

## Ep #94: Prioritizing Your Workload as a Leader



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 94.

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.

What is up? What is up? How are you guys? How are you doing this week? Did last week's podcast help you with work burnout? I really, really hope so. I have to tell you, the work that I did on my own thoughts about burnout was a game-changer for me.

And it's not to say that you're never going to feel burnt out again, even though you understand where your burnout is coming from. But when you do feel burnout kicking in, you can use it as a signal that it's time to find out what's going on for you. Why are you feeling burnt out? Are you not getting enough sleep? Are you over-scheduling yourself? Are you saying yes when you mean no? Are you working on projects that you aren't aligned with?

When you notice yourself saying or feeling that you're burnt out or that you're exhausted from work, I want you to ask yourself why. The answer to this question is going to be your thoughts about the work. You're going to see your thoughts come out in the form of answers to the question.

And when you're thinking about your work and your workload, and if it's generating burnout, then we have some work to do, some mental work to do. So, workload is what we're going to talk about today. So many of my clients talk about they're overworked, they have a huge workload, the expectations for their work, they're impossible. And so we're going to explore what workload is and what it isn't and how to manage your workload in a much more empowered way.

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So, what is workload? Workload is the amount of work to be done by somebody. So in education, we outline a person's workload with a job description.

What's funny to me about job descriptions is that, oftentimes, what is listed on the job description is not a very tangible or a measurable result and it doesn't really identify how or any approach. It's just kind of nebulous.

We say things like, "Foster a climate of student success." What does that even mean? What does that look like? What does it sound like? What does it feel like? What is it in action and how do you measure a climate of student success? Like, how nebulous is that, right?

I actually looked up one school district's job description for K-12 principals and it had 40 bullets of tasks that the principal must be able to do; 40 pages and pages of desired outcomes, and the desired outcomes aren't for the principal. Well, maybe the principal is alignment with all 40 of those, but the desired outcomes are for the district, right? And at the end of the job description – this is the best – it had one line at the bottom on how performance would be evaluated.

So under evaluation, it said, "Principals will be evaluated in accordance with board policy." Okay, well no wonder school leaders feel like the world is being placed on their shoulders. We have 40-plus things that we want you to achieve, and when you're not doing them all, we're going to tell you, but we're not going to tell you how we're going to tell you. It's so ridiculous, it's so funny when we think about this.

So we're not going to tell you how to accomplish the task. We're not going to even be specific about what we want you to do as an outcome of your job, as a part of your workload, and we're certainly not going to tell you how we measure your progress or how we communicate that to you. That's classic, right?

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I just love it. But we're all out here doing the best we can, humans. It's okay. Here's where workload and burnout become intermingled. We apply for a principalship, we get a list of 40 tasks that we're responsible for, all at the same time, of course. And then we get into this daily work of the job.

And under each of those 40 tasks are all these little subtasks that we have to do, not to mention the tasks that pop up every day that aren't even on the list. This is when our brain will lock up and go into overwhelm and burnout.

It feels impossible to do it all, and the truth is, it is impossible to do it all. Let's stop pretending that we should be doing it all. Humans are not designed to multitask and to take on 40 things at one time is impossible in the sense that we believe we should be getting to everything all at one time when we're not designed to multitask. And so believing that we should do all 40 things at once, then we fail at doing the 40 things at once, we make that failure mean that something's wrong with us, that we can't keep up, that we should work harder, faster, longer, and those thoughts lead us to take more action that may or may not create a result that we want but typically not because when we're coming from that kind of energy we spin out. And when we don't, then we end up feeling burnout, disappointment, frustration, overwhelm.

So much of our work drama stems from believing that we have to do everything and we have to do it well. Let me challenge you a bit. Let me tell you a story first. My school site council president – hey, Greg. I want to shout-out to my friend Greg out there. Greg and I used to have these amazing discussions about what we were really required to do at our school versus what we believed we had to do, or what the collective agreement in education were.

So, for example, like, is this a law that we have to follow or we're going to be arrested or fired? Or maybe it's a district policy that we have agreed to

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follow or adhere to and that we can't really change, it's not within our sphere of control to change it. Or is this just a common belief that we've thought so many times we just think that it's law, but it could actually really be approached in a different way?

We'd love to ask ourselves that question and we'd dig into it. We'd be like, wait a minute, this isn't a law, this isn't a district policy. We just – it's like, folk law. It's like it's been passed down from the generations, so we just believe it because we've been told by our elders that it's true and we don't question it. It was so fun to do that.

So, I like to use the example of bell schedules and grade levels. Most schools group kids by age and we call them grade levels. And we also have bell schedules at our school to indicate what time we should be engaged in a particular activity.

