

Ep #73: How to Act in Courage



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 73.

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 happy Tuesday, everybody, woo-hoo. You, my friends, are so close. You've got a three-day weekend on the horizon, and I bet your body could not be more ready for it. I'm curious to know what thoughts you are thinking throughout the month of May and how you are feeling now that it's near the end of the year versus what you were feeling at the beginning of the month.

And the reason I ask this is because May, for me, was really interesting because it's a really long month in terms of number of schooldays. But because it was at the end of the year, my excitement for the warmer weather and the longer daylight and the looming summer break before us carried me through all of that testing chaos and the overexcited children and the over-exhausted teaching staff.

I had to focus on the things that gave me energy versus the things that I was so tired of dealing with just so that I could keep showing up with a little bit of patience and a smile on my face. How about you guys? Like, what is May like for you? And I want you to know I'm thinking about you and that you are so near the end and you have done an absolutely amazing job this year.

And I know you are not thinking that you have, you're thinking about all the things you didn't get done or all of the things that didn't go right. But I'm here to tell you, just by showing up, just by being a school leader means you're amazing. You're superhuman, you have a cape. It might be invisible,

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but it's there. So pat yourself on the back, you guys, and really give yourself credit where credit is due. Okay, I want you to do that.

So today, we're going to talk about how courage is necessary in our lives as school leaders and how we need to build it up in our minds and in our bodies so that we can take action in courage. So many of my clients say that they want to be confident, and when I ask them what that means for them, what they say is that they want to be courageous in their decisions and feel like they know what they're doing. They want to be competent and confident.

When we talk about having courage, we typically refer to it as an emotion. We say things like, we want to feel courageous. When we think of courage as an emotion, we basically think of it as the lack of fear. We think of it as fearlessness. And this idea of courage being considered as an emotion is interesting to me because feeling courageous is not really what we want. That's not the goal.

We say we want to feel courage because we know intellectually that our emotions have an impact on how we approach any given situation, because emotions are what thrusts us into action. So if we are feeling courageous, then we are willing to take action even when our brain is telling us to be scared and that we are in danger. But the feeling that we experience when we're exhibiting the act of courage, which is why I talk about it in terms of acting in courage, the actual emotion we are in when we are exhibiting actions of courage is not pleasant. It's actually scared or afraid or fear, worry, doubt. It's all of those feelings that aren't pleasant in the body.

So think about a time that you felt courageous. And I want you to really drop into that situation. Think back to a time where you were feeling courageous. And I'll give you an example just to help get your brain into it. I

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think of a time when I was holding a parent meeting one day and I knew well ahead of time that I had a parent who was coming to blast me.

He was enraged because he was mad that he received a letter from the school district, but it had my name on it, so a letter from me basically, talking to him about his child's unexcused absences. The family went on an extended vacation. They came to me beforehand. I explained to them what was going to happen.

I explained that yes, those were not going to be excused absences, even though you're telling me that you're going on vacation. So you're going to get a letter. Just get the letter, ignore it, I know you guys are on top of your game, I know your child's doing well in school, so just ignore the severity of the letter. The letter is written in legalese and it's going to be very intimidating, just ignore it.

That is not what happened. It triggered this person. They were irate. They talked to a bunch of parents. There was this little group brewing. They were coming to the meeting and they were going to let me have it. I knew it was coming. I felt a lot of fear and anxiety and stress about how I was going to handle it, how I was going to handle being like called out in front of other people. My body responded with a surge of fear.

So even though I wanted to go in there with being bold and courageous and brave, the feeling, the emotion that was present, what was resonating in my body was fear. So I just want to identify the difference between the two. Because we say we want to feel courageous and we believe that feeling courageous is a good feeling. And I'm here to say it actually doesn't feel good. But the act of courage propels us to do things in spite of the fear.

So think of a time for you. What was going on with you? When was a time that you needed to act in courage to move yourself forward, to do something anyway? And why did you need that courage? You needed the

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courage because the fear you were experiencing in your mind was resonating through your body, but you knew that you had to take action in order to get to the other side of it. So you leaned into the very thing that you were afraid of.

Real courage is very uncomfortable, and that is because it requires vulnerability. I recently watched Brené Brown's talk on Netflix and it was called The Call to Courage. And did I learn so much about what courage is and why we have such a complex relationship with it as a society. We are told to be courageous, but don't put too much of ourselves out there or people are going to hate on us. We've got the trolls out there, right?

So on one hand, we're told to be courageous and brave and bold and do all the things, but on the other hand, don't take risks, don't put yourself out there. People are going to hurt you, they're going to say mean things. So we get these conflicting messages as kids. We grow up with them. And then, as an adult, we're in constant dissonance in our brain about shall we be courageous, shall we not, shall we pullback, shall we put ourselves out there?

So we value courage and bravery but we define vulnerability as weak. There is no act of courage that does not involve uncertainty, vulnerability, and risk. As school leaders, it is our responsibility to promote and encourage a culture of vulnerability in our schools. And promoting a culture within our school that allows and invites vulnerability starts with our own willingness to expose ourselves to acts of vulnerability and courage.

So, why should we act in courage? Why should we risk being vulnerable? Why should we, as leaders, have to expose ourselves to criticism, rejection, and failure? Because to me, before I became a leader, it seemed like the further up the career ladder that people went, that they should be able to feel more safe and secure, that they had an office versus a

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classroom, that they could close the door, they could leave campus if they want to.

They had more opportunities for safety and security than teachers did. That's how it looked to me. Well, let me tell you, I've been a beginning teacher and I've worked in many positions up that ladder all the way up to a district office position, and I can tell you this; as a leader, you can lead in one of two ways. You can spend your time and energy hiding and protecting yourself and you have plenty of opportunities to do that, or you can lean in and you can allow yourself to be even more exposed to the haters than ever before.

