

Ep #74: 4 Ways to Act Courageously as a School Leader



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 74.

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, my Empowered Principals, happy Tuesday. I'm so happy to be here with you today. How are you? I am amazing. I am thrilled that summer is here. I am so excited because I am going to be presenting at the National Association of Elementary School Principals at their national annual conference. It's being held this year in Spokane, Washington, July 10th through the 12th, and I am presenting the *Empowered Principal* concepts, my book, my podcast.

I will be there. I cannot wait to meet you. If you are coming, please come up and say hello, please stop by and come to my session. I will give you more information. I believe that it's on the 10th, the first day, and it's right after lunch, it's around one o'clock. So I'll give you specific details on it later in the podcast, but I know that I will be there. If you are going to be there, I want to have you come say hello. Wouldn't that be awesome to meet in person? I would love to meet you guys.

So, I'm pretty stoked about that. I've got a lot of fun things going on. I'm heading to Portland actually in the next couple of weeks, going to a work event up in a little town called Corvallis. It's near Portland. There's a small university there, so I'm looking forward to seeing that town for the first time, and then I'll be staying with some friends in Portland, just for some R and R before I come back to the beach.

So, today it's out Tuesday podcast day, it's the last day of May. We are going to talk about acts of courage as a school leader. So I thought to end

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this month's podcast that we could briefly touch base on some of the acts of courage that school leaders most often face and provide you with some thoughts to commit and take the action when you are facing a fear so that you can build up your capacity, competency, and confidence in these kinds of situations.

Okay, so situation number one, let's talk about making difficult decisions. Part of being a school leader involved making decisions. It's interesting how we want to become school leaders so that we can have an impact on students, yet when we're in the position, we squirm whenever we have to make decisions that are impactful. It's so funny, right? Humans are so cute, I love us; we're so crazy.

Some of my clients hire me because they're afraid to make really string decisions and stand by those decisions. And I have to say, like, I can relate to this from my past. I remember being a little girl and telling my mom that the last job I ever wanted to be in the world was a judge because I didn't want to have to make decisions.

It seemed so finite. It seemed so critical and that the world's weight would be on my shoulders if I were a judge and I had to make decisions about people's lives. And as a school leader, we can feel that way too. We feel that heaviness and that burden that comes with making decisions as it relates to children, other people's children, our students, our staff, their careers.

I had a client one time who was so worried about making these decisions about her staffing and having to let go of some people because there weren't enough positions and how impactful that was on her. And I said, you know, in the big scheme of things, that person who you have to let go, they're on their path. It was their destiny to end up at another school. It's okay. It's not that you denied them access to their career, it's just that their chapter with you was just very short, and that's okay.

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So when you become a school leader and you start having to make those really significant decisions that impact a lot of people, I remember thinking back to the time I had told my mom about not wanting to have to make decisions. I didn't want to be a judge and I actually laughed out loud. I was like, oh my gosh, here I am, sitting in a job that is full of making decisions all day long.

Isn't that funny? Here we are, making decisions all day. One of my colleagues used to say to me, will you please just decide where we're going to go for dinner? Like, my brain cannot make one more decision today. I'm like, sure, no problem.

So, yes, as leaders, we make lots of big and small decisions all day long. You're making so many, you don't even realize how many you're making. And for most of us, the small ones don't have a ton of impact, but many of them over the course of one day can put us into decision fatigue. And decision fatigue can be reduced by limiting the number of small decisions that fall onto your plate.

So this is where delegation can be really helpful. If you know what you want and you've trained the person that you're going to delegate to how to handle these small decisions in the way that you would like it handled, then you can pass that along and avoid having to make every single decision on your campus every single day.

So, here's what new leaders tend to do with the bigger decisions. So, the little decisions, take them or leave them, delegate them, let's talk about the bigger ones. When we're new, we tend to either avoid them, we contemplate them for a long time before we decide, we stew, or once we decide, we waver back and forth and we change our minds and change our decision based on other people's opinions.

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All three of these approaches, you guys, it takes up so much energy and time and it weighs you down from getting to the things that matter most. The reason you choose to approach decisions from this way is because you're worried about the outcome of the decision, usually in the form of what people will think and feel about you and your decision.

So you'll avoid decisions because when you do decide, that makes you responsible. And if you're responsible, then people are going to hold you accountable for that decision. And if they don't like the decision, they're going to talk about it and they're going to blame you for it. And nobody wants to be blamed, right, but that's part of the game.