The bell rings, we go inside. The bell rings, we do our work. The bell rings, we go outside. The bell rings, we come back in. The bell rings, we go to lunch, right? This is such a common practice, grade levels and bell schedules, that many people think it's a law in education, that we're required by law to have grade levels and bell schedules. And so most leaders don't even stop to question it deeply, even though grade levels and bell schedules don't serve all kids.

We think, that's too bad, bell schedules and grade levels, that the kids aren't fitting into our system, they're not fitting into our grade levels, they're not fitting into the bell schedule. Because it's law, we have to have it. No, if you did some research, you would find that there are schools that do not group children by their age and they do not have bell schedules. And there are some schools who don't do either.

So in fact, it is possible to not group students by their age and to not have bell schedules. But we don't tend to question it because we think it's just a

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part of the job description that we've been offered and that it's our job to provide instruction via grade levels and bell schedules.

The same is true in our jobs. We often believe we're required to do things in a certain way, and this often means that we more to do. We have this huge to-do list because we believe that in order to achieve the 40 tasks on our job description, that we have to do all of these subtasks in a particular way.

It gets very complicated and messy in our heads when we think about all of this at once. So what I recommend for clients who are feeling tremendous overwhelm is to separate the facts of their job from the opinions that they have about it or the story that they create about it.

And it's really hard in the beginning because our stories, our opinions of our job, feel like facts. They feel like the news. They feel like the law, the truth. So when you do write the story down about your job, you're going to see that the facts of the job, they tend to be very short and sweet.

They're things like, I have a job, the job has a job description, I have a boss, my boss has authority over the position that I currently work in. My boss sends out directives. My boss asks me questions. I have a staff. I have students. Students attend my school. Students have parents.

Like, the facts are short and succinct. They are just the situation. They're simple. They're not burdened with all of our opinions. So they, in and of themselves, are very neutral. They don't have any meaning. You have a job has no meaning. So what, you have a job, what do you make that mean?

Well, the story behind you have a job is the meaning you attach to the story that is what you think your job's all about. So what happens is that our brain

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creates a story, which is just a set of opinions, no worries, and the fact is you have a job. That's a fact, and it's just that. But what you think about the job, how you feel about the job, and how you approach the job is all based on the story that you give it.

So the story you might be giving your job might be something like this; this is ridiculous, I can't possibly do all of this. There are too many interruptions to get to all of this. How am I supposed to be in classrooms and be in the lunch room and meet with parents and spend the day in leadership meetings and stay on top of the latest research when it seems like what I'm really doing with my day is handling student discipline issues all long?

So while this sounds like it's just a principal who is venting, and it's seemingly harmless, it's creating a lot of suffering for this principal. She doesn't realize that her thoughts about her job description and what she makes it mean causes her intense stress, frustration, burnout.

And as we talked about last week, burnout is a feeling based on our thoughts about our workload. Our opinions about our job is what makes us feel burned out or overwhelmed.

We usually say we're burnt out when we believe that we have more things to do in order to achieve the outcome of our job description than we believe is possible, or that the things we do do doesn't create the result that we want. So when we believe that it's our job to do all 40 things and that the boss is going to be unhappy and give us a bad review if we don't do them, we have this whole story, we're going to approach the job from an emotional state of stress and panic and worry and ultimately that turns into fatigue, disdain, and burnout.

So in order to get a handle on the workload, we must first get a handle on our thoughts about our workload. So let's get started. What you have to do is separate the facts from the story. Be willing to really question what you

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currently believe to be true. Ask yourself if your belief can be proven in a court of law.

Is it true that you have too many interruptions? Is it true that Mrs. Smith cannot handle her classroom? Is it true that your superintendent has too higher expectations of you? Be willing to ask yourself if you can prove these to be true in a court of law.

Getting into the habit of questioning yourself will begin to break down burnout immediately because what happens is that your brain starts to say, hey, wait a minute, is that true? It feels really true. But is it really?

If it's not true, oh my gosh, what if it's just a thought? What if I just thought it was true. Whoa, that is a trip. Right there, your brain can already like think about new possibilities, what else might be true, what else might not be true. And once you're able to shake that up and shake those thoughts by questioning them, it's so empowering because once you're able to honestly question what you believe is true about your workload, then you can start to prioritize your tasks and constrain the amount of work you do. And that's step two.

So, step one is separating out your facts from your story, and number two, once you've done that, you're going to start to prioritize. The word prioritize drives me crazy because we say a priority means one thing, the top thing, it's the priority. But what do we do? We have 10 priorities, or three priorities, or 40 priorities. Everything is a priority.

