

Ep #93: Principal Burnout



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Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 93.

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, my empowered leaders. How are you today? Happy Tuesday. I hope you're doing well. And I hope that you're enjoying the school year. And I hope that you're not feeling burnt out already. But hey, if you are, if you're really feeling the burn of starting up the school year, you, my friend, are not alone.

Many, many leaders feel that burn at the beginning of the year because it's both super exciting, but it's also really exhausting. And if you're feeling that exhaustion creeping up and the excitement going down, this podcast is for you today.

So today, what we're going to talk about is principal burnout. Why do we principals experience burnout? What's happening? Why are we leaving the job at record rates and how can we eliminate or at least reduce our feelings of burnout? Let's talk about burnout today, you guys.

So, most of us think that burnout is a result of overworking. We see it as an outcome of one of the following things. We either feel like we've put in long hours at work and we've worked so much time that we're burnt out. We believe that's a result of working long hours.

Or we believe that we're burnt out because we've put in significant effort and energy and time and resources into our work with very little rest. We just worked ourselves to the bone. We work long days. We don't give

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ourselves a break and we feel like we are working all of the time and we feel burnt out because we're working so much and putting so much effort into the job.

Or we feel like we are putting forth the effort and we're not getting anywhere. We're doing all of this but we're disappointed and we're frustrated and we feel like we're a hamster in a wheel spinning around and we're on the treadmill not really making gains. We're not going anywhere and we're asking ourselves, I'm doing all of this work for what? What is the purpose of this? And we start to feel burnt out.

Or finally, we feel burnt out because we are doing something we dislike day in and day out over and over again and it's not in alignment with who we are or what we want or how we want to serve in the world. So when we're doing something we dislike, we feel burned out before we're even started, we're having these thoughts and feelings about burnout.

And because our brain views burnout as a result, we tend to think that the reason we're burnt out is due to the amount of effort or action that we're taking in our jobs. And this makes sense when you think about the STEAR Cycle, it makes sense in the sense that the actions we take do produce a result. So we believe that when we're overworking and we are putting in so much effort into our work and not getting that result that we want, we feel disappointment and we feel burnt out.

This makes sense when you think about the STEAR Cycle in the sense of our approach and the set of actions that we choose to take, creates our results – yes, this is true. So the actions that you're taking is creating a result for you. And you believe that the result is burnout. But if you really think about what's happening, we have to look at the entire STEAR Cycle and we have to say, look, the reason I'm approaching my job in this way and that I'm working to the point of exhaustion and burnout is because of the way I'm thinking about it.

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And the burnout is not so much a result as it is an emotion. And you're creating the result of emotional burnout because you are thinking and feeling as though you're burnt out. And so the way you are approaching the job, like I have to do more, I have to work harder, I have to work faster, I have to get more done, I have to put more on my to-do list, I have to work day and night, I have to work weekends, I have to work breaks, that set of actions you're taking, it's coming from a place of trying to avoid burnout, which then burns you out.

So if you're a person who feels burned out, I want you to write everything down that you think about your work. Tell the entire story. So let me share my story. When I was a principal, prior to learning all about self-coaching and personal development, this was the story that I had about my job; this job is overwhelming, there's too much to do, I can't get to everything, people aren't happy, I need to make them happy, people don't like me as a principal, they used to like me as a teacher, what's happening? I can't seem to get anywhere, I can't seem to get any traction, I have to work long hours, I have to work these hours so that people don't think that I'm not taking my job seriously, principals must just have to work long hours, this is way harder than teaching. Nobody understands what I have to deal with, the teachers don't understand me, this job is crazy.

I could go on for hours about what I thought about my job prior to learning how to self-coach. And we tell our story to ourselves and to others every single day. And when we do this, we tell it in different ways and it feels very innocent or very simple. And it can be like something as minute as a comment here and there to somebody else, "Oh my god this job is so crazy," and we laugh about it and we talk about it. But really, the more that we talk about it in that way, the more we are reinforcing our belief that the job is overwhelming, that we are in burnout.

And when you believe that story and you tell it over and over again that you're burnt out and you're overworked, you will, without realizing it,

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approach the job with the energy of someone who is completely overworked and burnt out.

So you could actually be fully rested and still come into work for the day already feeling burnt out because you've made a mental decision that you're burnt out. Do you see that? So burnout is actually an emotion. It's not a result.

