think about all the decisions you make in a day. If you allow yourself to worry what everybody else is going to think about every single decision that you are going to make, you're going to bog yourself down and nothing's going to ever get decided. This leaves your staff in limbo.

Leaders who are doing this are doing a couple of things here. Number one, they're trying to people-please. And number two, they're trying to sidestep from taking full ownership of the decisions made on campus. If you are constantly asking input from your teachers and then someone complains about a decision, it's really easy to say, "Well, I asked you for your input, you should have said something then." Do not fall into this trap, you guys.

Do not rely on your teachers for input and consensus for every decision. They want you to be decisive. Decide, communicate, and let others be responsible for how they feel about the decision. And, guys, in the worst-case scenario, you receive input about that decision, you reflect on it, and you decide to change it or adjust it, so what? Big deal...

Make the decision and let it go. You will find that when you are willing to make decisions for your site, teachers will feel supported by this and they are going to appreciate the time that you have saved them from helping you make all of the decisions that you're responsible for as a leader. Can you see that?

Okay, finally, with that said, supporting your staff also means staying in your lane. And what I mean by this is that you want to spend your time tending to your work and not micromanaging everything your team is doing. There's one thing to be observant and know what's going on on your campus, but there's another thing to be constantly micromanaging and

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getting into their business and worrying about every little tiny thing they're doing.

You want to stay in your lane. You want to do your job and you want to respect them and allow them to do their job. So, basically, you are believing in them and you are trusting them to do their work because you are busy doing your work.

Supporting your staff ultimately comes down to treating them as you want to be treated by your district administration. There are times when you've exhausted all of your ideas on how to problem-solve and you want to talk it through. There are other times when you really need some help and you want someone to step in and help you solve it.

You want your district leaders to make decisions so that you don't have to try and figure out everything on your own, and you want them to give you the autonomy you need to run your school. You want to feel supported and you want to feel trusted. Your entire school staff feels the same way about you.

And I want to say, in the end, that even when you approach your staff in this way and you're very intentional and very conscious about being supportive, there are going to be times when you have to take measures into your own hands. Your staff members are human too.

They're going to complain before they've tried to solve problems. They will sometimes not tell you everything in full disclosure. They will not like your decisions and they may act out of displeasure. They're going to do and say things that don't contribute to the greater good and you will want to respond accordingly. I understand that.

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We will talk about this in next week's episode as we explore what to do when conflicts arise on our staff in different scenarios. Okay, so start this week, you guys, by becoming more aware of how you approach your staff and the ways that you can help them feel supported.

So much of the way that they feel about your level of support is the energy in which you show up while you are with them. Be mindful of your emotions when your staff members approach you and they want to talk with you. And shifting this energy into this openness and this acceptance and this wanting to help and be supportive can make a huge impact on the entire climate of your campus.

Thank you so much for listening, you guys. I hope this has been helpful. If so, please share it with a colleague of yours. I love to hear from you. And, you guys, drop me a line and let me know, how are things going? What can I do to support you?

I just had a client reach out to me and say, hey, you know what would be a great topic? She told me a great idea for a topic. I'm going to put it in under the leadership theme. I think that month is in July. So I'm going to be talking about how to handle leadership in crises. I think that's a fabulous topic. Thank you, Stacey, for suggesting that.

But if you guys have a topic or you have a concern or a question or some of this podcast isn't jibing for you, reach out, let me know, I would love to help. Have an empowered week, my friends. I will talk to 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.

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