No, we say that these top three things are the priority. If every one of them is the priority, how do you schedule them in your day? Because they're all the same priority, they all have equal value. They need equal time and attention. How do you prioritize them?



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Well, you choose one priority. So, what you'll notice, that when you start to get really honest with yourself and you start to answer these questions about what you believe about your workload, you're going to find this; you don't really have to do anything. There are school leaders out there – I'm sure it's not you – if you're listening to this podcast, it's not you. But there are school leaders out there who just opt out of focusing on their campus climate or they don't take a strong stance on instructional leadership. They're just there.

And the truth is, you don't really have to do one darn thing on that job description list. You don't have to do any of it. You could totally blow it off. The reason that you do do the things on the list is because you want to. You choose to. You do want your staff and students to be successful, so you serve them. You do want to have relationships with parents, so you meet with them. You do want your boss to like your work, so you honor the initiatives of your district. You do want to be seen as successful as a leader, so you show up. You do the work.

You want to create legacy; you want to have an impact. You also don't want to create negative results for yourself. You don't want to be perceived as lazy or incompetent. You don't want to fail. You don't want to experience getting fired.

So get honest with yourself about your workload. You empower yourself when you acknowledge that your workload is truly based on what you want. And the way that you approach the job and the results that you get is an ultimate indicator of what you truly believe. So get to noticing.

And with that said, once you are owning your choices in how you work, then you also get to own how you prioritize your tasks and how you constrain your tasks. And before I get to this, I want to say something real quick about being busy.

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There is a cultural norm, especially in our society in the United States that we need to exclaim how very busy we are and that the work we do has to be very serious all of the time. We are not being productive if we're not being serious and busy, and we wear busy as a badge of honor, as if being busy means that we are being productive and that we're taking our job seriously.

I know that I was told that being professional meant being very serious and being very busy. And if we weren't being busy, then we must not be doing a good job because being a principal is busy. If you're not busy, what's wrong with you? You're obviously not good.

So, I thought that I had to feel very busy and I had to act on being very busy and therefore my schedule was very busy. But knowing that busy does not mean productive, it doesn't mean being effective and it doesn't mean being successful. Knowing that changes everything.

So having our calendars jam packed in the name of being a good leader means that we aren't being a good leader. We aren't taking interruptions into consideration and putting them on our calendar knowing that they're going to happen. We aren't giving ourselves time to intentionally create new solutions. We aren't being efficient with our time.

Our job description tasks are going to fill the amount of time we give it. So being a good leader includes constraining the number of things we schedule in a day and planning on time that isn't busy, that does accommodate interruptions, that gives birth to new solutions that we could not conceive when we're so busy being busy.

So if you are a person who's always telling people or telling yourself how busy you are, check yourself because you don't have to be busy to be successful. You don't have to be busy to be productive. You can plan on interruptions, and you should plan on interruptions because they happen,

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and pretending that they don't happen or ignoring that they happen will only cause you stress and frustration.

You have to know, you don't have to be busy to be productive and effective. So let's get back to prioritizing. It's as simple as this; you look at your list, you look at your to-do list, write it down, look at the 40 things you have to do today. You pick one.

You're going to pick the top thing. It's not a priority if it's not the top. You pick the one top thing and you just schedule it. You put it on your calendar. So today, for me, podcasting. What did I do? As soon as I sat down at eight o'clock, I started working on the podcast. I wrote the podcast. Actually, I wrote two podcasts, and this is the second one of the day I'm recording. And then tomorrow, I'm going to write the other two for the month, and October will be done.

They are the first things that get done in the day. And then I post on social media, and then I get to my business, and then I coach my clients. I do the things. I make sure that it gets done when I said it's going to get done. It's the one thing of today.

Now, is it the one thing every day? No. Sometimes the one thing is consult calls, helping clients or prospective clients get a better understanding of how coaching can help them.

Sometimes the priority is planning out my business plan for the month. One thing. I do one thing per day and I do that. I schedule a time and I do it. So if you're a morning person, do it first thing. If you're better in the afternoon and you have to have your morning coffee and your diet coke for lunch, then you schedule your priority at 1pm.

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Stop telling yourself you're going to get all 40 things done. You can't get to everything, so quit believing that you can or that you should. Just choose the top thing and do it. What happens is you feel super productive because you complete it, then you've accomplished the one thing and one step towards your job description.

And when you prioritize it, I want you to keep this in mind; ask yourself why it's the top priority. So, if your top priority is going to lunch that day, why? Why is it? Is it because you're so burnt out you need a break, the only thing you're looking forward to is going out to lunch with a colleague?