I've seen both in my colleagues and in my bosses, in my peers. I've seen instances where we lean into it and I've seen instances where we hide. I've seen both, and believe me, I've exercised both personally. But in the end, the reason that we choose to act in courage as leaders is so that we can create a new result; a result that otherwise would not happen if we chose to stay in our comfort zones.

You guys, this is so, so important as a school leader. We can never ever expect to get brand new results if we're not willing to expose ourselves, to try new things, to get out of our comfort zones and to be willing to be vulnerable. As Brené said in her talk, and I highly recommend watching it, you guys, it's like an hour and 20 minutes, it's on Netflix. I'm sure it's probably on the internet somewhere if you don't have Netflix so watch it when you have a minute, or 140 minutes or whatever, but watch it when you can.

But what she says is that without vulnerability, there can be no creativity, and without a culture of failure, there can be no innovation. So here we are, wanting our kids to be creative and innovative, but we're not setting up a culture of creativity and innovation because we ourselves are not willing to be courageous and vulnerable. It's so powerful. I could do a whole series

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on Brené Brown's work and how it should translate into the school system, but we shall save that for another day.

I do reference her a lot because her work is so valuable and it directly aligns with our work as school leaders. So check her out, Brené Brown, there's a lot of good stuff. She's written a lot of books. There's a lot of good stuff her way.

So, how to act in courage – the difference between fear and courage is in the belief of possibility of accomplishment. So the way that I see the difference between fear and courage is this; when fear is taking over, it's because our brain is leaning towards the belief that the result is not really possible. We tend to believe like, oh my gosh, if we do that we actually will fail, or we actually will die, or we'll actually not get the result, it's not really possible. So fear locks us down and prevents us from taking action in courage.

However, when courage takes over, the vibration of fear is still present in the body. It's not like we eliminate that, but the mind believes that the result is possible, it's attainable, and that it's willing to do the scary thing because it believes that the result on the other side is, number one, available, and number two, worth it.

It believes that you're not really going to die, emotionally, socially, or mentally, or physically, and that going through the process is worth feeling those intense vibrations of fear. So, in order to choose courage, we have to focus on the results that we desire from acting in courage.

One way to do this is to celebrate your past accomplishments that occurred from acting in courage. So all of the moments from your past that you have acted in courage, you want to celebrate those past accomplishments because this builds evidence that your efforts are worth the pain of feeling the fear. List them all down. List your past acts of courage so you can help

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your brain see that you're not going to be in harm's way and that your efforts will pay off because they have paid off in the past. You're building evidence, right?

Another way to build up your courage is to be aware of your fear. Emotions are the signals your brain uses to get your attention. And these negative emotions are also communicating to your brain that your brain is making something mean you're in danger. Now, that might not be true, so you have to question it.

Whenever you're having a strong emotional reaction to something or you find yourself really resistant to taking action even though you're telling yourself that you want to take the action – something as simple as calling a parent who's left two voicemails and sent an email to see if you got the voicemails, you know, that parent, right? "I've left you two voice messages; did you get my voicemail? Have you had a chance to read my email yet?" Those people, and then they bug you and you don't want to do it – you will most likely have a limiting thought lurking around if you're avoiding getting back to that parent because you're like, I don't want to deal with them, it's going to take too much time, it's going to be painful, I don't want to experience this, they're going to be mad, whatever it is.

So use your emotions as a signal to stop and ask yourself what's going on. What are you fearing and why? Once you identify what your brain is trying to protect you from, then you go ahead and shift into your prefrontal cortex thinking and you can rationalize whether you're actually in real danger or not. Nine times out of 10, you're not.

But the brain, like I told you before, it cannot identify that difference between that emotional and social fears versus the physical fear. So, when you're exploring what thoughts are causing you fear, you may need some alternate thoughts on hand to consider, otherwise you're going to blindly believe that the danger isn't worth the risk.

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So I like to have thoughts that are created ahead of time. So here's a couple you can try on. These are the ones that I use. You can make up your own. I can do this. It's possible. I want it bad enough. This will not kill me. This is really Important. I'm committed, no matter what. What's the worst that can happen? How likely are these worst-that-can-happen scenarios? Is this for a bigger purpose? If so, I'm doing it. I've gotten this far and I can handle mistakes.

The truth is that emotions involved with acts of courage and vulnerability are really, really uncomfortable. They basically suck, you guys, it's just the way it is. There's no way around it. That's why it's important to have some alternate thoughts to promote that courage and spur you into actions of courage.

Because the truth is that fear immobilizes you, it just sucks, it's horrible. Nobody likes them, yet everybody experiences them. We are hardwired to care what others think. We want to be liked, we want to belong, and we want to be accepted. So we have to consciously choose to step into a zone of discomfort – that's what I call it – if we want to be exceptional leaders who have influence and impact on their school community.

And one last word of inspiration – our job as leaders is to be a role model of vulnerability and courage so that our teachers and our students will feel safe enough to do the same. We must change the culture of our schools by being the example of what is possible. And the more we exhibit courage and vulnerability, the more evidence you'll create for your brain that you can handle it and that it's worth it because of the results that you will create, which include impact, legacy, connection, and joy.

So, my friends, I invite you, find opportunities to act in courage. You have what it takes. I know that you do. I love you guys. Go be empowered. Get on it.

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Hey, if you're enjoying the podcast and want to dive deeper into your empowerment, I invite you to join me for a free mini-session where we just on the phone together and talk through what's going on in your school. The fastest way to get your courage on is by talking about what's working, what's not, and what it is that you truly want. Sign up today at angelakellycoaching.com.

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.