

Ep #83: Leadership After a Crisis



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 83.

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.

Hello, hello, happy end of July. You guys are starting up full steam ahead come tomorrow. Oh my gosh. So, this week, we are going to talk about a topic that was requested from one of my clients. She asked me to do a podcast on the topic of leadership in the midst of a crisis and how to handle the emotional toll that a crisis can take on a school leader.

I'm happy to bring this up in the podcast today as a way to express support for every school leader and to acknowledge the intensity of work that you do on a daily basis. You know, most people don't stop and think about the weight of responsibility that comes with being a school principal. They don't realize that you have at least 500 or more of other peoples' precious babies on your watch every single day.

You also have to consider the staff members and parent volunteers that are on your campus that you are also responsible for. There's a lot of people who rely on you, not only to lead the school instructionally and manage the day to day operations of the school, but to keep them safe and to help them- manage the emotions that come up for them when a school community experiences a crisis.

I want to explicitly state that I am not an expert on crisis management and this is not a podcast on how to act during a crisis. I strongly recommend that you know and practice and adhere to your district's protocols on what action steps to take during any type of an emergency.

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What we're going to focus on today is how to manage the emotions that come up for you after a crisis situation has occurred at work and how you can take care of yourself and others. When we're experiencing the actual emergency, our bodies will naturally go into this auto mode based on our fight, flight, or freeze response.

Your emotional state will be revving really, really high from the adrenaline rush, which means your ability to intellectually process is going to be low. As I tell my clients, when emotions run high, intelligence runs low, meaning that we're not able to process and handle our emotions from an intellectual, our cognitive state, when we're supercharged.

Our emotional state is what determines our approach to something. And when you are experiencing a crisis situation, your ability to stop and process your thoughts and emotions is going to be low. Of course, it is. You are simply going to have to react based on the situation at the moment. You're going to have to make lickety-split decisions. You're going to have to do the best that you can with what you know at the time of the incident.

So, the focus for today is on processing the emotions that stem from the thoughts about the situation after it's already occurred. So we're kind of fast forwarding to what happens, what do you do, once a situation has happened and it's over and it's under control and now you're left to deal with the aftermath.

All humans will experience pain at some point in their lives. It is just a part of being alive and no person is exempt. We all experience loss. We all experience grief. It is how we choose to process our pain that determines how long we will feel the agony of our pain.

And we tend to approach pain as human beings in one of three ways; one, I call it inaction. And inaction is where we actively resist and avoid processing and feeling pain, so we don't take the action of allowing and

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processing pain. Two, we react. This is our typical response. We let the emotion of pain determine our actions. We just respond in the way that we feel. We're not stopping the question, our thoughts about it. We're not even really stopping to consider what we're feeling or why we're feeling it, we're just on full reaction to the intensity of the emotions that are in our body and we're acting out on those.

And then third is intentional action. This is when you are being purposeful, being reflective, being mindful of the emotions that are occurring in your body and you're choosing to take intentional action to allow yourself to process the pain. So it doesn't feel like we have a choice when our emotions are so intense, but we actually do, even when it doesn't feel like we do. We do get to choose to resist and avoid or we can choose to just react, or we can choose to intentionally choose to process and allow this pain to be present. Let me dive a little deeper into each one of these areas.

So, inaction is when we avoid and resist feeling intense pain. And I call it inaction because we are not actively choosing to feel and process through the pain. We're avoiding the emotion altogether, trying to sidestep it because we think that, if we avoid it long enough, we won't have to experience it and that it will just go away. Have you done this before? Have you just tried to pocket it up and compartmentalize it?

We tend to buffer. We tend to distract ourselves from the pain. When a situation occurs that triggers painful emotions, the emotional vibration can be so intense that we do everything within our power to avoid feeling it. We buffer with whatever distractions we have available to us to push the pain to the side.

So some people might eat, they might over-drink, they might watch TV, they might just sleep all day or they might over-exercise. When I was going through a particularly painful time in my life, I noticed that I surrounded myself with my friends during every waking hour I had. I never would allow

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myself to be alone because being alone left me to see and feel all the thoughts I was having about this painful situation.

It just felt torturous to be alone and so I avoided processing the emotion and allowing it to be present in my body by letting my friends distract me and comfort me and basically help me think about other things other than this pain I was going through.

And this technique can help release the intensity of the emotions in the moment, but only for the short-term. When your brain drifts back to the thinking about what happened, the waves of intense and painful emotions are going to come right back to the surface. And in some cases, you've compounded your pain because your method of buffering creates unintentional consequences in your life.

