

Ep #90: When You Think the Team Isn't Working



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 90.

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 hello there, my friends. How are you doing? How is the month of September going for you? I hope you are well. I hope you are taking good care of yourself. I know the beginning of the year is a struggle. Please be sure to get rest, please be sure to self-care, schedule in some fun and pleasure. Don't give it up just because summer is over, people.

No, seriously, I hope you are taking good care of yourself and I hope that these podcasts are helpful for you. I hope they are helpful in building your teams as you're setting up your school year and getting everything up and running.

So, I want to start by saying that I realize some of these concepts that I teach are challenging for our brains to consider. I want you to know that it's okay that that's happening. It's okay that they feel awkward and complex.

And the reason they feel complex is because they are new ideas. They are things we haven't thought about before, especially in education. We tend to just go along with what we already know and do the same thing over and over. These concepts also feel complex and awkward because we have been so conditioned to believe that circumstances outside of us are responsible for why we feel the way we do.

We are taught as kids, in school by the way, we're taught as children to tell other people that they hurt our feelings and to stop hurting our feelings.

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And we call these messages “I messages.” But really, they are “You messages.”

We say things like, I feel this way because of something you did or said. So please change your behavior so that I can feel better. Those aren't “I messages.” Those are “You messages.”

And it seems like we are empowering students, when we teach them this, to speak up for themselves. But in a way, we are teaching them to disempower themselves. We are teaching them to say, hey I'm going to give my emotional responsibility over to you, and please act accordingly. Please act in a way that makes me feel better because you're responsible for how I feel.

We've been taught that. I'm sure our parents were taught that. I know I taught “I messages” when I was in school. And I'm not bashing the “I message” people. That's what they know. That's what we believed to be true.

I'm just here to offer an alternate idea which feels very different, and that is we are responsible for the way we think and feel. We're all human. We all have a set of emotions based on what we think about, based on what we're feeling. And based on what we're feeling is the way that we treat people. We treat people in different ways based on how we're feeling and the reason we feel different ways about different people is because of the way we think and teaching them this STEAR Cycle from a young age.

Now, we don't have the luxury of going backwards in time and changing how we were taught as children, but we can change the way that we choose to approach our emotions from this day forward. So, adult learning feels really difficult and challenging because we have to backtrack for all those years that we were taught to believe something. Those belief systems have deep roots. And it's more challenging to unthink or unlearn

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thoughts and try on new thoughts than it is to just learn a new thought for the first time.

So, the first time you heard two plus two is four, you're like, okay, two plus two is four, I agree, I accept, I'm going to learn that as truth. And then if somebody were to come along 20 years later and say, you know what, we've discovered something completely different, two plus two isn't always four, your brain is going to be like, what?

I'm sure it's the same way the whole earth is flat, right, like most of us can't conceptualize believing that the earth is flat, but back in the day, everybody thought that was true. And now, there are certain people who still choose to believe that and that's fine, that's their opinion, but the majority of people now believe that the earth is round.

So, when we have to stretch our brain because we're thinking new thoughts, it can feel like a challenge. And actually, this whole idea of "I messages" and who makes us feel what, it's the focus of today's conversation.

We're going to talk about what happens when we, as a leader, believe that a team, particularly a grade level, isn't working well together, and how we can question our opinions about this team and how we can neutralize our thinking about the team before we make a decision on how we want to approach the team.

So, here's what we need to know from the very start. As the boss, your brain's going to tell you that you need to control other people, you need to control their outcomes, control their results, control the way they act. And the truth is that we just don't have control over the outcome of our grade level teams. That's truth.

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You can show up how you want as the boss, or as a team member for that matter. You can contribute tons. You can over-deliver as much as you want and you can work really hard towards helping them achieve their goals as a grade level. But you cannot control any other team, or within those teams, any individual teammate's thoughts, emotions, or behaviors. Nor can you control the results that that team is going to create.

You can inspire them into action, you can work to be a positive influence and impact on the way that they show up, the way that they contribute, and the way that they over-value or give value to the team and to the greater good. But you can't get in there and manipulate that and change that to the way you think it should be or the way you want it to be.

