

Ep #85: Organizing Your Workspace with Shira Gill



Full Episode Transcript

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Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 85.

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.

Angela: Well hello, my school leaders, happy Tuesday. How are you guys doing? Happy August. I have been thinking so much about you and I've really been wondering, like, what would be the most helpful for you as you're getting ready and geared up for the new year.

The beginning of the year, there's so much excitement going on and this is the time of year when you're setting up all of your systems, your schedules, your campus, your classrooms, your office, all the things. And I want to be able to provide you some support as you're getting ready for the school year and you're planning and organizing.

And I know this part is fun, but I want to make sure that you have systems in place so that when school is in full session and your time and intention are going to the students and the staff and the community and all of the other tasks, that you have everything in place organized so that you are ready to go and put your energy into leading your school. And I know that you guys super love when I offer hands-on practical advice.

Very early on in the podcast, I recorded an episode on organizing your office space that was inspired by Shira Gill, who is an organizing expert. And to this day, it is still one of my most downloaded podcast episodes. Well, have I got a treat for you? For this episode, I have live, here with me today the amazing, beautiful, and talented Shira Gill, who's going to talk about some tips for organizing your office space and strategies to keep it maintained when the year gets crazy. So, welcome, Shira.

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Shira: Oh, thank you. I'm so happy to be here.

Angela: I'm so happy you are here too. It is such an honor that you could do this with me today and I want to dive right in so our listeners can get as much of you as possible. So, Shira, why don't you just start by telling us a little bit about yourself, who you help, and what got you into helping people organize their spaces?

Shira: Sure, so I founded my business 10 years ago in San Francisco, California, where I am from and grew up. And I grew up with kind of hippy parents who always really stressed the value of people and experiences over physical things. So I have that as kind of a background, but I also have this kind of innate ability to see the clutter in any room or any space and just want to filter it out.

So early on, I started helping girlfriends edit their closets and organize their dorm rooms when I was in college and, when I became a new mom in my early 30s, everyone around me was so overwhelmed by the stuff and the gear and the gadgets and all the things that were innovating their homes. And so I went on a mission to help them and to help people kind of cut through the clutter and the noise and all of the pressure to buy, buy, buy and accumulate.

And so I just started seeing busy working moms one on one in their homes, helping them sift through the clutter, get organized, set up and maintain systems. And now I'm at a point where I'm doing virtual programs and have the great privilege and honor of helping people all over the world, on every continent now, with my virtual programs.

Angela: Wow, that is incredible. I love that. Wow, that is really, really fun, how exciting for you. And I have to tell you, like, I've known you through The Life Coach School and had the pleasure of meeting you in person, but what really captured my attention was when you were on Brooke's podcast,

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The Life Coach School Podcast, and you were talking about this space and I thought, wow, I need somebody like this in my life. I am not a natural systems person and I didn't even know that people like this existed. It's like a miracle to me. So I'm so happy you're out here doing what you're doing.

There are so many school leaders and educators out there, and our job is to have a very tidy organized office space and classroom, but you know how the school year can get. There's so much going on and coming at us that maybe we start to set up and we don't get it finished and then we don't get back to it. So I'm really glad that there are people out here like you who can help people like me who aren't naturally organized.

Shira: Yes, 100%. And it took me a long time to realize – because it's always been easy for me – that it actually isn't easy or intuitive for most people that I meet. So you're not alone and it is so fun for me to help people because, for me, it's so satisfying to look at a before and see the after and help people navigate through the clutter and the noise and the distraction and really start taking action.

Angela: Exactly, so what's the most common problem that you see when you're helping your clients? Why is getting and staying organized so hard for so many people?

Shira: Yeah, so I think it's a few things. So one is we're really a nation that's become completely overwhelmed by too much stuff. And I'd say we've kind of reached this tipping point where our physical possessions have become more suffocating than liberating. So instead of helping us, making our lives easier, we're not at a point where we have so many things. We're drowning in clutter and we're overwhelmed. Like, we've reached a point where it literally is too much. So that's number one, is really starting to question the volume and how much are you bringing in, how much is enough, how much can you realistically maintain and keep clean and clear and organized.