For me, being around my friends didn't really add to my pain; it just prolonged it. But if you're a person who goes into isolation or sleeps for hours on end or eats or drinks in addition to what you normally eat or drink, you will find that you are compounding your pain by adding weight, then you're feeling bad about the weight gain. Or you don't eat and you extremely lose weight and now you're underweight, or you just feel like apathetic and you avoid taking care of your personal and professional business, which could cause all kinds of problems, you don't pay your bills or you don't show up for work or when you're at work you're lashing out and responding in this negative way.

So there are unintentional consequences that can compound our pain and that is kind of an unexpected, or we don't even think about that in the moment when we are in such pain. We don't think about the unanticipated outcomes that come from avoiding and buffering and distracting ourselves.

Now, a little side note here – please know that there is nothing wrong if you choose to buffer for a period of time or you find yourself processing some

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pain, buffering a little bit, processing some pain, buffering, as long as you are aware that you're choosing to do this, that you are temporarily choosing to give yourself some relief from the pain you're feeling.

Buffering can provide you some needed relief, but where it becomes a problem is if you are buffering unintentionally without thought. When you are buffering for extended periods of time with the purpose of not ever wanting to feel the pain, this is when buffering turns into reacting. We are allowing the pain to determine how we act.

I'm going to talk a little bit more about this in a minute, but just be aware that you can intentionally choose to buffer. You can say, you know what, I've processed a little bit of this pain and now I'm going to give myself some relief, but I'm also going to try again tomorrow, or try again tonight, something like that. Be aware of what you're doing and how you're processing the pain.

We resist pain by believing that the crisis that occurred on your campus – let's say something horrible happens and we all know – I could list a ton of crises that could happen anywhere from school shootings to losing a student to a health issue or a car accident or losing a teacher, anything could happen. So whatever you determine to be a significant crisis on your campus, just refer to that in your mind.

So, any crisis that occurs, we want to believe that it shouldn't have happened. We beat ourselves up. We wonder what we could have done differently to prevent it. We want to fight against it and believe that it should not have happened when it did.

We resist those feelings of emotion and we trade the emotion of pain in for emotions of anger and frustration. We do this by shifting our thoughts that trigger grief and sadness. That's when it did happen and we're acknowledging that it happened and we're sad about it and we're grieving

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about it – to thoughts that trigger anger, disbelief, resentment. So those thoughts that we buffer, we don't want to feel grief, so we end up being angry. We want to resist that it happened and we're mad that it happened and it shouldn't have happened and we blame other people or we blame ourselves and we judge the situation by saying this shouldn't have happened, or we blame somebody else for being the reason that we feel so awful, right?

So I'm not saying that you should not think that something terrible should not have happened. This is really important. Listen up here. What I'm saying is that when you think something should not have happened but it did happen, the conflict between the reality of what happened and your thoughts about it, that it shouldn't have happened, are definitely going to bring up negative emotion for you.

You can choose to think that it should have happened and then process that pain that you're feeling because it did happen. Or you can decide to be angry that it happened and keep thinking thoughts wishing that it shouldn't have happened, it didn't happen, I didn't want this to happen. Either way, you're going to feel bad.

You're going to feel anger and frustration and resentment, or you're going to feel grief, pain, suffering. But one approach is going to allow you to release the pain, and one is going to sustain it.

Reaction – this is number two – reaction is when we allow painful thoughts to run in our brain without question and we let ourselves respond to whatever emotional state we find ourselves in. We react any time we do not process the thoughts that we're having about a situation and we act out in response to our emotions.

We've all done this. We've all been in an emotional state that's negative and then somebody approaches us and wham, we snap at them or we yell

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at them or we give them the stink-eye, right? But when you are reacting to your emotions unintentionally, you're not thinking about how you're acting, you're going to react.

Being in a state of reaction is typically most people's MO. So when they feel intense pain, they believe that they have no control over how they are going to respond to that pain. So they do whatever they can to provide comfort to themselves in that moment or they act in a way that doesn't really serve them or those around them.

So, for example, and I mentioned this earlier, you might respond by either yelling at people around you, snapping at them. Sometimes we just blame the universe or blame god for what happened or we embellish what happened in our mind. We make it bigger than it actually was and we make it mean something more than it was and we make it mean something terrible about ourselves that we're not a worthy principal, that we're not meant to be a school leader and that we should leave because this situation happened.

We can really get into a story about what a crisis means, what it means about us as a leader, what it means about our team, what it means about other human beings, what it means about the world. And I'll discuss this a little bit further when I talk about this concept that I call cluttered pain.

So the third one is intentional action, and this is the type of the action that I recommend to you. Intentional action is when you allow yourself to process the emotions that come from having experienced a traumatic loss. You allow the waves of pain to come. You don't try to avoid them or fix them. You just let the heaviness of the pain be present in your body. Doesn't that sound like fun? Processing pain is no fun, but it does also hold the key to your freedom from that pain.

