

Ep #108: Become a Better Leader Through Accountability



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Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to Episode 108.

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.

Hello, my empowered leaders. Happy Tuesday. How are you guys doing? I'm so happy to be here with you today and hey, for many of you, you are coming off of a three-day weekend, so I hope that you had a lovely three-day weekend and that you really enjoyed the time off.

And if you did happen to go into work, I do hope that you were able to work without interruption which, to me, was just as much of a gift as taking the time off from work. Having a day where you can think and work on your projects for as long as you want to, give yourself the time and the space to process and really think deeply about the work you're doing that is so juicy and delicious. So, either way I hope you had an amazing Monday.

This week, we're going to talk about accountability, which in my years as an educator made me roll my eyes and made me a little bit nauseous. But it's because of my experiences with accountability that I'm going to talk about it in a very different way.

We're going to talk about accountability that comes from a place of love. A love for ourselves, a love for others including our teachers and our students. And I believe out of all the emotions the entire spectrum of

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emotions that humans experience, there are two primal emotions; love and fear.

And we can either approach accountability from a place of love – a love for our students, a love for ourselves, a love for our school and our teachers, or out of fear, out of worry, out of doubt, out of fear of what our boss is going to say or what the county is going to say or the state or the feds, or that we're going to get fired. And we approach accountability from this place of fear. We're going to talk about these two approaches and how they impact the way that we lead our schools and the way that we hold ourselves and others accountable.

So, what is accountability? Being accountable means being subject to the obligation to report, explain, or justify something, or to be responsible for or answerable to. That's the definition in the dictionary for accountable. What it means is that we just simply understand why we are doing what we are doing, and it means that we know why we're taking the actions we're taking, which goes back to understanding the thoughts and emotions which are driving our approach.

So, when we're accountable to a goal or to a thing or to someone, it basically just means we understand the goal, we understand our thoughts and emotions about that goal, we recognize the obstacles that we're facing in reaching the goal, and we understand that we're taking towards that goal and the compelling reason that's driving us to keep taking action towards the goal even though we haven't achieved it yet. We have full control of our focus on that goal and our actions towards it. That's what accountable means. Being accountable means understanding the process we're using to get to that goal.

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And when you look at it this way, it neutralizes all of the drama in our heads around what accountability means and we don't feel bad about the goal because we want to achieve it. We want to get that goal. We strive for the goal.

And we don't mind failing time and time again until we get there because we are enjoying our quest to conquer that goal, even when we have failures. Think about this. I think about sports. My husband loves sports. We're really into watching the 49ers right now and when you think about games, whether they're video games or real games in real life, the games are designed for us to fail at times.

In sports, we win some of the games and we lose other games. And the players don't quit their job when they lose. They don't quit playing the game every single time they lose. No. What they do is they study the game, they study their opponent, they study how they played personally and how the team played together.

They get coached and they get motivational talks from their coach. They get fired up and hungry, and they practice, and they work hard, and they do this over and over and over again with no guarantee that they will win or lose the next game. They do it for the love of the game.

And that's the same with video game players, right? The games are designed to allow you to win early, when you first start. Video games are wired based on how humans respond to accountability and to progress and to goals, and they're designed in the beginning for lots of early wins.

They're easy to understand how to play and how to win. Your brain gets several hits of dopamine and it gets you hooked on this game and

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understanding, and chasing the prize. And before you know it, you have played some game on your phone for an hour, right?

They know how to design games that tap into that human drive and motivation to seek out the win. Even amongst the fails, we keep striving and striving and trying. Same is true with the basketball players or football players. They push themselves, they keep studying, they keep learning. They're willing to fail in order to learn how to get that win the next time.

And that is what we want to create in our schools. We want to have this kind of environment, this kind of hunger, this mentality of athletes or gamers. We want to create this culture of loving what we do even when we fail and being open to having ourselves and others hold us accountable.

So, let's talk about what accountability isn't. What I believed has happened with accountability, particularly in education, is that the meaning of accountability has shifted from ownership and love of the game, of teaching, into blame and shame.

And I think way back, I'm dating myself, but I think way back to NCLB's 100% proficiency expectations. Remember those, and all of the sanctions that were going to happen to you and your school if you didn't follow the hockey stick pattern up to 100% proficiency?

