

Ep #86: Essentialism in School Leadership



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 86.

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, how are you? I am so excited to be here with you today. I have to tell you, I have been recording the podcast for August, September, and October over this past few weeks because as this show airs, which will be on August 20th, Mitch and I are leaving tomorrow on the 21st for a three-week honeymoon vacation, finally, two years later.

We are flying to Munich tomorrow, where we are going to stay for four days, and we have some friends who live in Munich. We're going to meet up with them, spend four amazing days there, then we're flying to Rome where we'll stay for five days. And Mitch's parents and two other couples are going to join up with us later on in Rome because the eight of us are going to embark on a 10-day cruise on the Adriatic Sea.

We're going to tour all through Italy and Croatia. It's going to be amazing. It's on this boat called Sea Dream. It's a luxury cruise line. It's a very small cruise line. It's more a yacht style cruising. And it's something Mitch's parents have done for years with their circle of friends and it's something Mitch and I just thought would never happen and we would never get to go because it's much more expensive than a typical cruise line. And we just really wanted to make it happen but didn't think it'd be possible.

So here we are, we made it happen. And I have to tell you, this is a dream come true for us, it really is. We purposely did not take a honeymoon when we eloped a couple of years ago, nor did we do anything special after our

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wedding ceremony because we wanted to save up and go on a really meaningful trip. We wanted to do something really special.

And Mitch has always wanted to go to Europe. He's never been to Europe, so this is super exciting for him. I have definitely been to Europe before, but it's been a long time ago and I'm really looking forward to experiencing it with him and to see it again. You know, it's been 20 years since I've been there, so I'm looking forward to it myself, but to experience it with him was just fabulous, and so I'm super excited.

And I have to be honest because when we first decided to book this trip and then we added the cruise with his parents as a part of the trip, I have to admit, I felt really uncomfortable about sharing the details of this trip. I didn't want to tell people about it. I avoided saying too much about it or sharing my excitement about it because my thought at the time was this sounds just too extravagant, too lavish, too over the top.

It just felt like every time I told people, their eyes would get super big, like oh my god. Number one, how do you even have the ability to take three weeks off for a vacation and not be at work? That's crazy. Number two, how are you affording to be away from work for three weeks? Number three, like, how are you paying for a trip like this?

And it was all this heaviness and weight in my mind around the money, around the extravagance behind it. And so I felt myself holding back from sharing my excitement. And I was really avoiding anything that had to do with the trip. Like, I wasn't even discussing it with Mitch in terms of planning our excursions and getting our hotels booked and getting the flights booked between cities. I wasn't shopping or talking about the trip. I was basically avoiding it altogether because I had the thoughts that it was too indulgent, too excessive, too ostentatious, that people were going to think terrible thoughts about us like, "Oh those rich fools and they're spending their money carelessly," or whatever people are going to think.

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Like, I had all of these thoughts around money and at some point, I caught myself holding back from sharing with somebody else I was talking to about this trip. And when I got home that night, I had to stop and ask myself, like, what's going on here? Why am I not allowing myself to share the truth, to be excited? Because as we all know, the anticipation of vacation, it's like half the fun. It's sometimes more fun than even being on the trip.

So it became apparent that my money blocks, once again, had come up to the surface, they're reared their ugly heads. And so I had to go back and do some self-coaching on it so that I could really allow myself to enjoy the anticipation of this amazing trip. And what I've learned from this experience is that, number one, there are always going to be situations that trigger you and show you your mental blocks. There is never a point in life where you are free and clear from all your mental drama, from all your brain activity, from all the shaming and doubt that our brain does to us and tries to put baby in the corner, right?

Your brain will always find a way to bring to the surface new things to struggle with, new stories to have to manage and new emotions to have to deal with. So that was number one. Number two, like, I've learned that when you absolutely love your reason for taking the action you're taking, and in this case, I know all of the blood sweat and tears that have gone into planning and preparing and manifesting this trip, all of the trips we haven't taken, all of the times we chose work over vacation, all of the savings we've had to do and the planning we've had to do to make this trip a reality for us.

When I lean into, do I like my decision, do I appreciate the decision that Mitch and I made to have this experience for ourselves, I absolutely adore our decision. And that means there is no need to justify the decision to anybody else. So when you love your reason for what you're doing, you don't have to justify it to anybody.

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If you want to take a vacation, you take a vacation simply because you want to take the vacation. If you want to spend your money on some crazy piece of artwork or you want to buy your dream car or you want to upgrade your diamond – I don't know, but whatever it is you want to do, just the fact that you want to do it is enough.

So you can simply do what you want to do because it's what you want to do. Mitch and I said no to many, many things so that we could say yes to a European honeymoon at some point in our lives. So I'm thrilled that we get to experience this exclusive cruise with his parents and with his friends and we're so excited to go explore places we've never been. It's 100% yes for us.

And I had to realize this and step into my own empowerment and my own ownership of our decision so that I could fully enjoy the entire experience. My brain was making this whole thing feel so cluttered and confusing and complicated and overwhelming. But the fact is this; there is no complication. We chose this trip, we wanted this trip, we said no to other things so that we could go on the trip, and we manifested this trip.