So listen up, there is a time and a place for input and consensus. I'm not saying you make top-down decisions all day long and you never waver. What I'm saying is that there are times and places for that. There are times where you need to make swift strong decisions as a leader and then there are times where you can take more time for input or you can take a longer time and have full consensus.

And we can talk about different types of decision-making processes in a future podcast, but for now, I just want to focus on the decisions that you know are your responsibility as a school leader. Making decisions does not feel comfortable. If you are a person who spends a great deal of time contemplating every decision, like you ask for others to weigh in, you agonize over the decision, or you're afraid to fully own that outcome of your decision, if you're that kind of a person, you tend to believe that there is a right or a wrong decision. So you spend your time and energy looking at all the pros and the cons and asking everybody around you what they think you should do.

You're also really worried that others are not going to like your decision, and in return, they're going to talk about your or judge you or try to get you to change your mind, which many of you end up doing. Come on, let's be

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real, I did it too. So I'm not blaming you guys, I'm just telling you, this is how we go down.

But when you waver because of other people's opinions, you are opening yourself up to a career of never-ending decision-making. So, here are some tips on decision-making. Number one, you are the leader. Leaders make decisions. It is okay to stand up and make a decision and stand by that decision. Number two, decisions are based out of love or fear. You make them based out of love or fear.

So when you're facing a big decision, check with yourself to see why you are making the decision and determine if it's coming from a place of love. For example, this is in the best interest of students or my staff or myself. Or do you make decisions based out of a place of fear; I should do this because or if I don't decide this, people will...

When you're making decisions based out of fear, they're not necessarily decisions that will hold or decisions that you feel that you can stand behind. Number three – this is a really important one, write this down – there is no wrong or right decision. Did you hear me? There is no wrong or right decision, you guys. There is only the decision you feel is best at the time you make it.

Decisions can only be made in the moment. You can't know what's going to happen in the future or rely on the past as an assurance that a decision will work or not work. You can only decide based on the information you have at the present time.

Number four, decisions can always be changed, but be clear about why you are changing them. If you are changing something because you have new information and a new decision is now the best, then move forward. But if you are wavering on the decision because someone's angry or somebody doesn't like you or they verbally attack you or they talk about

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you behind your back or on social media, all the reasons, all the kind of crazy ways that people get you to change your mind, I want you to stop and consider, is the decision still in the best interest of those involved?

If so, you keep it. You stand beside it and take the heat. It's okay, you're not going to die. People won't like you. People are going to say mean things and it hurts. It stings. But you can get the support you need to get you through those emotional wounds and get you back up on your feet. And when you know you're making the decision based out of love and in the best interest of those involved, it's much easier to stand behind.

Number five, process your emotions around the decision. You guys are human beings. You have emotions. You are going to feel badly sometimes. You're going to get the sting of rejection, the sting of the trolls and the haters. It does not feel good. It's awful. But you can learn how to process those emotions around the decision.

You are responsible for your emotions and other people are responsible for theirs. Decide that your decision was made from a place of love and process any thoughts you have about the other people's opinions about your decision. And use the STEAR Cycle and notice how other people's words are impacting your impact as a leader.

Do the work, run the cycles, run how you're thinking and feeling now, how you want to be thinking and feeling, and see if you can close that gap into what's going on, why you're feeling badly, process that emotion, work through it and get to the other side.

So, here's the truth about decisions; life is just a long series of decisions. We are making decisions constantly, whether we are conscious of them or not. Allow yourself to make a decision as quickly as possible, and then move on, so you're freed up to engage with your school in other ways. You guys, don't spend time in constant worry and confusion and overwhelm and

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fear. Know that when you make a decision from a place of love versus fear, you will find it much easier to stand behind that decision when those opinions from the outside get rough.

Okay, we talked about decision-making. The second act of courage is to say the truth to the best of your ability. And by truth, I mean your perspective or your opinion, because there is no one truth. There is only like your truth, your perspective, your opinion. So I really think this is important because being honest with yourself and others is one of the hardest things we do.

We are trained from a very young age not to say what's on our minds, to be polite, to not be rude, to have our manners, to be in check. We're trained not to say what we think is the truth but to say what we think will make other people feel comfortable. Isn't that interesting.

So, just know this; saying the truth is not the same thing as being rude. There are ways to speak truthfully that are not rude or disrespectful. And that doesn't mean that other people are going to agree with you or like what you have to say. It simply means that you don't say something you don't mean or that you don't believe just to make somebody else feel comfortable, and it means that you do what you say you believe is accurate based on your own interpretation.