And this is why; you cannot jump into another person's STEAR Cycle. Each member of the team has their own cycle happening and it's happening over and over, day in, day out, round and around and around. We've talked about creating the foundation for teams two podcasts ago, and we talked about building a culture that inspires people to want to work in teams, and we talked about how we can help them navigate through conflicts on teams.

And today, we're going to talk about how we, as leaders, process when our grade level teams, or other teams within our site, within our campus, aren't working well, or at least according to us, and what actions that you can take as a leader versus the actions you want to consider not taking.

So, let's say that you have a team on your staff that you don't believe is working well or they're not working together or whatever. I want you to start with your thoughts about that team, the reason you're believing that the team isn't working well together is, why? What are your opinions of this team? What evidence do you have that is proof that this team isn't working well together or they're not working at all together.

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Write down each one of your thoughts as a separate sentence. And I call this a brain drain. What you want to do is just get all those thoughts down onto paper. And one suggestion that I have, when you make a list, don't write it in journal format or, like, paragraph format. Write it one sentence per line at a time. And what I do is I put a T in front of it, T equals the thought. Because that T in front of each sentence helps my brain see that's simply a thought that I'm having. That doesn't necessarily mean it's a fact or that it's truth, it's just a thought.

And I'm going to show you on today's podcast, like, how this works in real time. I'm going to share some examples of a time I thought a team wasn't collaborating well, I thought that they were meeting just long enough to send in these very sketchy collaboration notes. And my thinking behind it was, wow, I can tell on these notes, these notes are evidence that this team is not having real conversations, that they're not working really well together, and that they're not functioning as a collaborative team.

So the thought, the brain drain that went down in my head was this; they aren't really working together, they should be working together, they're just doing their own thing once they get back to their classrooms. Some members of the team are more open to collaboration than others. Mrs. Smith is the one preventing the others from having a collaborative team. I should do something about it. I should talk to the team and make them work together. This team is about kids, not adults. I had many more ideas, but I will stop there.

So, as I thought about this steam and I looked at those thoughts, the thoughts felt very true to me. I really believed these thoughts to be true. I want this team to work together and they're not. I'm blaming Mrs. Smith for not being willing to collaborate. I'm thinking she's the reason that the team's not working well. I really do believe that, as the school leader, it's my job to do something about it, that I should do something about it.

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I definitely believe that the team should be about kids and not the adults. I definitely agree with that. So I'm holding tight to these beliefs. They feel so, so true. So I'm just looking at this list and I'm like, wow, I'm having a lot of thoughts about this team. Saying that out loud helps me neutralize them.

It doesn't mean that I'm right and they're wrong. It doesn't mean that they're right and I'm wrong. There's no right or wrong, true or false. There are just thoughts. There's the situation, then there are thoughts.

Now, many of us stop here. We hear the story in our mind and we're aware that it's there, and we stop and agree with it. We're like, heck yeah that's what's going on. This is truth. This is what's happening. And then from there, we justify our story, we agree with it, and we react. We take action right away.

We think, okay, this is it, this is what's going on, this is true, I've got to take action. And we react to the story because we believe that the thoughts are facts. But I'm going to dig in a little deeper. Let's keep reflecting here a bit more.

So as I write these thoughts down and I think about them, I experience vibrations of emotions that ripple through my body with each thought. So when I break down each thought that I'm having, I try to identify the emotion that most connects with that thought.

So for me, this is what came up. They aren't really working together. I feel betrayed, and that feeling comes up because another thought that pops up is they're trying to trick me into believing that they're working together when they aren't really doing it. Do you see that?

So they aren't really working together. I feel betrayed. I feel they're trying to hide something. They should be working together. I think they should be

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working together and I'm frustrated when I believe that they should be working together but they're not. That feels really frustrating to me as a leader. They are just doing their own thing once they get back to their classrooms.

When I picture that and I think about that thought, it really annoys me to think that teammates would get together, blow steam for 30 minutes just to get collaboration notes turned in and comply and then they go back and do their own thing. I feel really annoyed by that. I feel like they should be more invested, that they should care more. I want them to work together.