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So, how do we go about processing a crisis? The simplest way to explain how to process a crisis that you experience is that you are going to allow yourself to feel the pain. You're not going to try and mask it. You're not going to try faking it until you make it. And you're not going to pretend that you are okay.

So many of us leaders, we try to pretend we're okay. We don't want people to see us down. We don't want them to think that we're weak or that we're not capable of handling a crisis situation.

You are going to allow yourself, as the leader, time to process your own emotions so that you can effectively continue to lead your school and support those around you in processing their own pain. As leaders, we think that we should suck it up, be strong, and not show a really strong emotional response, and I want to say, I think this is the worst thing we can do.

When a crisis has occurred, people don't want to see you sucking it up or being strong or not managing emotions. They want to see how you handle your emotions because they're not sure how to handle it either. They don't know how to handle intense emotion and they're looking to you. They don't want to see a robot up there pretending that nothing's gone wrong and they want to know that, even though you're the leader, you're human and that you experience pain just as much as they do. They want to know that you care as much as they do.

They want you to model for them how to process their pain by allowing yourself to process the pain and being willing to tell them about the experience. Now, I'm not saying go in front of your staff and have a meltdown. That is not what I'm saying.

What I'm saying is being honest and open that you are stopping and taking time for yourself and going behind closed doors and processing your pain,

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that you're reaching out to loved ones, that you're getting the support that you need, that you're hiring a coach or you're going to your mentor, whatever it is, whoever your support is, that you have somebody to help you, let your people know that. They don't have to process pain on their own and nor should you.

So, number one, when you feel the wave of pain coming over you, when something's happened and you're thinking about the crisis that occurred, I want you to try and allow the feeling to wash through you and let it sit in your body. Notice where it goes in the body. It will wash through kind of like a wave and it will come, the waves will crash into you and you'll feel the wave come through, and then another wave will come through.

And if you can withstand the waves of emotion, they will start to decrease. You'll feel some really intense ones, then it will get less, and then they'll come back again, and then it will get less. When you can allow yourself even to process an emotion for 60 seconds, it usually doesn't even take that long to release it, but you can process it, process it, process it one wave of emotion at a time.

When this is happening and when your brain is screaming to stop the pain – because it will, it will say buffer, stop the pain, get up, go do something, distract yourself – you can say to yourself, this is pain, I'm experiencing grief. I'm really sad. This really hurts. It's okay that it hurts. I want to feel sad about this crisis. I'm processing pain. Just any thought, any sentence you can say out loud to help yourself process the pain while you're experiencing it without pushing it away, find something that you can grab onto that will allow the waves to come.

Notice the urge to resist and react. This is number two. So allow the waves of pain to come and then notice the urge to resist and react to them. You can say it out loud without taking action. I want to resist this pain; I want it to go away right now. You can cry, you can shake, you can scream into a

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pillow. You can tell yourself, I know it's not going to help to resist this right now. Pain is a part of this crisis and it's part of my journey as a school leader to learn to process this pain.

So, number two is just noticing the urge to resist and acknowledging that urge without taking action on it. You can acknowledge it without taking action.

Number three, thoughts are going to float through your mind. You're probably going to have some really intense moments, then you're going to want to resist, and then there will be moments where you feel some levity and there will – you know after a good cry where there's just kind of downtime, you're going to have thoughts that float through during that time.

You're going to want to brain drain those and write them all down, get them out of your body and let yourself think whatever you want. Just write them down. Pretend that you're listening to somebody else who's in pain and you're just letting them tell the story. Let it all come out, write them down, let it keep coming. It's going to be overwhelming. It's going to feel intimidating and overwhelming because you're going to see that pain on the paper. But getting them out of your body is going to allow you to process them when you're ready.

When the pain comes up over and over again, and it will, ask your pain why it's here. So this is step four. When the pain shows up, process it, allow it, acknowledge you're wanting to resist it, do a thought download if you need to and ask yourself, pain, why are you here? How are you serving me? And what can I learn from this?

And then number five, once you can allow yourself to feel pain without reacting or avoiding it, the last step is really to take ownership for it. Take responsibility for it. And the reason we don't do this first is because it feels too painful to add responsibility and ownership on top of processing pain.

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So, first, you just have to allow the waves. When the waves start coming less frequently or they're not as intense, then you can say this is my pain and I'm going to own it. I want to feel this pain. I'm feeling pain because of my thoughts. See how we're shifting into responsibility? I'm choosing to believe these thoughts about the crisis and now I'm ready to start forgiving myself. I want to forgive the crisis. I want to move forward. I am accepting myself. I know I'm good. I know I'm a good leader. I am not this crisis. This crisis doesn't define who I am as a human. I want to start moving forward. I can start moving forward. It's possible to start moving forward.

And here's the beautiful thing; if you can create pain in your mind, then you can create relief in your mind. This is so valuable to know because you will need to clear your pain so that you can help others do the same. So, once you've processed your pain to the point of being able to hold space for others who do, then you are going to want to start processing pain with other people.