So, for example, most principals, and I'm certainly guilty of this, don't give completely honest feedback to our teachers. We sugarcoat, we tread lightly, we beat around the bush, or we altogether avoid bringing something up and expressing our thoughts about what we observe in the classroom. And we do this because, one, we've been trained to as little children all the way up, and number two, because it feels really uncomfortable to us to say something that we believe will make somebody else feel uncomfortable.

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So we feel uncomfortable making somebody else feel uncomfortable, and therefore, we avoid speaking the truth because of the way it makes us feel. And we will mask talking about our own feelings about it because that would be selfish, and we mask it by saying we don't want to hurt the other person's feelings, that's why I'm not telling the truth.

No, we need to speak our truth. And it's really tough because we're wired for love and belonging. We want to be liked by others and we do care about other people and how they feel. But when we hold back what we believe to be true, we are doing a disservice to ourselves, to others, and to our schools.

I invite you to notice where you tend to skirt issues or tell little white lies or speak indirectly to people. See if you can find the courage to speak up at least once a day. Just start small and then build up your courage to say the things that are a little more uncomfortable.

The third act of courage is to be willing to try new things, be willing to fail, and be willing to be judged. It sounds fun, right? That is why it's an act of courage, people. When we're new leaders, people expect us not to know what we're doing. They expect us to fail once in a while. And this can actually be a benefit.

Martha Beck calls this the kindergarten complex and she tells us to use it to our advantage. She says, like, when you're brand new at something, take full advantage of it. Be new. Be curious. Ask a lot of questions and ask for help when you need it. Be like a kindergartener and try all of the things, be willing to fail and try again.

Like, if you've ever gone into a kindergarten classroom, those kids, they don't care if they fail. They don't care what other people are thinking, that they're new at something or they've never tried something before. They jump right in. They're eager to learn. They want to try, they want to fail, they

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want to see how things work. And the good news is that if you try something and fail, you will know what doesn't work and then you can just make a new choice.

Failing is an option. You should fail as a leader, you guys. If there's one thing I wish that we could do in schools it's to just drop all the stigma around failing and just do it. Just Do It, like Nike says, right?

We are the leader after all. We get to choose what we do. We get to choose how we do it. We get to try and fail, it's okay. So do not fall into the falsehood that you have to continue doing something just because at one point in time you decided to try it.

I'm sure that you've seen people out there who continued doing something just because they decided it at one point and they don't want to be seen as wavering on their decision so they keep doing it even though it doesn't work. They dig their heels in. And if you've heard this before, that is absolutely the definition of insanity, right?

So, deciding to change after a failure isn't wavering, let's be clear on that. Deciding to change after a failure is being a smart and savvy leader. Like, you try something and you decide something and you do it until you see that it doesn't work. You have proof that it doesn't work. You have evidence or you're stagnant, it's not getting you anywhere. It's okay to change.

When you waver is when you make decision A and then B and then C and then D because of other people's input before you've tested your theory or your decision, right? So, be open to failure because that is how we create and innovate. And I'm going to say this directly to you; let people judge you.

So what, what they think? You know, again, I mentioned Brené Brown's talk, the courage to act, I can't remember what it was now, but you know, she talks about people who are critics tend to be sitting in the stands. So if

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they're not down in the arena playing the game, why do you give any of their words time, attention, and weight?

Drop it, don't even worry about it, just move on. Let them judge you. When people would criticize me or judge me when I was working as a principal, I would have to tell myself, like hey, they can judge me as soon as they've been the school principal. They have no business assuming they know what to do or have a better plan when they're not in the hot seat. And the way I do it doesn't have to be the way that they do it, doesn't have to be the way somebody else does it as a principal.

So let me share something with you; I had a teacher who was constantly complaining about every decision and every request the district made or that I made. And when she was making her concerns public, like I heard them through the grapevine, but if she made those concerns public in a meeting, I always stopped and asked her for her input. If she was complaining, then I thought to myself, if she is complaining, she must have an idea about how to do this better.

I mean, if you're complaining that somebody's not doing something right or the best way then you obviously have a thought about how to do it better. So I would always ask her directly, hey what are your thoughts? How do you see us improving this?

And, to be honest, sometimes she had some really productive feedback and I would use it. But other times, she really had nothing. She was just whining. So by asking her and allowing her to judge me and to criticize me and to give me input, I was actually able to glean some important information at times and make some positive adjustments. But I was also able to take stock of what was true feedback versus what was her just not wanting to have to change or do something that she didn't want to do.