Emotions stem from our thinking. When we have a burnout story playing in our brain, we feel burnout no matter what we're working on or how many hours we actually work. And your brain might be listening to me talk right now and saying, "But Angela, you don't understand, I'm the only site administrator in my district and I have to do my job and I have to help with district level work and I have three kids at home. Don't tell me I'm not busy, I'm not burnt out. Don't tell me that it's not true. I have to work 12 hours a day. It's an absolute fact. I am truly burnt out."

And I'm here to say I hear you. I get what you're thinking and feeling. I really do because I was in your shoes. I know, I was such a believer. It was my religion to believe that I was overworked and burnt out and busy. I practiced it fanatically.

It's okay and it's really normal to believe these stories about work are very true. I know I did. I understand that you do, my clients do, and I would have argued the same thing back then. But I want you to see that if you can just try to be open to the idea that burnout is an emotion, not a result, then you can be open to the possibility of fixing it because you have control over your thoughts and emotions, okay.

The reason I believe that burnout is an emotion is that there are people who work 12 hours a day and have kids at home that do not feel burnt out. They are thriving. They are happily getting up, going to work, doing the

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work, getting deep into it, and then coming home and being engaged parents.

They love what they do and they don't even talk about being burnt out or being overwhelmed or feeling exhausted from their work. So that's how we know it's true and that it's possible that you can work a lot of hours and not feel burnt out. The number of hours you work has nothing to do with how you feel. What you think about having or choosing to work those number of hours is why you feel the way you do.

So, there are weeks that I work the same, if not more hours than I did as a principal, to build this business. And guess what – I don't ever feel burnt out and here's why; every action I take in my workday is an intentional choice that I'm making. So even when I'm doing something that I don't love, which has been happening the last couple of weeks, like trying to figure out technology glitches and email problems, like I'm not getting emails that I should be getting and all the technology that comes with building this business or tracking my travel receipts, just things like that that feel mundane.

I don't love doing them. It's not innately a joy for me. But what I do is that I do these tasks from a mindset and energy of this sis helping me grow my business so I can serve more educators. I want to figure this out so I can move forward. I want to celebrate the accomplishment of figuring out this problem. I want to honor my business and my commitments to myself. I want to do this work so I can get it done.

I want to honor the commitments I've created today and on my calendar it says track your business expenses, therefore I'm going to honor that and do it, right? Like, I want to do those tasks, not with this fake, "Oh I love what I'm doing," but from this energy of, I'm committed to this, this has a bigger purpose, I want to do this so I can accomplish this. I just don't want to spend time indulging in the drama that my mind is creating, that this is

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hard, I don't want to do it, I don't feel like it right now, I'm going to do this later, I'll get to it another time, all of that.

The more I spend time thinking about how I don't want to do something when I should be doing it because it's what I committed to doing, the more time I'm wasting. That's going to create burnout because I still have to do the work. It's just that now I've made it take much longer than it should have taken or that it needed to take.

Another reason I don't feel burnout is because I'm focused on the results I am creating. I don't ponder over all the tiny steps that it's taking me to produce a result. I try to focus on the feeling that I want to feel after I've completed a project or task.

Producing these podcasts, for example, isn't just a matter of jumping on this microphone and talking at you. It involves researching and studying and implementing the work on myself so that I can see if it works or not so I can adjust the work so I can tell you the process and experience I've had so that it can better help you.

I can't teach this until I learn it myself, so I have to figure it all out on my own, and then I write it up, and then I record it. and even then, I have to do all the technical work of uploading it into DropBox and then I pay my podcast producer wonderful amounts of money to then take this and then he puts his magic and does his thing to make this accessible to you.

All of this time and this work and this effort, and not to mention the technical energy that went into when I first had to learn the podcast, how to figure out the aspects of recording it and producing it and then sending it off to my producer, then I had to learn how to do podcast interviews, which was a whole 'nother thing.

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But I wanted to learn it. I chose to learn it even when it was hard because I wanted the result of this podcast to help people, to serve. This is how I want to show up in the world.

And I don't love having to love the technical aspects or times when I just recorded a podcast where I did an interview, we did the entire interview and I accidentally hit delete. We had to do the podcast interview all over again. I don't love when those things happen. Or I don't love when I wake up in the morning and the podcast failed to upload into DropBox.

But I do love the feeling that comes with completing the podcast and focusing on helping you guys as school leaders become better leaders. Like, that's my jam. That's what drives me. That's what motivates me to get through the tasks that aren't as fun.