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So that's always the first thing that I'm looking at is just volume and really questioning the volume. And then, number two is just having really simple systems. So, just like in a preschool classroom or a department store or a grocery store, there's really simple zones of organization.

Like in a preschool, I use this analogy a lot with my home organizing clients, there's a section for balls, a section for art. And you don't have to discuss it. You just walk in and it's easy, intuitive, you can identify it and put things away.

So, the funny thing is we don't really do this in our own home. So a big part of my job is just helping people to set up those easy simple intuitive systems by zoning their possessions in these broad categories and making sure everything they own has a home. And then the third piece of it is the daily habit and maintenance, so when we're coming into our homes after a big busy day and we have all this stuff in our arms, we're taking those five minutes to put every single thing back in a way in its home so that we can maintain our organized space.

Angela: Oh, I love that. You know, it's so true, there are spaces that we keep very organized in our lives and other spaces that we don't. And I know, even within a classroom, I would have much more organized spaces than I would other spaces. So I love how you use the idea of a grocery store or a classroom where everything's very compartmentalized, everything that's in one space works, it fits, it belongs, there's a space for everything and it makes sense where it's at and why it's there and how it's grouped.

Shira: Exactly, yeah, and it is funny because I have so many clients who say, I don't get it, my office at work is organized or I would never be like this at work, I would never dump things everywhere and leave. But my home has become kind of a dumping ground. So I use the analogy of the classroom a lot, which is funny because I know we're going to be talking

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about how to organize those spaces. But I think teachers do set up this intuitive easy to maintain systems for their students that I really emulate in my work.

Angela: Oh, that's perfect. That's just what we're talking about today. So what tips can you give school leaders and educators that will help them get started on organizing their office space or their classroom for maximum efficiency?

Shira: Yeah, so when I think of an office – and offices I will add are the spaces that people find the most overwhelming typically because there's all the paper clutter and it takes so long to go through each sheet. And people often get so overwhelmed, they just don't even start.

So I like to make it really simple and to think about everything that's currently in your office should go into one of three categories. So, category number one is, I call it, like, reference and resources, so tools and materials that you may need to refer back to but that you're not actively using. So that's category number one. So that could be reference books, text books, programs, or things you've taught in the past that you do want to keep but they're not active right this minute.

Then there's the current, like, top of mind, this requires action. I call it a to-do bin or basket. So that should just be one designated place in your office, super easy to reach. I usually use a bin or a basket or a tray or a magazine file that's, like, these are my current things. So your action items.

And then the third thing is just your office supplies; pens, paper, pencils, staplers, tape, all the things. And that can just be corralled together in one location, like a drawer or a bin. Most people have way too many office supplies that they barely touch...

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Angela: Educators are guilty.

Shira: Guilty as charged, like, how many pens do you really need? So I'm always, like, the answer is no. So I'm always focusing on the concept of fewer better, right, like find one pen you really love and maybe you have 10 of them in one nice cup and that's it. But most drawers are drowning in years of accumulated, you know, it's like Office Depot has moved into your office.

So I'm all about that's a very quick fix, just really think about what do I use on a day to day basis, what are my tools that I need? And then just get rid of all the rest. Donate them, get them out of your office. So that's number one. And then number two is really cutting through the clutter to kind of constrain what's on your desk to one bin or basket of, like, these are the current action items that I need to be focusing on. Everything else is off the desk in a file or organized elsewhere.

Angela: You know, that just made me think of something. The paperwork, in education, we are slowly gravitating to a more digital style of formatting and filing and maintaining our paperwork, but there is a lot of paperwork to be had in education still to this day. And what do you recommend for the piles and files?

Shira: Yes, so as things are coming in, I like to think of them as being in one of three categories again. So it's either, I need to deal with this, it requires my attention, and then that gets plopped right into your to-do basket, right on top of your work surface. Category number two, I don't need it, it's done, it can be recycled immediately, so then that's done and complete. And number three is it's been dealt with but I need to keep it for whatever reason. So in that case, it would go into some sort of very simple filing system.

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And my filing system, even at home, I make it so easy, so broad. So my categories are literally home, car, kids, business, important documents, done. So what I find is people often are, like, overcomplicating filing and they make it so over-organized that they never want to file anything because it's such a headache. And so I like to think of what are the most broad easy categories that are intuitive and make sense for your brain that then you can just plop things in so they're off your workspace, out of your brain, but you can find them easily in the future if you need.