Mrs. Smith is preventing the others from having a collaborative team. And some are more open to collaboration than others. When I think that and I feel that one person's preventing people and some are more open to others, it makes me upset. It makes me want to understand why she's doing what she's doing and it makes me want to get her to change. I'm upset by that behavior.

The next thought, I should do something about it, I really feel I should do something about it. I need to talk to the team and make them work together. That makes me want to feel the need to control. I feel very compelled to take action and that urge is very strong in me. And the thought that this is about kids not adults, when I think that thought, I feel very justified in my reasoning. I feel very justified in my rationale and a little bit self-righteous to be honest. I feel like, yeah, this should be about kids, not about you. What are you guys doing? Put on your big girl panties and deal as adults. This is about kids.

It feels very justified. It feels like a very compelling reason and a very true thought that collaboration should be about kids and not adults. It feels very true.

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So, when I think about this team's work and I look at my thoughts and they all feel really true and I think about the emotions that are triggered when I believe these thoughts, I feel very compelled to take immediate action and to march into this grade level's collaboration and observe what's going on.

I want to hover over them and insist that they collaborate. I want to take ownership and control because I'm believing that that's what good leaders do, that they make their teams collaborate, that they insist on strong collaboration.

Okay, so before I take action, we're going to process this even further. So now, my emotions are elevated. I'm really invested in this team based on the thoughts I'm thinking about it, and I want to stop and highlight that this is the part right here where we have to intentionally choose not to act.

You want to choose to plan out your intentional actions and notice that why you want to take the action you do is because of the way you are thinking and feeling about this team. It has nothing to do with what they're thinking and feeling and doing. It has everything to do with what you think and feel is true for you and what you think and feel that team should be doing.

Okay, so before I react to that initial story that my brain has developed regarding this team, I want to notice how I'm feeling, all the feels, and I want to notice the urge to act on my emotions. I want to be able to see, in the moment, what I'm making that teamwork mean about me as a leader. That is what's driving my urge to fix it.

We feel this urge to fix the problem that we see in our mind so that we feel like we're doing our job, so that others will think we are doing our job, and what we want is for them to think this way because that will mean to us that if others think we're doing a great job, then we're doing a great job. This is why we have to process our own thoughts about the team very deeply and very intentionally before we decide to take action. Because when we react,

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it's always based on what we want our feelings – and it comes back, ironically, we're saying to the team, be about kids, don't be about you. But when we react in response to how we're thinking and feeling, we've made it about us, not about kids. Do you see that? It's funny.

So, instead of reacting to the urge and jumping in to fix the problem, I want to think about and think through the potential outcomes of my urge just to see what might happen and plan out all the potential outcomes.

So, as I picture myself acting on this impulse, I imagine what might happen as a result of my taking this reaction approach. When I think about how I might react if I were on the receiving end, so now what I'm thinking is, okay, what are the potential outcomes? What could happen? And what would I be thinking and feeling if I were the teacher receiving this type of approach?

Well, I'm probably not going to want my boss to come in and tell us that we're not working well together. I'm probably going to be very resistant to my boss trying to control me, my team, and our outcomes, and I probably will mask how I'm really thinking and feeling just so that she will say what she's going to say and allow us to get back to what we're doing. And perhaps another outcome might be that some members of the team are happy that you interrupted – not interrupted but interjected – your thoughts and ideas and you came in with the intention of helping, of course.

But some people might be happy about it and then others might not be. Most likely, what's going to happen is that members of the team who maybe aren't showing up or aren't wanting to collaborate as much as other people will feel that they were tattled on or that the overachievers told on them or something came up and what's going to happen is that will create more tension with the group and it will decrease trust within that grade level group.

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So, depending on how you approach them and what you say, it could also be true that everyone happens to agree and they start to self-reflect and they show up more fully. That could happen as well.

And I know that this is the result that you would want as a school leader, and it's definitely a possibility and it's an option. But the thing to remember is that you don't get to control the result of that team's outcomes. You can't control how people are going to respond to your approach or how they're going to react to how you are approaching them.