So whenever we feel burnout, we have shifted our focus from the service that we're providing and the value that we're providing to our clients. And in your case, it's your students, your families, your teachers, the district, the community at large, whatever, those are all your clients, right, and you are all my clients. Whenever I shift from what it means, what I'm making it mean about myself and how I feel and the pain I'm going through and woe is me, I've shifted from serving you to serving me.

When we shift from focusing on ourselves and woe is me and the pain I'm going through to create this podcast or create this business for you all, to serve you, when I shift from worrying about how I'm feeling about it to how it's impacting you and serving you, then I'm going to experience burnout.

So you, in your case, your clients are your students, your staff, the families, the community, the district, whomever. Those are all your clients. And when you focus on how you're feeling about your work and the value that you're providing and you're worried about how you're feeling and what

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you're doing and how it's impacting you versus impacting those you're serving, that is when you experience burnout.

And I know this sounds kind of harsh, but you're not a school leader so that you get to feel comfortable all the time or you get to love what you do every minute of the day. Education is a service industry. We provide massive value to the world. And when we focus on serving versus being comfortable and happy all of the time, we actually get to feel better.

Contributing and serving is a universal human need. It feels amazing to serve and to volunteer and to contribute. This is why people love to volunteer and to donate to their causes. It feels really good to give.

Look, everything that we ever do, including paid work or volunteer work, it doesn't matter, it is because of the way we believe it's going to make us feel. So you have a job because you want to get paid and you love to get paid, it feels good to get paid, but also because you want to contribute in some way.

As humans, we are wired this way. We love to give when giving comes from an authentic place within us. We don't love giving when it doesn't feel good. When we aren't getting something back in return, at least in our brain, we don't value what we're offering anymore. We don't want to offer it anymore. So in your brain's eye, it has to be like something in exchange, even if it's an emotion, you have to feel good about the volunteering that you're doing or the work that you're contributing.

So at your job, you get a return of money, you get an exchange of value that is your paycheck. So you put out work into the world to serve and to contribute, absolutely, but you also get in return a paycheck. That paycheck doesn't always mean it's going to be easy or simple or feel good or be comfortable all of the time.

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When you volunteer, you volunteer for as long as it feels good, but when it doesn't feel good anymore, what do you do? You stop volunteering. There's no more exchange. So the exchange for volunteering is an emotion. An exchange at work can be an emotion if you choose to let it be, but it's also that exchange of money for your time, for your effort, for your value that you're providing to the district.

So, at work, when you believe that you're giving and receiving value back and forth and in return, you don't feel burnout. But when you aren't feeling there is an exchange, that you're getting something in return for what you're providing, you feel burnout.

And I know this because I did this as well. I would say things to myself like, I'm putting all of these hours in for what? Like, I forget about the paycheck in the moment. I was thinking to myself, I just spent all this time and put this together for the teachers and they're not responding or the kids aren't responding or the parents aren't responding to all this work that I did, poor me, you know.

The same kids are needing RTI or the same teachers are being negative Nellys or the scores went up a little bit but not that much so what's going on and nobody seems to notice how much effort I'm putting in anyway so what's the point, right. I got into a really negative space for a period of time as a leader. I felt super deflated, super defeated, super exhausted. I felt like I was fighting an uphill battle against the system and that everything was a struggle.

I was really in a bad space, which is why I'm now being able to help those who are because once I found coaching and I hired a coach and I started examining my situations and I started allowing her to push me to question beliefs I deeply held onto, then I saw how it was my thinking and it was my emotional state and it was the way I was approaching my day that ultimately led to my suffering in the job.

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But it also led me to see how I had once loved serving in that capacity and that I was no longer aligned to serving the world and the field of education in the same way.

So finally, what I had to do in order not to feel burnout, we must align to the work that we do. We must be in alignment. And what that means is that you feel compelled to serve in this way. So don't mistake not liking everything about your job for not being aligned to the work. There's a difference. There are always going to be things that you don't like doing in the moment and that, in fact, what I've come to realize is that now that I'm working for myself and everything I do in my day I'm responsible for, like I'm answering to me as the CEO of my company.

And there's times, as the employee of my company, I don't want to do what the CEO tells me I have to do. And your brain, when you have to get down and get to work, it's always going to not want to work. It doesn't mind planning, tomorrow I'm going to do all these things and that's going to feel amazing to get them done. But then, when you get to that moment in time and it's eight o'clock, it's time to start work, your brain is going to be like, but wait a minute, I need to throw in a load of laundry, or wait a minute, I forgot to call so and so, or oh, I didn't answer my text from my friend last night.