Angela: That is everything. I try to make everything very specific. I thought the more specific my files were, the better organized I was. And you're right, it ends up being, does it go in this file or that file. And then there's a bazillion file folders with two things in them each. I love this idea of generalizing it. That's a new a-ha for me. It actually is.

Shira: That's a game-changer. It really is. And I think one thing you can do also is, as you're filing that way, you just put the most recent thing right in the front so if you're going to a category that has a lot in it, you know at least it's roughly in date order, so anything that you filed recently is, like, right in the front waiting for you, but it's still just these big broad categories. Like, it could literally be reference or programs or courses and just plop it right in, get it off your desk, and out of your way.

Angela: That's awesome. I never even thought of that before. That is happening in my home office this week. I love it. Okay, so I'm thinking school leaders come into the office, they've one thing, they've gone through the step process, they have the basic organization down. Then the school year starts. The kids come. The parents come. Chaos ensues and life happens. So what is an easy way – or is there an easy way – to maintain that organized office space that doesn't take up tons of time. Because I think that many school leaders are going to say I don't have time to be organizing or even be thinking about organizing my office space. So what can they do?

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Shira: Yeah, so I'm going to reference a book that is literally my bible called *The Compound Effect*. It's by Darren Hardy. And the whole principle of this book is small consistent actions over time yield massive results.

So the whole premise of this is, of course, leaders don't have much time, but everyone can find five minutes a day for a quick reset. And so this is what I do in my home and I have all my clients do it, both in their personal and professional lives. I call it the five-minute reset.

So it's before you're leaving for the day, you're taking literally three to five minutes to put your office supplies back in their designated home, to put your to-do or action items or things that are still being worked on right into your to-do basket and getting anything that's done in the recycling bin or plopping it in your file. Literally, I'm saying five minutes, so that then it's kind of self-care for your future self, so that when you walk into your office the next day, you can breathe a sigh of relief and start fresh with a clean slate instead of facing this mountain of unfinished business. So it's that idea of, like, the little things done consistently are going to reap huge rewards and everyone can find five minutes for the quick tidy before they leave.

Angela: Oh my gosh, that is golden because, a couple of things here that I love about this, when I think about ending my day with just a five-minute routine, it just closes out the day. It's like it's signaling to your brain it's end of business day, we're going to wrap up, the day is done, I'm going to organize for five minutes, get everything ready for tomorrow. It just helps me shut down for the day. It's a nice routine. You transition to home to go be mom and do all the things at home.

But when you walk in in the morning and you've given yourself that gift of the five minute reset and kind of closing out for the day before, it's so welcoming to think you would walk into your office with everything put

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away, your desk is clear, and that's energetically such a wonderful way to begin the new school day.

Shira: Exactly. I mean, it truly is this little gift to yourself and I do it. I mean, I hate doing dishes. It is my least favorite household task. But I'm always thinking, like, the end of the day and there's the kids and all the things and I'm thinking, how do I want to wake up and walk into my kitchen? Do I want to face all of these old dishes and counter crumbs, or do I want to put in that five or 10 minutes to throw things in the dishwasher, give the surface a quick wipe, and it's like a reset of my space so that when I walk in to go make breakfast, I'm starting fresh and I'm so grateful for that five minutes I put in the night before.

Angela: That's so true. I love the way you said, you know, thinking about your tomorrow's self, you're going to give yourself gratitude and thanks for having done that work for that five minutes, even though I know, like, the last thing you want to do at the end of a long exhausting day is to, like, have to organize and put things away. But the gift you're giving yourself for tomorrow is really what it's all about.

Shira: And literally, I tell people, like, set a timer for five minutes because it can help get you out of that paralysis or that feeling of, I just want to get out of here and be done. If you can literally just set your timer for five minutes and be like, all that I'm doing is five minutes, I promise you, the reward will be much bigger than you could imagine.