It created this culture and fear around accountability, which then led counties and states and districts and schools to lead from a level of fear, because we were worried about what would happen to us personally, and happen to our school, and our kids, and our teachers, and our district if we didn't get the goal of 100% proficiency. And this led to fear-based tactics in an attempt to raise test scores.

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And this intimidation came down from the federal government, down to the states, down to the counties, down to the districts, down to the sites, down to the classrooms, and then the classrooms to the students and the families. All along this path, the goals were imposed upon people with only negative consequences as behavior modification.

And people in the industry, educators, feared these consequences because we thought we were going to lose our job or lose our school, or the districts were going to be taken over by who knows who. And in the beginning, before we realized that most of these threats were not going to be really carried out, the test scores actually did improve a bit.

There's always a certain level of compliance that comes with fear-based expectations, but in the end, using the emotion of fear to drive behavior will not create the results you want in the end. And let's be honest, even if it did, it would feel terrible being a leader. The whole process of getting to the goal would feel awful.

So, in order to make accountability feel more motivating and more exciting, we need to think about it in a way that generates more positive emotions. And it's not to say that we will never feel bad when we fail and that we won't fail, because we will, or that the negative consequences won't occur along the way.

What it does mean is that we create an environment where working towards big goals becomes compelling and motivating and more positive. We cheer people on towards their goals. We offer lots of support as a school leader. We check in with teachers and staff members and ask them, "How are you doing? How can I help you?" And we allow them to choose their consequences and then we hold them to it.

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So, why do we avoid holding ourselves accountable? Let's start with that first. We avoid holding ourselves accountable because, for most of us, holding ourselves accountable meant that we have to be harsh with ourselves if we fail.

Perhaps you grew up with harsh consequences and as a child, your brain solution was to avoid consequences at all costs. Even if you didn't experience harsh consequences as a child, having to follow through on a consequence with ourselves is not pleasant. And let me tell you, our brains can be pretty mean to us, and at the very least, if our consequence is only to tell us that we're being terrible leaders, that's what we do to ourselves.

We beat ourselves up, we tell ourselves we suck, we don't know what we're doing, we're not good at our jobs, we can't solve this problem, so no wonder it's hard to follow through on consequences when consequences mean being really harsh with ourselves, being mean to ourselves, beating ourselves up, feeling like a failure. No wonder we don't want to follow through with accountability.

Another reason it's hard to follow through with ourselves is because our brain is really clever at talking us out of the consequence. So, if we have a goal, let's say our goal is to work out in the morning, and our consequence to ourself is that if we don't go in the morning, we're going to have to go to the gym after work when we're tired and all we want to do is go home.

When you don't go to the gym in the morning and then it becomes the time where you have to go to the gym after work, and you don't want to go and you're tired, your brain is going to have amazing, very profound excuses and reasons as to why you can't get to the gym. And they will seem very justified and very reasonable. The same holds true with our habits at work.

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If we have a goal of scheduling more time in a classroom and we find ourselves day after day and week after week not getting into classrooms, what we'll notice is that the issues that come up during the day that we tend to take care of instead of getting into the classrooms, they all feel very true and very worthy of our time.

And we like our reason for not getting to the goal, not committing to our goal of getting into those classrooms. It feels very logical at the time. And when it feels this logical, we don't really see it as a problem and we don't see a need to hold ourselves accountable because we tell ourselves that we just had to take care of that issue. We justify it in our minds, which lets us off the hook.

The problem with this is that we learn not to trust ourselves. We stop creating new goals and evolving as a leader because we believe that we won't follow through with ourselves and we won't hold ourselves or others accountable. So, if we're not going to hold ourselves accountable, what's the point in creating the goal in the first place? That's how our brain works.

And this is how we get into ruts or we feel stuck or we feel burnout. Burnout comes from not growing and not making things fun and different and exciting. When we do the same things over and over and we don't have new goals and we don't learn new things, we feel kind of burned out, we feel stuck, we feel in a rut. Loving accountability lets us create goals, make them fun, fail, and try again without the shame that comes with failure.

So, we know why we don't hold ourselves accountable, but why are we so worried about holding other people accountable, and why do we avoid it with others?

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So, of the leaders who feel uncomfortable with holding others accountable, some people don't. Some people are very comfortable with it, but others are not as comfortable. Usually it's new leaders out there, but not necessarily. But, of the leaders who feel really uncomfortable, their primary concern is that they don't want people to be upset with them.

