

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

[The Empowered Principal Podcast](#) with Angela Kelly

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 65.

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, everybody. Welcome to the end of March. Spring is finally, finally in the air, finally. And we are seeing more sunlight than we have in probably the last four months. Come on, what is happening right now?

For sunny California, as they say, this has been quite the gloomy and rainy season, and I know that we needed the rain, I really do, I get it, but I am so happy to see the sun again. I thought that the rain would never stop.

As I record this, my son and I are just about to head to Iowa to visit my family. It's Alex's spring break coming up and he wanted to spend his week visiting with my mom. Isn't that the sweetest? He's so sweet. Alex is her only grandson. My sister has two girls who are both amazing women now, and that being said, Alex has a special place in his grandma's heart because he's the only male and there's only three grandkids.

And I love to go back and see my nieces, and they have a special place in my heart because I did not have the joy of raising any girls. So, I love to be with them and they love to be with Alex. It's just the best. And listen to this, my oldest niece, she has two little ones of her own, and of course they're the most beautiful babies I've ever seen. They're the sweetest. They have such gentle tender hearts.

And my niece gets in the car and drives seven hours each way from Illinois to Iowa whenever I'm back home just so I can see the kids, and her, of

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

course. But I think that is an incredible feat for a mother with a toddler and an infant. And my younger niece, Brenna, is wrapping up her freshman year in college. And this girl is incredibly talented as a singer and a musician.

I can't wait for the day I get to see her performing onstage. My son is studying screenwriting, so I want to go to the Oscars when he goes and is nominated for an Oscar. And I want to go see my niece when she is a Grammy award-winner. So, talent abundance in my family, I'm so excited.

But I also love my younger niece because she is super into coaching, so she's always asking me coaching questions and we talk all the time about her friendships and her relationships. And I really look forward and I think it will be super fascinating to see the impact that self-coaching has on her life as someone who's learning the skills at such a young age. It's so good.

So, anyway, that's my family life. That's what's going on with me. Let's talk about you. Today, we are going to wrap up our March theme by discussing how we manage conflicts that arise within our staff. I want to talk about conflicts that arise between staff members outside of you, like between two different people, and when the conflict is directly at you, I should say.

So there's conflict outside of you and conflict that's directed at you personally. Let's start with the conflict that occurs between members of your team. As a school leader, you are bound to hear about conflicts between people on your staff. It might be between people on a grade level team, it might be a teacher and an instructional aide. Perhaps it's two different grade levels arguing or having opposing views. Or maybe it's just two individuals somewhere on staff who do not get along.

I've had all of this happen. So if your staff is like most others, it doesn't take long for the gossip train to stop by your station, your office. You're going to hear the rumblings, because when people are in conflict, they talk. They

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

usually talk to their team members or they talk to their friends on campus, and eventually, someone is going to say something to you. It will get back to you. It always does.

I have a client right now who's dealing with this. She's got a staff member who comes to her regularly to complain about other staff members. So this person will basically come to her and tell her their side of the story, but then in the end of it all, ask her not to say or do anything about it. So, she feels conflicted. She's like, "Why are you coming to me telling me this but then you're not wanting me to do something, but now I feel obligated to do something because I know there's something wrong."

So, when you're the principal and you hear that there's a problem, your first instinct is to want to directly intervene and go ahead and solve the problem. We are wired, as leaders, to fix and solve problems. That is what we do. We did that as teachers, we do that as leaders.

So, my client right now, she's in this predicament where people are coming up to her and telling her about the problems they're having, and yet they're asking her not to take any action. And knowing there's a problem and then feeling like you don't have permission to solve it can be super frustrating and stressful.

So, what would you do in this case? So, let's take a step back and look what's happening behind the scenes of this particular individual's scenario. So, step one is to listen and ask questions. When a person approaches you and has something that they want to talk to you about, you want to listen very openly and ask lots of questions.

And I know that I say this about many of your interactions with people at work, but listening and asking are the tools that we most often overlook and underuse. The reason they're so effective is that they allow you to diagnose the full situation of what's happening, just like when you go to the doctor. A

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

doctor doesn't just jump in and tell you what to do without asking or checking you out, examining you.

They conduct this full exam by asking you a lot of questions, gathering information and data, getting very specific with you and they allow you to do all of the talking. So, as a school leader, this is your role much more often than you think. It feels like we should be doing all the talking and all the directing. No, you're listening, you're diagnosing, you're examining, you're exploring, you're asking.