I'm going to talk more about how we said no so that we could say yes. That's what this whole podcast is going to be about. But I want to share a side note in terms of manifesting your wildest craziest most out of reach dreams.

So, I recently found my vision board from several years ago that I created and on this vision board was a photo of a couple holding hands on a beach. There was another photo of a bride and groom, beautiful wedding setting, and then there was a phrase that I had posted that said, three-week honeymoon in Europe.

Now, I had got all this stuff out of a magazine years ago. I used to hold vision board parties at my house and at the beginning of the year I would

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have girlfriends come over. We'd make cocktails or have a glass of wine and we would create our vision boards together.

So I did this years before I had any of those things. And when I looked at it, it almost took my breath away because, number one, I have the man of my dreams, and yes, we are holding hands at the beach. It makes me want to cry just saying it out loud.

Number two, we did end up having a beautiful wedding celebration up in Tahoe that I could not love more. It was my favorite day of my life. I would live it every day if I could, it was that amazing.

And three, now we're actually taking our three-week honeymoon in Europe. How crazy is that? When I created that vision board, I had met Mitch, but I had no plans of ever getting married again. I never even dreamed that we would live at the beach. And I had no idea how we'd be able to take three weeks off in a row for a destination vacation. So it's really blowing my mind.

And the reason I share this story with you is that things that feel wildly impossible and out of reach are never so. So if you can dream it, you can achieve it. You don't have to know the how, you just have to keep it in your stream of consciousness and believe that the possibility that it could happen is true.

You don't have to know the how or know the when even if you just believe that it's possible that it could happen to you or happen for you. Then it isn't complicated and it doesn't have to mean doing a bunch of things or forcing it to happen. We didn't have to do a million things in order to take this trip. When I think back, we simply did one thing at a time, one small thing per day until we had the trip booked, we had our accommodations reserved, we had our excursions scheduled.

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It was really like one savings deposit at a time, one email at a time, one phone call at a time, one booking at a time. None of those things were difficult, challenging, complicated, they just happened because we believed that it could happen someday. And when I looked back and realized, wow, I put those thoughts into my mind, and even though I didn't 100% believe that it was really going to happen, the fact that I allowed myself to consider the belief, consider the possibility is how it came true. And this idea of less is best and that things don't have to be complicated and you don't have to know all of the things and the hows is what we're going to focus on today.

So, I'm going to combine my research on essentialism, minimalism, and constraint to share with you how it is possible to maintain an organized and clear physical space and mental space so that you can lead your school with more clarity and confidence. Now, if you don't believe that less is best is even possible in your job right now, all I'm asking you to do is to do what I did. Just consider that it may be possible that one day your job doesn't feel overwhelming, it doesn't feel complicated, it doesn't feel like too much, it doesn't feel like there aren't solutions. Just consider the idea that it's possible.

So, as we discussed last week, having less physical property in your possession actually leads to a more productive and organized mind. When you have less items in your office and physical space and in your visual space, there is literally less to think about. You don't have to think about all the pens or all the papers or all the books or all the piles. They're not there.

You don't have to be spending energy and time thinking about them. There's less to manage in terms of you don't have to create space for all the things that you have. You don't have to be always putting it away or taking it out or moving it around or filtering through it or organizing it. There's just less.

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So you create time by choosing to have less. And I feel like our brains tell us the opposite. We have to have all the things really close up front and personal. They have to be right here in our possession so that at any moment in time, if we ever needed them, they're right here. But what really happens is it burdens us. It weighs us down and it gets in the way of us just doing the thing that we actually need to do in this moment.

When you need a pen, a pen will be available. And the worst thing that could happen is you don't have a pen, so be it. Like, you'll go get the pen. It will take you two minutes to go find a pen in the office, or not even that. Like, it'll take you a minute to go get the pen you need versus having a slew of pens that don't work and then spending the time going through all the pens to see which pen actually works.

If you have one or two pens, a pen and a backup pen, that's enough. It's as simple as that. So when you have more, you have to spend more energy managing more. And as school leaders, we think we have to offer it all, have the smorgasbord of opportunities and choices and we have to do it all, we have to be all, we have to be everywhere. And this thought, this belief system is why we fail to stay organized and productive.

Instead of believing that we have to do it all, when we decide to just focus on the one thing that's in front of us, we can choose different focuses through the year, but one thing at a time, that's how you can gain competency and confidence and clarity in the work that you're doing. So it's very important that you stop thinking about all of the things and think about the next one thing.

Trying to do everything well all at once is going to set you up for macro failure and massive burnout. In the book *Essentialism* by Greg McKeown – which is a fabulous, fabulous book, by the way, I suggest you read it or listen to it on Audible, that's what I did – Greg says this, “The essentialist asks herself, which problem do I want?” So in this case, do I want the

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problem of potentially not having something I might need in the future, or do I want the problem of being cluttered in my physical office space?