Angela: You know, when think about it, if you set your timer for five minutes – and leaders, don't tell us you don't have five minutes. I know you're out there thinking, eugh five minutes... But it's just five minutes, you set the timer, and here's what I think, like, okay, if I'm visualizing what's going to happen here, it's like, put away the books back on the shelf that I was referencing, put my stapler back in the drawer, put the papers through that

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shuffle with the three – either they get recycled, filed, or they're active and they go in the bin on your desk. That can't be five minutes, honestly.

Shira: No, five minutes is a big window for just that quick tidy. And also, the benefits in terms of your time, it's like the cost benefit analysis is huge here because when you walk into a streamlined organized efficient office, you're going to have clarity and control, you're going to feel calmer, less stressed, more able to face your day. So that few minutes really has a massive payoff.

Angela: Yes, oh totally. That is – I think, school leaders out there, this is the number one tip. Once you get that organized office up and running, the five minutes a day to maintain it will give you so much more time back. I think this is what we're really trying to say here is that the five minutes you invest – because time is just like money for you, if you invest the five minutes now every single day and commit to that little tiny routine, at the end of the day, it closes out your day, but then it opens up your day with so much more clarity and focus and energy and you don't have to then start your day with that task, it's already done.

Exactly, and you can apply this exact same principle if you feel like you're not even starting with a clean slate to begin with and you have so much to organize and edit and go through I use the same thing of, like, 15 minutes or one drawer or just do a surface, like, these little baby steps so that you can get out of the overwhelm and the paralysis of it's all too much and get into action and productivity, these little manageable chunks. So when I'm working on a whole house with a client, I'm doing just a room and within that room, we're breaking it down one drawer, one shelf at a time.

So the same thing, like, if you're feeling right now like, I don't even know where to start, start with one drawer. Just set up one bin that says to-do and just start, you know, from tomorrow forward, anything that's important,

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popping- it in that bin. These little things will become massive wins and give you a lot of momentum to keep going and keep it up.

Angela: That's a great idea. And I love what you said about how it's only five minutes and if it's too much, you don't have to do it all in those five minutes and you don't have to get everything done, like, every organizational task in your office done that day. You do the five minutes and then the next day you do the next chunk of five minutes and you work your way through. And eventually, you will get to a place where you won't need the five minutes.

Shira: Exactly, and my other advice, because I'm such a minimalist in everything is just anything that you can get rid of, get rid of it because anything that exists in your space is something you have to clean and organize and care for and maintain. So instead of being like, well maybe this could be useful, I really want people to start questioning, like, is this going to make my life easier or is it going to make it another thing to manage? And if you have to question it, if it's not an essential, I would say get it out.

Angela: Absolutely, and I know it can be hard for people to let go, but when I think about my office at my school, I had 20 Sharpies, 30 Sharpies. I can guarantee you, there is an abundance of Sharpies on campus and if you should need a Sharpie, somebody will have a Sharpie on campus. So don't approach this task with a scarcity mindset.

Shira: There will always be Sharpies.

Angela: I know, they're just the golden ticket in an elementary school. Well, any other last tips, thoughts, or strategies, Shira, that you'd like to share with our listeners?

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Shira: Well, I just want to say that I can't emphasize enough, like, start small. Start with these little baby steps, five minutes or 15 minutes, super simple systems, make it as easy on yourself as possible to just get started, to just start taking action and questioning the volume. Like, if you have 100 pens, maybe it's like, well what would be reasonable? Maybe 10 pens. Okay, I'll give these 90 pens away. Like, little things like that to just launch your organizing effort.

And just a big thank you because, you know, I'm a mom and I went through school and college and all of the teachers and educators that I came into contact with truly have been some of the most impactful people in my life and now my kids' lives. So just a huge thank you and it's an honor and a privilege to be here and hopefully help in some small way.

Angela: Oh, this was huge. And thank you so much for your time. If listeners want to learn more about you, Shira, where can they go?

Shira: Yeah, so they can visit me on my website which is just my name, shiragill.com, also on Instagram, @shiragill. I have tons of free resources. I have a blog. I have a five-minute makeover series that you can do for free, virtual programs, you name it. So I would love to see you there.

Angela: Awesome, thank you so much, Shira, I look forward to seeing you again soon.

Shira: Thank you so much.

Angela: Take care, bye.

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