So, stepping in as the leader may or may not work to inspire this team into being more collaborative or working together more closely. In the best case, it can bring awareness to the team and they can work on building up their trust and collaboration skills. But in the worst case, it could backfire and create more issues and more tension and more breakdowns of trust in both you as the leader and in one another on the team.

Or it could land somewhere in the middle. People might play nice for a while but go back to their old habits. And this typically happens because they're not truly convinced, they haven't truly changed the way they think about collaboration and that they don't fully believe that showing up in a different way is beneficial to them or to their students in some way, so they slip back either intentionally or subconsciously into their old patterns.

When we approach this situation from the belief that something had gone wrong, it's because we as leaders don't yet believe that that situation is neutral. And what I mean by that is we can look at the STEAR Cycle and say, yeah, the situation is neutral, it's our thoughts about it. But if we react based on the idea that something's gone wrong or I need to fix this or they're broken or they're not working well, whatever it is we're thinking, we're really acting from the belief that the situation is not neutral, that we need to fix it.

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And it's really difficult for our brains to believe that a situation is neutral because of that story, which is a group of thoughts and opinions that we have about it. And so this is where I ask my clients and I teach them how to get themselves back to neutral.

When you are really attached to story such as, with the title being the team isn't working, and there's a bunch of thoughts about the team isn't working, I have my client tell me the story in full detail. Don't filter, tell me everything. And as they're telling me the story, I'm writing it all down as fast as I can. I type it up. And I try to capture as much detail as possible. And when I'm done, I read it back to them.

So you can do this as a leader. Just write it all down and then read it back to yourself as if you were hearing it for the first time. And notice, I ask my clients to listen to the story and pull out the facts. What parts of the story are absolutely true, could be held up in a court of law, and which parts of that story are opinions about those facts?

So, what you'll find is, like, 80% to 90% of the story is opinion and 10% to 20% of the story are the facts. And in this story, it's basically like there is a grade level team, yes we can agree on that. They teach the same grade level, we can agree on that. They have weekly meetings, we can agree on that.

Other than that, that's about it. You might end up having some additional facts that come up, such as maybe you know that they met for 30 minutes, and even though the contracted collaboration time is 60 minutes, you have evidence, they put in their notes, that we met for 30 minutes. So maybe that's a fact. Or maybe you have evidence that Mrs. Smith didn't attend one of the meetings.

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So whatever you know to be fact, put it on the list. And you can add as many details that you believe are fact and just let yourself say, is that absolutely true? If it's true, great, it's a fact.

Now, the rest of the story, they aren't really working together, they should be working together, they're doing their own thing once they get back to their classrooms, so on and so on, all of those thoughts, those are opinions. Those are ideas that we are having, thoughts that we are having, that are opinions.

Now, our thoughts and opinions about the situation are what generates a non-neutral view of what's going on and why. And even though these feel like facts to us, they feel true, like this is about kids, not adults, that feels like a fact, but it's really an opinion. What we want to do is neutralize the situation to deepen our understanding of what's happening with this team and why.

So, could it be true that maybe Mrs. Smith had a parent meeting so maybe she had to skip collaboration that day? Or maybe the grade level meetings are so effective that they're getting everything done in 30 minutes. Like, every fact that we are presented could have an alternate situation happening, an alternate view, an alternate opinion about it.

Maybe the way that they work together doesn't work for you personally but it works for them. Do you see? There is a way that we can look at these situations and try to neutralize them. So okay, this grade level is meeting. This grade level is sending in notes and I'm having some thoughts about those notes. Those are the facts. The rest is all opinion.

So, what if we approach this from a different stance? Based on all of that thought work that you've done – and notice, this is all internal work, you haven't taken any action towards the team yet – what if you approached this from another angle? What if you approached the situation – this is still

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internal work – by comparing the current situation, what's really happening right now, the facts, versus the desired situation? What is it that you really want from this?

So, you've got to dig even deeper, guys. What about the grade level team meeting is going on for you? What is it that you want from that team? Why do you think they're not collaborating well and what is it that you want out of their collaboration? What are the benefits of their team working better together? Are students not learning? Are parents complaining? Are teachers arguing or causing larger staff or teaching issues?