When someone comes to you with a complaint, you can start by asking them why they're coming to you. Like, just be curious. What expectations do they have of you? Are they just wanting to vent? Do they need help figuring out how to solve the issue on their own? Or do they expect you to intervene?

You want to know this from the beginning because it will impact the questions you ask and the information you are seeking. And knowing this will adjust the way that you need to listen. Listening to someone who just wants to vent looks different than listening to someone who wants to file a formal grievance. So, right off the bat, you'll want to know what outcome the person is seeking. Asking them directly what outcome they are expecting will sometimes snap them into an awareness, and they may decide not to share with you.

So, what I mean by that is you ask them, "What is it you're looking for? What outcome? What are you really wanting from me?" They'll be like, "Whoa..." and realize that they're just looking maybe to tattle on somebody or maybe they're looking for sympathy and they step back, they decide this isn't really a good use of our time, let's not go there. But sometimes, it's legitimate and they really do need to talk it through. That's cool, that's why you're there as their leader.

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

But other times, they won't know what they want. They're not really sure why they're coming to you, and so you might have to sit down with them, and through the process of listening and asking, you have to figure out as you go. And if this is the case, you're going to want to be on the lookout for the reason behind them coming to you as they speak.

You can ask them questions such as, how can I help you? What is it you're looking for? How do you want to solve this problem? What support do you need from me? That's kind of step one is all the listening process, and that might take a little time.

And step two is this; you do not want to jump in the pool with them. This is a coaching phrase, jumping in the pool, that means you don't want to get invested in their story. So, as a coach, people will tell me all the time all these situations, and I can very easily relate to them because I've also experienced them as a principal.

So it's easy for me to be like, "Oh my god, I totally had that happen to me, this is what I did..." and I get emotionally invested in this story and I'm jumping in the pool, right? I'm swimming around with them in a hot mess and I'm not able to coach them from a neutral standpoint. So when you get invested in what they're saying and believing in their story, you begin to experience the same emotions that they're having.

You cannot coach someone on a problem when you buy into the problem, when you believe it's the problem and you believe their reasonings as to why it's a problem is a problem, right? So, for example, let's say that a teacher comes in and complains that her teammate's room is an absolute mess and that the colleague is spending so much time looking for materials during their planning meetings that it's driving her crazy and it's taking forever.

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

Now, if you jump in the pool here and you agree, yeah, that person's room is a mess and I would be really upset if she were taking all this time to get herself pulled together, you're jumping in the pool. So you've got to remain neutral. You've got to be the doctor. You've got to be looking for the neutral information. You want to ask the questions and you want to extract the facts away from the opinion.

And as the listener of the teacher's story, your goal is to be a neutral observer. And this is challenging as a principal. And I'll tell you why; that brain of yours. It's going to tell you that you should solve the problem because you are the principal and it is happening on your campus and you are responsible for every single little thing that happens on your campus. This is what our brains tell us.

You've got to tell your brain to slow its role and take a step back. And physically take a deep breath if you have to remind your brain to focus and listen. I have to do this all of the time. As a coach, as a school leader, I had to take the deep breath, remind myself I'm listening for the facts. Your job, as the neutral observer, is to separate out the facts versus the opinions.

And in my experience, most teachers who come to you to talk about another person, they're pretty fired up. If they're coming to you, they're spending time and energy coming to you, they're fired up. They're choosing to approach you because of the intensity of the emotions that they're feeling.

So, when they're sharing, it's coming from a pretty emotionally intense state. Your job is to remain neutral, slow things down, ask questions, and take note of any of the facts that she's relaying in her story. Now, remember, facts are situations. They're completely neutral until we give them meaning. And that person is definitely going to be giving their story meaning.

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

When the teacher shares that her colleague's room is so messy that she's spending forever finding her materials or whatever, there are really few facts stated in that sentence, right? What you can do is ask some questions like, well how long is she taking? How many minutes specifically is it taking her to find the things that she needs? So if she shares with you, like, she's spending at least 10 minutes looking for her things, 10 minutes is a fact. It's a situation.

But the ideas like her room is so messy, it's taking her forever, those are all opinions. So you've got to be really clear what facts and opinions are so that you don't get caught up in the story and the opinions and the perspective of this person. You've got to dig down and ask specific questions to uncover as many facts as you can.

Once the person has shared her entire story, you can again ask her what she wants to do next. Talking this through out loud, like sharing her story, may have helped her process and think through how she wants to approach the situation.