You have to make those tradeoffs very intentionally. You can only be one kind of leader. So what problem do you want to have? Do you want to have the problem of clutter and overwhelm, or do you want to have the potential problem of not having what you need right there in the moment that you need it? So, being intentional about that tradeoff is very important.

When you decide to focus on one thing and not the other, then you have to say no to something. You have to practice saying no when something's not in alignment with that one focus that you want to focus on. So if the answer, when somebody asks you to do something or gives you something, if your answer to that thing or that idea or that event is not a 90% yes, then it's a no. You have to learn to constrain.

You want to minimize your obligations, minimize your output of energy, minimize your physical being, all the things in your space so that you can stay focused and choose just one thing at a time.

In the book, he talks about essentialists being willing to explore lots of options at first to ensure that they picked the best one thing to focus on for later. So he talks a lot about taking a great deal of time to explore and learn and create and question and just think so that you can actually decipher the one focus you want to have for your school year and just ask yourself, what's the one thing that I feel I can focus on right now, and then pay attention to signals and the noise.

So much chatter goes on in the school day and in the school year and you want to sit back and see it all happening and then basically analyze it and just get to the essence of what's going on. What's the essence of your staff's chattering? What are they talking about? What's the essence of it?

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What's the essence of the parent message? What's the essence of the district message? What's the one thing you can extract from all that's happening on your campus and how can you compile them and make it mean one thing for you to focus on?

So, essentialists don't focus on everything. They focus on tapping into the one thing. So my question for you is how can you bring this concept of essentialism into your practice as a school leader? So I ask you this; what problem do you want to have? You can't take them all on. You can't have all the problems.

Do you want to have too much of stuff or do you want to worry that you're not going to have enough to do or enough stuff at your disposal? You have to consider the idea that less is best. And when schools are trying to do it all, they do nothing well. And this concept of essentialism in the way that we lead our teachers and the way that we lead our students is that we want to filter and provide them just the essential information so that they can focus, they can do one thing best.

When we bombard them with information and expect them to take all the time to digest it and process it and then output it, we're bogging them down. So it's our job as leaders to find the essential information to communicate and to explore so that they aren't having to then do it themselves.

And I invite you to consider what you feel is essential in your role as a leader and what you feel is essential in your teachers' role as teachers and invite them to consider what do they this is the one essential thing that they can focus on for the school year.

Another thought to consider is that we have come to believe that overextending ourselves is the norm, is the accepted way of being. We believe that over-activity and over-busyness is a sign of productivity, is a

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sign of importance and having time just to think and create and play and dream is a luxury and it should be kept to a minimum.

We think that if we're not actively engaged in busyness that we're not being productive and that we're not being good leaders. I argue this. I believe that the opposite is true. I believe that the more time we give ourselves to create and to think by design, that is when the answers come to us. That is when we see clarity in what we need to do.

The faster and the busier that things get, the more we believe we need to schedule time to get them done. But in reality, the faster and busier things get is the more we need to slow down and schedule time to think. We need to schedule time for quiet.

We believe that this is wasteful, but I believe it can be the most productive thing that you do with your day. And I get it; this approach feels very counterproductive and very counterintuitive. It seems as though, and our brain rationalizes, that we should do more, be more, and that focusing on less, that doing less, that's pending more time in productive thought is very wasteful and that we're getting to what we should be getting to.

So we don't allow it in our schedules and we rarely allow it for our teachers and our students. But I ask you this; what if the opposite were true? What if you just believed for one minute that it was possible? What if we chose this year, just try it for one year, to give yourselves scheduled time to think, to create, and to ask and answer questions and come up with solutions that we've never thought of before?

What if, by constraining, we actually become more productive? What if that were true? Do you know that that's not true? Can you prove that it's not true that less is best? I think it's time that we give it a try because the way I see it, the way we've been approaching education for the last several years, several decades, hundreds of years for that matter, is that we've

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created this train wreck of believing that we have to do more and take on more and be more and need more. We need more resources, we need more time, we need more curriculum, we need more materials, we need more money, we need more people to help us.

That insatiable desire for more has resulted in having to do more, to manage more, to consume more, to buy more, to be more to people, to need more, and to take care of more. More is creating more. What if we believed in the possibility, the wild out of reach dream, just like my three-week vacation to Europe, what if we reached out and thought, what if it were possible? What if less could mean more?

What if less could mean more productivity, more organization, more clarity, more time, more solutions? As a school leader, you do have control over how much you have in your physical space. So make a decision to become an essentialist and a minimalist in your office space, in your campus space, in your brain space, in your computer space.

You also have influence on how many things that you can your staff choose to focus on and how much you ask of them to focus on. So I invite you this year, try on less. Take on less. Constrain your goals, your efforts, and your to-do list.

I believe it can't hurt to give it a try, right? Why don't you give it a try and let me know how it goes? For those of you who are interested in my professional development series that's starting up in September, this is going to be a part of the process. So if you want to learn more, how to constrain, how to stay organized, how to do less and make it best, join us in *Empowered Principals*. Let's do this, you guys. Have an amazing week. I'll talk to you next week. Take care, bye-bye.

If you are 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

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