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But listen to this; it also allowed her to be heard. And because I would ask her for her opinion in front of other people during the meetings, it sent the message to everybody else that it was safe to share their truths and that they would be heard and taken seriously. So even when I didn't take her suggestions, I allowed her to say what she wanted to say.

I allowed it to be said. I allowed her to judge and criticize. And hey, like, let people openly criticize and judge you and be open for that dialogue because the truth is that none of us really know. A lot of what we're doing is trial and error and we need to try things, fail, and try again. And we need to be open to that feedback.

So, let me clarify something. I did not do this with her in the beginning of my tenure because, quite honestly, I was really afraid of being seen as incapable. Now, you have to know, this second school that I was a principal at, it was my former school that I taught at. So these were my peers and they were now extra critical because I used to be like an equal to them and now I was their boss. So they felt very comfortable questioning my decisions or my thoughts or my processes.

So in the beginning, I didn't push back because they were my peers at one point in time and many of them my close friends, and I was really worried about, like, was I capable enough, was I competent? I didn't want them to think that I wasn't capable of the job. So I certainly didn't do it in the beginning and I didn't do it all the time.

Like I had my moments of hiding and resistance and even resentment, you know. I get mad sometimes, right? And I had moments that I wasn't proud of. I had moments where I was critical and I was judgmental. Trust me, I had plenty of them. And I share all of these moments with you so that you can learn from my experiences, both my successes and the times I have bombed.

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So just consider being open to failing, to judgment, to criticism, and just know, guys, everybody can have an opinion about what you do. And to be honest, they have it whether they're saying it or not. So let them say it. Put it out in the open. The worst thing that can happen is you're going to feel bad about it. You can process the emotion and move on. But you are the boss. It's okay.

Number four, and this is my final act of courage, I want you to consider being transparent, open, and honest. I think that one of the most important and courageous acts of courage that you can take is to be transparent. I have seen so many school leaders hide their own vulnerability. They think that it's important to be right and to be strong and to be protected and guarded and to always be professional.

And it comes across as callous. I think it's one of the most vulnerable acts of courage that you can take as a leader. Allowing your staff to see you for the human that you are lets them know that they are okay to be human too. If you're a leader who's always trying to be right, you're always trying to look right and act right and know everything and be on top of it all and you never let them see you sweat, your staff is actually not going to be able to relate to you. And they will judge you more if they can't see the mistakes that you make and they don't hear how you made the mistake, how you failed, how you processed the failure, how you corrected the failure. And if they don't feel like you ever fail, that, basically, you're telling them that they have to be perfect, that they have to strive never to fail.

Let me tell you another story; I had a colleague, a fellow principal of mine who was a really close friend. He and I collaborated together all the time and we worked super well together. And when it was just us, he was totally himself. He was casual and open. He had a great sense of humor and we would swap stories and we would just laugh at ourselves and situations until our sides hurt. Yet when he was with his staff, he was super polished

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and professional and he never let them see his real emotions, or even emotional at all. He was almost robotic about it.

And I knew it was because, at a deep level, he wanted to be perceived as knowledgeable and professional. But his staff felt he was like really distant and they were disconnected from him.

He and I shared an instructional coach between our two schools. This woman is amazing. And if you're listening, Instructional Coach Amanda, I love you and I'm shouting out to you. My instructional coach, Amanda had an amazing way of getting my friend to loosen up.

She and I would tell him all the time, like, relax, be human with your team. And then one day, he was going through a very emotional personal situation and it was on a day that he was facilitating a staff meeting. He was obviously really distracted by his thoughts and he was overcome by emotion at one point. And so he shared with his team that he was facing some challenges in his personal life and he actually shed a tear or two right in front of his staff members.

And afterwards, like a day or two later, the three of us were talking about it, and our coach who happened to be at that staff meeting on that particular day, she told him that that was one of the best staff meetings he had ever had and that people were talking about it so positively and they were feeling such emotion for him and such compassion because he was allowing them to hear and see the human side of him.

So the moral is this, you guys; you are human. They are human. Parents are human. Students are human. Be human. Be open. Let them see you being you. You don't have to cry or sob or tell all your dark secrets to get sympathy from your staff. That's not what I'm saying. Just allow yourself to express your authentic emotions and share your triumphs and your failures. It's one of the most empowering acts of courage that you can take and your

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staff will be so much more likely to follow your lead when they know that perfection is not the expectation.

Leaders, the way to empowerment is through acts of courage. You cannot sidestep it. You cannot go around it or fast track it. You must go through it. You've got this. I believe in you. Go get empowered. Practice acts of courage. Have an amazing week and I will talk to you in June.

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 jump 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 really 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.