If, after sharing, she isn't sure what she wants to do, then you can offer some suggestions. Some sample options for her might be, number one, you can allow this to continue to happen and let the colleague join the meeting when she has her materials. Two, you can speak to your colleague and let her know that searching for her materials is impacting the planning meeting. Three, you can let her know how it's impacting the meeting and ask how you can be of help. Or four, you can ask her, you know, maybe the teacher that has come to you has already talked with her colleague three times, she's attempted to solve the problem on her own, and now she's running to you because more intervention is needed and she'd like you to join the next meeting so you can facilitate a group discussion.

So, you have to get clear as to what that teacher wants so that you know how to coach them, guide them, help them create next steps or know that

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

you're going to have to be a part of the process. Here's the key; when a conflict arises between two individuals on your staff, the conflict is between them. It is not your responsibility as the school leader to take on the conflicts between other people.

Now, I know your brain might tell you it is your responsibility, but it really is not. There are conflicts on your staff that you are never aware of because the people are able to handle them on their own. So, know that people are capable. When people come to you to complain about someone else, your goal is to empower them to seek solutions to their own conflict.

You can coach them and guide them on different ways that they might approach the situation. Ask them how they want to handle it and let them come up with their own solutions. Now, if they can't, you can offer ideas of your own. But ultimately, they need to be the ones who decide which approach they feel is going to work best for them.

Now, if someone comes to you and complains and then says to you, "Hey, don't do or say anything," which basically mean they were coming to you just to vent or to tattle, then you need to do just that. Don't get involved, you guys. If, after listening, you feel yourself spinning on it, your brain's starting to chug in there and think about it, persevere, or you feel the need to get involved, it's time for you to self-coach.

You need to ask yourself why it's bothering you. And it will often be because we believe we should step in and solve it. Because we're the leader, our brains keep thinking and going back to this thought. Like, well I'm the leader, I should take responsibility. Or you think that there's something about that situation that has a bigger impact on your staff, your students, or your campus.

So, let's say someone comes to you to complain that a colleague is not coming out for yard duty and that she's the only one on the yard at recess.

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

But she doesn't want the person to know she told you because she doesn't want the conflict. She doesn't want to feel like she's tattling, so she's asking you, don't say anything to that teacher.

Now, this is a legitimate reason for a teacher to come to you if she's tried to ask that person to be on time and come out for yard duty and that person's not doing it and she comes to you to let you know but she doesn't want to have a negative impact on her colleague or the relationship with her colleague, you can step in and say, "Okay, this is a safety issue."

You can let the person who came to you know that this is not acceptable and that either she can say something to her directly to solve the problem, if she hasn't yet tried, of course, or you can step in and ensure that there's adequate student supervision. You want to give this personal choice on how it gets handled, but ultimately, it is now up to you to follow through and ensure that that problem gets resolved, because it is a bigger impact on your students' safety and on your campus.

Now, what do you do with conflicts that don't directly come to you but you hear about them through the grapevine? The infamous grapevine – these are the type of conflicts where people talk about others and people might take sides and then there's this buzz of gossip on campus.

So, while the initial issue may not have even been of a high priority, or it's not even related to teaching and learning – and usually, what this really comes down to is like a conflict outside of campus, like a social issue, maybe something that happened at happy hour or something that happened at a party. Why knows where it happened, but it happened away – it becomes the gossip and sometimes it will blow up into a bigger deal.

It can actually create a lot more tension and staff and in your culture on campus than a teacher having a messy room, let's say. These things can blow up into a big deal. So, in most cases, the simplest thing to do is just

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

not get involved. And again, I know this feels like you should take the reins and stop the drama, but if you start taking action on every conflict that occurs on your campus, you are going to be spending so much time and energy doing just that.

Gossip and hearsay can pull you into the pool and get you so invested in trying to solve other people's issues that it takes up all of your time and energy and attention, guys. So, the rules of thumb I use are this; there are two things I ask myself.

Is the gossip directly impacting students, teaching, or learning? Is it having a negative impact on my students, in the way we're teaching, or on the way we're learning or functioning as a team? Number two, is the gossip harming another individual? Is it hateful, hurtful, detrimental to somebody else's wellbeing?

As a school leader, you have to maintain perspective. People in work environments are going to talk about other people. They're going to have conflicts. It's just the reality of the workplace. You do not want to get blocked down with the minutia of other people's day to day interactions. This will take a tremendous amount of your time and energy, unless the drama has gotten to the point that it is impacting students and learning or it is creating harm to another individual.

If not, it's best to allow people to work through their conflict and trust that they're capable of handling themselves and putting kids first. You can exhibit your trust in them by having expectations of how the adults on campus are to handle themselves. Having a conflict resolution in progress for your staff and lovingly holding them accountable to it, will decrease the time that you need to spend stepping in and solving other people's conflict.