All of those things are going to pop up. Your brain is going to do everything it can to not do the work. Just know that. So when I sit down at the computer and I'm like, okay, I can't wait to write my podcast. I love doing this podcast, but let me tell you, when it's on the calendar I'm going to write the podcast and get to work and get it done and get on with the rest of my work for the day, my brain does everything in its power to self-sabotage.

It wants to distract and it wants to do something that feels better. So I really have to notice the resistance and know that my brain is going to say, like, oh look, I haven't dusted for a while. Oh wait, I need to stretch, I need a

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snack, the plants haven't been watered, right? and if I give in to every one of those little distracting thoughts, it feels in the moment like it's only going to take a second to water the plant or to get a snack, who cares, it's just a few minutes? But you keep doing that over and over and answering those urges and allowing them to take over, you won't ever get the work done.

And then, what's going to happen is you are going to feel burnout because you will have to scramble to get your work done. You're either going to put out C-minus work, which is unacceptable, or you're going to have to work longer hours because you didn't get done what you said you wanted to get done.

So, what I'm trying to show you is that your brain is going to want to flutter all about and be happy and comfortable all of the time. But when you align to the work, you have the mindset and the emotional stamina to stay focused and do the work because you love the result so much. When you're not aligned with the work you're doing, you're going to notice that not only, will you give into those urges of distraction, you won't even really care that you're giving into them.

And here's what's so interesting; when we're not aligned with our work and we're feeling burnt out, we give into the immediate relief by distracting ourselves and procrastinating and doing tasks that feel more fun in the moment and we don't even really care. We're like, so what?

But when something becomes do or something becomes a problem because we haven't addressed it and now it's brewed into a bigger problem and we have to address it, then we're spending more time, more energy, and more focus than if we'd handled it right away. And having to work in that way in reactive mode creates thoughts and feelings of burnout. It's so fascinating how we create our own results, isn't it?

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So, how do you know whether you are aligned to your work or not? I get this question a lot because people are like, god, I'm so miserable, the only thing I want to do is not this job. Well, ask yourself this question; if nothing was an issue, money, time, family, obligations, how would you choose to contribute to the world? What is it that you want to be known for? How do you want to help and serve others?

If your answer is like my clients' answers, it's like, I'll do anything but this – which is not true, of course, but you say that at the time because you just want out of the misery. But really, when you think about it, if your answer is, like, not this, then ask yourself why not. Why don't you want to do this work? What is it about this work that you don't love? What do you want to spend your time doing?

So when I was a principal and I started digging really deeply into what I truly wanted, I asked myself, Angela, if you had all the money in the world, what would you want to be doing with your time? And I realized this; I want to build this business. I want to serve in this way. I love coaching. I love helping people step into their own empowerment. It's the best thing I can imagine ever doing with my life.

And yes, like, when I first was – when I was still in the principalship, I was like, all I want to do is get up, have no agenda, travel the world, go have fun, be with my friends, listen to music, do all my favorite things. But in reality, that gets kind of boring. Indulging 100% of the time is no longer indulging. It starts to feel lazy or unproductive and invaluable.

So when I think about if money weren't an object, if time weren't an object, if I could create whatever I wanted in my life, it would be exactly this. And yes, there are times when I also don't want to work and I want to have total freedom in what I do and on a given day. But in reality, being fully free from any contribution does not sound appealing to me at all and I imagine it does not sound appealing to you.

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You didn't go into education to not contribute to the world. And I personally don't want to live a life where someone else is responsible for my income and how I consume life. I don't want to just consume and not give in return. So you want to get really real with yourself and ask yourself, like, what is it that I really do want to do with my time? How do I want to contribute to the world?

It doesn't feel good to not be productive and to not contribute to the greater good. And when I realize this – like, when I first took some time off, I'll be honest with you, yeah, I thought I was, quote en quote, working on my business. But really, I was dabbling in the business.

I was spending a lot of time doing nothing. And over time, I saw the results I was getting, which was not coaching anybody and not serving people and not helping and not having an income freaked me out. So I decided, wait a minute, I actually do want to do this work. I want to dive deep and get into it.

And that is when I fully committed to life coaching for school leaders. I honestly thought it was the last thing I wanted to talk about when I first left the district. I was like, I am so burned out from education, I don't want to talk about this anymore. And I even told my business coach, the last thing I was going to coach on was education. But guess what, I found myself talking about education and how it could benefit from all the life coaching tools I'd learned and all I could think about in my mind was how to implement these life coaching tools into the field of education.