Your reason for it being a priority must be because it's a task that results in a desired outcome. So, for example, the goal of clearing out your email box might feel really good to accomplish in the moment but doesn't get you the result of creating a tiered response to behavior system in your school.

If you're working to create a tiered response to behavior, and you want a school-wide system in place, checking and answering and cleaning out your email box is not getting you that response. Maybe checking an email that's regarding that might help you, but it's very easy to get distracted with cleaning out your email box versus sitting down and scheduling and getting to work on that tiered response system. If it doesn't honor your top priority, your top outcome, then it's a no. It's not the top priority and you should say no to it.

Number two, once you prioritize, then you must constrain. As we know, there are well more than 40 things on your job description list that you could do with your time at work. It's very easy to fill our schedules with things to do.

The goal is not to be busy and working 12 hours a day. People, no, the goal is to do less but commit to the priority. If it's not the priority, then it's a

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no. As a principal, you are asked to do many, many things in addition to your priority all day long.

You want to be a yes person, I understand. You want to help and serve as much as possible, and many times, to our own detriment. But listen to me, if you do not learn how to constrain, you will not have the energy and focus to get the bigger results that you ultimately want.

Leaders that feel successful and love their jobs do so by keeping their focus on one priority at a time. This doesn't mean that the only work you ever do all day and every day is that goal. It means that task towards that goal, that one goal, that one priority, you schedule those in first and you get them done first.

And the other things that come up as distractions for that goal, if it's not a yes, it has to be a loving no, and you can lovingly say no and keep your focus. People aren't going to hate you. And even if they do, you're okay with it because you committed to the one priority.

Constraint is also important when it comes to the time limit you give a task. I used to block off hours of time for one task to that I had lots of time to do it. But what happened was it was like a reverse effect on me.

So, for example, I did this with the podcast. I used to give myself a half a day three days a week to work on one podcast. I was spending, like, six, nine, 12 hours writing one podcast. It took me days. It was ridiculous. How could I even coach? I wasn't even attracting clients because I was so busy writing the podcast.

Now I give myself 60 minutes to write it, 30 minutes to record it. I don't allow myself to go on for hours and hours on end. It doesn't make the

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podcast that much better and it takes up too much time, time that could be spent doing other things.

But what I do now is I get really focused on that priority. I write for 60 minutes. The timer goes off, even if it's not done, I get up and I record it. If it sucks, my podcast producer will tell me this isn't good, do it again.

I have learned to write in an average of 60 minutes. I'm not perfect. Sometimes it goes longer. And I do an average of 30 minutes, which, if I don't get busy here, this is going to be longer than 30 minutes.

So it's not perfect, but it's trained my brain to get really focused, to eliminate distractions. Do not look at my phone, do not check email, do not get up, do not pass go, do not collect \$200. I work for the hour, completely wholeheartedly work for the hour.

So when you have a task, you want to give yourself a time limit. Work the entire time that you've scheduled for that task and when the time is up, you're done. Now, what's going to happen is that, at first, you're not going to get it done. But what I want you to try and do is either way just stop working on it.

If you schedule an hour and you're not done, it's okay that you're not done. End it, schedule another hour the next day. But make yourself stop and go do something else because you want to train your brain, like, whoa, I didn't get this done in time. You know like when you take a test in school and it's a timed test and the time is up, it doesn't matter whether you finish the test or not. It matters that the time is up.

Play the game like that, like if I only have 60 minutes to do the podcast, how much can I get done? If I only have 30 minutes to get it recorded, how much am I going to fit in, right?

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Make it a game. Play with yourself. It's really fun actually. And what you'll do is you'll surprise yourself. You'll get it done in 26 minutes or you'll get it done in 50 minutes or 45 minutes versus 60.

It's so much fun to see what you can get done when you choose to constrain, not just your time, but the amount of things that you do. And the takeaway here is this; you don't have to feel overwhelmed or overworked or burnt out. You don't have to be so busy that nothing gets accomplished. You can slow down, plan your day, commit to your priority, and leave the day feeling productive and accomplished.

Being productive does not mean being burnt out. It doesn't feel like burnout. It's actually the opposite. It feels amazing to be productive, to have accomplished something, to do one thing, the one thing that is the priority. That feels so good at the end of the day. And when you do more in less time and you stick to one priority, it diffuses burnout, which gives you enthusiasm and energy to tackle the other 39 things on your job description list.

So, give it a try. Reach out and let me know how it's going. If you're struggling, reach out and let me know, I'm here to help you. Have an amazing, empowered, and productive week. I will talk to you next week. Take care, bye-bye.

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