There will be times when you have to do it. If it's directly impacting student achievement, teaching, learning, or if it's harming somebody, yes, you want

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

to step in as the leader and take charge of that situation and nip it in the bud. If, however, it's something you're hearing, it's a little tussle that somebody's having, you want to stay out of it.

And I want to side-note here, the way that adults on campus behave is the way that the kids on campus will behave. So if you have a conflict resolution plan for students but not for your staff, this will be evident and kids will not follow the process that you have in place.

Anything we expect kids to do, we should expect of ourselves. This means learning how to communicate effectively, problem-solve, handle conflicts, and feel and express our emotions appropriately. So, this is just my little side-note, have a conflict resolution for your staff in place that mirrors what you expect of kids.

Okay, let me move on. Last but not least, how do you handle a conflict when it is directed at you personally? Now, this will for sure happen to you as a school leader at some point. A staff member is not going to be happy with something you do or say or a decision you make or they just don't like you personally. I've had it all happen to me. And really, like, sometimes people just don't like your leadership style. They liked the last principal, they don't like you, and they're going to talk behind your back, they're going to make snide comments during meetings. It's going to happen, you guys, trust me.

So, what are you going to do about it? And if you've been listening to the podcast or you coach with me, you already know my answer. You self-coach, got it? You do not need to confront anyone when they are directing their opinions and negative emotions your way. You know this, right?

It's really tempting to want to do that. Here's what you do; you self-coach and you allow them to be in charge of their emotional response and you be in charge of your emotional response, because that is what emotional

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

adulthood looks like. Managing our own thoughts about other people and allowing them to own their thoughts and feelings and not feeling like we have to control them because we're the leader, but rather allow them the responsibility for their own emotions and get out of their business and get into your business of managing you.

So, obviously you're going to run a STEAR Cycle, but in addition to running a STEAR Cycle, I want to offer you three questions that my friend and colleague, Elizabeth Salazar, has created for her clients. She is amazing. I love her. I coach with her and she is just outstanding. She came up with these three questions.

Number one, when something's bugging you about something somebody has done or said, number one, what do you make it mean? What is your brain making this situation mean? Number two, what can you learn from this? What about this situation is triggering you? What can you learn from it? What can you take away from it? And then number three, where can you see your responsibility in this?

When somebody triggers you, it is always a reflection of you. Any time you're thinking something negatively and feeling something negatively, there is a mirror into your little heart and soul that is creating that feeling. So where can you take responsibility?

And sometimes, somebody's opinion of us stings because deep down it's our opinion of ourselves. So, use these questions to help you work through your emotions regarding conflict that is directed your way. Know that the truest answers to these questions are not going to feel comfortable. They do not.

Actually, Elizabeth just coached me this week with these questions. But I will tell you this; stepping into the ownership of our emotions does require practice, stamina, and self-comfort. But these questions, I'm telling you,

[The Empowered Principal Podcast](#) with Angela Kelly

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

they're ninja coaching questions, and they're going to empower you faster than you can imagine.

So, when it comes to conflicts on your staff, you guys, think of them as the conflicts that students have. You expect students to have conflicts on a regular basis, so you don't make their conflicts mean anything is wrong with you or that you're not doing your job. You hold space for your students. You don't jump in the pool with them and you help them process the situation, you guide them towards solutions, you help them take ownership of their role in the conflict and of their emotion, and the same is true for the adults on your team.

We're just all humans trying to figure this out, right? We are forever learning the process of emotional ownership, and this is how you do it. This is what it looks like and this is how you evolve. So, take that, conflict.

Alright, you guys, that is the end of our March theme. Next month is amazing, we're going to be jumping into money. We're going to talk about money blocks, we're going to look at all of our negative emotions around money, why we spin in education, all the things about money. Nobody's out there talking about money except what we don't have.

We are such a scarcity and lack mindset when it comes to money. I'm telling you, I'm going to turn it around. So, join us in April. We're going to talk about money, we're going to coach through money blocks, we are going to get you empowered and on the money train. Have an amazing week.

Hey, if you haven't signed up for a mini session with me yet, what is up? You have to check out what personalized coaching feels like and how transformational it can be. It's one thing to learn the concepts, it's another thing to practice and apply them. Sign up for a consult call today and let's get you on the path you know you were meant to live.

[The Empowered Principal Podcast](#) with Angela Kelly

Ep #65: Conflicts on Staff

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.