I was obsessed with it. It was crazy. So my coach just simply kept pointing this out to me and it was that very week – and I remember it distinctly – that *The Empowered Principal Podcast* was created. I now know that no matter how much this business generates in revenue over the upcoming years, I am not ever going to sell it or resign from it because it's what I love to do.

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The work I've had to do to get this thing started goes way beyond recording a weekly podcast. The mental mindset work, the emotional stamina work and taking scary and massive action is the work that I needed to do in order to create this company, this service, this content.

And you might be thinking, good for you. You just left your job, sold your house and you live in the Bay Area so you made a lot of money on your house and you're able to start a business. I don't have that kind of luxury. You can do that but I can't. I've got kids. I've got all these reasons why I can't.

Well, I have a child. I have a child who's in college, so it doesn't get easier when kids go off to college by the way. And let me tell you, the experience of transitioning from being an employee to being an employer was not easy. It's actually been the hardest thing I have ever done.

And let me tell you, ladies and gentlemen, I birthed a child, I've gone through a heartbreaking divorce, and many heartbreaking breakups afterwards, and I'm also in the midst of building this business, caring for a parent who has a terminal condition. So I've also done many hard things. We all have a story about our hard things.

The mental and emotional fitness required to break away from all that I'd known to be stable and secure in my life and to follow this work and to align with what it was I want to do was anything but easy.

So I promise you, if you study yourself and you get the support you need and you determine that school leadership is not in alignment with how you want to serve anymore – like if you feel really trapped and stifled and stuck, then you need to get honest with yourself and figure out what you're going to do to align with yourself and create a plan for getting yourself there. It's not going to be easy, but it will be the most rewarding thing you have ever done.

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If, however, on the other hand you study yourself and you ask all of these questions and you realize that you do in fact enjoy being in education and you're just feeling a little burnt out, then you need to get honest with yourself again and figure out why you're thinking about your job in this way.

The burnout is a red flag to say, hey, I'm having some thoughts about my work that are creating some suffering and stress and burnout and overwhelm and exhaustion. Now, for those of you who are clients and you have the podcast workbook for this month, I want you to explore this deeply. Set aside time to answer the questions and determine if you're having burnout thoughts and you want to stay in the job but you want to figure out how to get back to enjoying it, or whether you're truly misaligned in your work in this world.

And if you do feel you're misaligned, please don't despair because you're thinking, oh gosh, it's only October and I have to go through a full year of work. No, view it as you have one full year to plan and prepare for your next chapter and contribution. And that you have one year to practice coaching yourself on believing that your job, which is a situation, is not why you feel the way you do, and work on giving value to that job and showing up and loving that job as if it's the last thing on earth you're going to do.

Because, as of today, you're a school leader. You can give it all you've got or not. You can choose to enjoy it or not. And you can choose to enjoy the process of planning and preparing for your next adventure, your next chapter of your career.

Seriously, guys, think about this; how would you think about your job right now if I told you right now today that this is going to be the last year in your position, that you don't get a choice, this is it. You are leaving next year. What would you think? How would you feel? Would you be super excited and happy and be like, dang, I've been waiting for this, I want a new career,

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I'm so looking forward to it, I'm going to get busy and start planning right now and I'm going to make this the best year of my principalship ever?

Or would you be spending your time worrying, oh my gosh, wait a minute, I said I didn't want this job but I need this job, I have to have a job, I need the money, I can't do this, my kid's in college, oh my gosh, and you panic? Think about it. Do you really not want the job or do you just think you don't want the job? Get real with yourself.

How would you feel? Would you feel sad? Would you feel scared? How would you show up for the year? What would you be spending your time doing for the rest of the year? These are amazing questions to ask yourself because they will help you differentiate the difference between wanting to be in this job and figuring out how to reduce burnout, versus I'm truly misaligned, I need to do something else.

This is such good stuff, you guys. I love it. I'm sorry the podcast went a little long today, but it's well worth it. Next week, we're going to talk about your workload and how you can approach the amount of work that you do in your day and in your week and how you can reduce your workload with a few minor thought tweaks and a schedule adjustment. My friends, have an empowered week.

Hey, 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 Principal Empowerment can do for you. It's my one-to-one personalized coaching program where we take concepts from the podcasts and we apply them to your specific situation.

This is how you become the most empowered version of yourself; not just as a leader at work, but in all areas of your life. Join me today to become an empowered leader.

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