What is behind your need for them to collaborate and why do you believe that it's so true that the team is not working well? Is it because you love collaboration and you were a contributor therefore you believe that others should value collaboration and contribute more? What do you believe is driving your desire for this different outcome?

Use the STEAR Cycle to reflect on this and you can create two STEAR Cycles; a current STEAR Cycle that's actually happening and a desired situation.

So, in the current situation, there's a grade level collaboration happening. Your thought about that currently is they're not working as a team, you're feeling frustrated, you might react by talking with them, asking them to collaborate, holding them accountable, kind of taking ownership for them. And then the result of that is to be determined, depending on how they respond.

Now, your desired situation, the situation you want to be happening at school is that you want teachers to collaborate, but when you ask yourself why, what you really want is you want children to be learning, you want teachers to be happy and respectful. You want parents to be satisfied with

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the teaching and learning that's going on and that their kids are happy and it's one big happy rainbow, right?

This is, of course, what we want as a school leader. And if this were all really happening, what would we be thinking? If this were our true desired current situation, if this became our current situation, what would we be thinking?

We'd be thinking, like, wow, that team is getting the results that align with my values as a school leader. So basically, the blueprint of how you think things should be at school is in alignment with what's actually happening. That makes us feel happy, we feel pleased, we're impressed, we feel pride.

And my question to you is, if you're believing that the team is working in the way that they need to in order to get the results that align with your values as a school leader and what you believe should be happening and you're feeling great, how do you act? How do you approach that team? How does a school leader who believes her teams are functioning well behave? What does she do? What does she say? How does she approach her teams?

And then what kind of results is she getting when she's treating them in this manner? She's probably getting really high levels of trust, higher collaboration, teachers are problem solving on their own, they're probably holding one another accountable versus you having to step in and do it.

So what happens when we choose to believe our teachers are capable of managing their own team, even when we don't have evidence to prove that that's currently true, we feel this urge to want to control. What we want to do, we want to believe ahead of times that our teams are capable. We want to support them. We want to empower them. We want to show trust in them. And we want to show them that we believe they are capable of collaborating, they're capable of handling conflict, they're capable of working through, they're capable of having flexible meetings.

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Some meetings are going to be more productive than others. Some will be more effective than others. Some will be more decisive than others. It will fluctuate and we are going to hold space for all of those things to happen.

Now, if and when a team member, or your entire team, does come to you and they want some support from you, which is totally going to happen, when you are approached with that situation and you choose to believe that you're capable and that you're going to help them see their capability, you can approach them and coach them from a place of helping them resolve the conflict on their own and helping them navigate that, versus stepping in, taking control and ownership, placing your opinions on how they should be running their team meetings, and then ultimately you're the one who is the boss of this meeting.

You want to empower them to discuss their own team dynamics and come up with solutions that work for them and for the members of that team, versus going through the motions of just doing what you tell them to do because of the way we think they should be doing it, which is ultimately not going to serve the team, they're not going to be very collaborative, they're not going to be very effective, which doesn't help students in return.

So, it's interesting to see how powerful our own thoughts and emotions are when it comes to helping our teams grow and collaborate on their own accord versus us believing that we should be taking control and coming in and fixing.

So, the takeaway here is this; as school leaders, there is so much we believe that we should be controlling, taking responsibility for, and all these rules that we have about imposing upon people – and truth be told, we feel that we're being imposed upon by the district, and the district feels they're being imposed by the county or the state or the feds, right? This idea that something's happening to us and being imposed upon us, we want to stop the buck with us.

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We want to believe that we are not being imposed upon by our district, therefore we're not going to impose upon our teachers. We want them to feel empowerment. We want them to believe that we believe in them.

And I'd like to suggest that the opposite approach, which is not controlling, will way better serve both us and them. So, I invite you to do this; be willing to loosen your grip on your teachers' teams. Empower them and dismiss yourself from feeling that it's your responsibility to get the results for them.

I want you to try this, do it, and share it with me. Let me know how this goes. I would love, love to hear what's working, what's not, and how we can continue to empower and approach our teams from a place of belief and success. Have an amazing week. Take care, bye-bye.

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