And how you do that is this; you always start with yourself. Manage your thinking about your own pain, which we just went through. And then number two, manage your thinking about their pain because you are going to have thoughts about the other person's pain, how they're responding, how they're managing their pain or not, how they're acting, how they're showing up.

You want to clear your thoughts about them so that you can be in a neutral space to hold a lot of openness for them to process their grief. It is really difficult to be around people who are processing grief. Everybody process it in a different way and you have to be emotionally stable enough to handle that.

So, clear your own thinking, clear your thoughts about them, and then hold that space for them. Listen with love. Let them feel whatever they want. Don't take on their pain. Allow their pain to be theirs based on what they're

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thinking and don't try to change their thoughts or emotions. Just let them sit with that. Let them be in their pain. Let them know they're allowed to process the pain any way they want and that – well, not any way they want. You don't want them hurting others, but they are allowed to process pain. And let them know they're capable of handling that.

So, you just want to give them the encouragement because when they're the one processing the pain, they don't believe they can handle it, just like you didn't believe you could handle it either. So you have to believe in them for them.

And finally, you need to be HOW with them – my three-step formula for interacting with people, honest, open, and willing, the HOW method. Just be honest, open, and willing to supporting them in processing their pain.

And one final thought about pain – there are different types of emotional pain. There is what I call clear pain, which is the universal human experience of grief. Clear pain is pain that comes from an event that triggers significant thoughts about grief and pain.

It brings up high intense emotions. It's the loss of a life. It's a tragic event. It's unexpected information such as a break up or a divorce or getting fired. Anything that you consider a crisis that triggers an extremely tense emotional reaction is considered clear pain. We all experience clear pain at some point in our lives. And for many school leaders, they experience it as part of being a school leader.

Clear pain must be processed and it will take time, as much time as it needs. And different pain points need different amounts of time. You don't get to determine how long it takes. The pain will determine how long it takes to flow through you before it can be processed and released.

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There is another kind of pain that occurs when we don't take the time to process our clear path. I call this kind of pain cluttered pain. Cluttered pain is when we avoid or resist processing the clean pain and that pain continues to show up in our lives in various ways.

The clear pain has become cluttered with layers of thoughts and emotions about it. It's adding suffering on top of pain. It's the kind of pain that, when the crisis first occurred, you stuff it down and avoid it because you didn't want to deal with it because it was just too painful to face. And in the moment, you have to be as clear-minded as possible.

So the longer you avoided and ignored it, your brain and body held onto the original grief and it also started to create a story about the situation. So on top of what originally happened, your brain now has played a story and created and embellished, enhanced a story over and over and over in your head each time adding a little bit of layers to the memories of that story of what happened, which ultimately deepens the pain you feel when you think back to that situation.

The most clear example I can think of is how people handle the death of a loved one. Some people allow their grief to be present at the time the loved one passes. Other people resist, avoid, and buffer their grief pretending it isn't there or hiding the fact that they are in deep pain.

But what happens in the long run? Those who avoided feeling the grief end up feeling grief for a much longer period of time because they never fully let it go. They've never fully released it. And that's because pain is an emotion that must be processed before it will fully leave the body.

The thoughts that are creating painful emotions, things like she shouldn't have died, he shouldn't have run into the street and been hit, he shouldn't shoot other people, whatever you're thinking, I should have stopped them

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from harming other people, those thoughts, they don't get processed and released. They stay put.

And when a person avoids processing a crisis, they are going to hold onto that pain for a longer period of time, which then further clutters their mind, their body, and their heart. If you have experienced a crisis on campus, I encourage you to find someone who can help you process your clean pain and manage the thoughts that are bound to come up for you.

Having the responsibility of leading a school goes far beyond curriculum, instruction, hiring, and test scores. It's about the safety and wellbeing of every individual on your campus. Unfortunately, principals and district leaders are the ones who are blamed when any crisis occurs on a campus.

You will need to have tools and support to process the emotional overwhelm that comes with a crisis on your campus. Again, I just want to state, I'm not an expert on crisis management. I'm simply offering you a tool that I use to help myself and my clients process exceptionally painful events in their professional and personal lives.

If you need support, I am definitely here for you. And if you are attempting to process some deeply personal traumas from your past, I encourage you to seek out an appropriate therapist or a medical professional. I am sending you school leaders so, so much love and so much support. I love you guys. Thank you for what you're doing for kids and teachers. Have an empowered week.

Hey, if you're enjoying the podcast and want to learn how to apply these concepts at a deeper level in real time, then you have to check out what Principal Empowerment can do for you. It's my one-to-one personalized coaching program where we take concepts from the podcast and we apply them to your specific situation. This is how you become the most

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