I was coaching a client a few weeks ago who brought up his discomfort with holding his staff members accountable, and when I asked why, why the discomfort, he said that he didn't want to be seen as a mean boss, and that he didn't want people not to like him. And this is a totally common situation for school leaders.

In our effort to build relationships with people, we believe that not holding them accountable to their goals will make people like us better as a leader. And when we feel uncomfortable because of our own thoughts about what accountability means, like if we think that it means that we're not good enough or that we suck, we're certainly not going to want to make others feel this way or think this way about themselves.

So, what happens is, is we feel terrible because we don't like accountability and then we feel terrible holding other people accountable because we ourselves have negative thoughts about it, and we believe that they're going to have the same negative thoughts about accountability, so then we hold back. Can you see that?

But I want you to think of this way, if a teacher has a goal that they want to accomplish and they aren't accomplishing it, because we know how hard it is to hold ourselves accountable, right? And if we're their leader and mentor, don't they want a leader who will lovingly hold them accountable? Wouldn't you want your own leader to check in with you and see how

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you're progressing towards your goals and ask how they can be of support to you?

So, just like fitness trainers lovingly hold their clients accountable to workouts and to building their stamina, we as school leaders can hold our teachers up to building their teaching and professional stamina and working out their professional and their teaching goals, right? It's the same thing. It doesn't mean that we're being mean to them or that we're telling them they're not good enough. It's not mean when we're approaching accountability from a place of love.

Another reason we don't like to hold people accountable is that we don't believe we will follow through. Have you ever had a leader who made all kinds of goals and promises, or maybe even threatened negative consequences only to never follow through with them?

So, when we're feeling overwhelmed as a leader, in the back of our minds we're thinking, should I really say I'm going to hold people to a certain goal when I don't have the bandwidth to follow up? And when we believe that and we think we're too busy to follow through, we're going to back away from holding people accountable when we worry that we're not going to be able to give people the support that they need or that we're not going to be able to follow through with what we say.

A third reason we don't like to hold people accountable is because we don't feel like we have any real authority or power in our position in holding them accountable. This, to me, it seems unique in education because of tenure. In corporate, when somebody's not doing something, we'd support them, we guide them, we try and get them to achieve a goal, and if they don't, we let them go. We have the authority to release them from their position.

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In education it's pretty different because of tenure. So, when you've been a leader for a while you might start to see that you can't force a change in someone else, and it can start to feel like you don't really have that much control or influence over the situation.

So, I remember thinking as a principal, "This person's not motivated to change, and they know they don't really have to because they have tenure and there's not much that I can really do if they don't want to change." When I look back at that, it's like, well that's not a very positive way to think as a leader.

I was basically just throwing up my hands as if it were my job to control that person's behavior, and because I couldn't control them, I had no power. And it's very easy to slip into the belief that your job as the principal is to control other people's behavior so that you can reach a goal, such as improved test scores, and there's all kinds of issues with this approach.

Number one, we try to control other people when the goal isn't theirs. Let's say the district writes a goal for us and then we then impose that goal upon teachers. That goal is so far removed from that individual teacher that we think we're going to control them by getting them to reach this goal. It never works.

So, trying to intimidate them or get them to act out of fear is never going to help them reach a goal, and even if they do, it's going to be a miserable experience, like we said. Trying to achieve someone else's goal never works in the end because people don't have attachment to that goal.

Number two, when we're worried about the consequences that we personally are going to receive when someone else doesn't do something, we start to lead out of fear, and this will for sure not build trusting

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relationships with your team. People will not like your leadership, and all of the things that you worry about happening will actually happen if you hold people accountable from a place of fear.

Here's the thing to remember. Holding people accountable doesn't mean that you're going to make them do anything. We can't force people to do anything, and you can't make them teach a certain way or not talk behind your back, right? Holding people accountable involves the actions that you are going to take in an effort to help them reach their goal.

Only you can control the action that you will take. You can't control theirs. So, when your school goal is to raise math scores by five points, when you see teachers not teaching math, you don't hold people accountable by telling them that you insist that they teach math and that you're going to do something horrible if they don't teach math. You hold them accountable through the actions that you're going to take as a leader.

For instance, you might meet with them and seek to understand the thoughts driving their actions. Why aren't they teaching math? What's going on in their mind? What are they thinking and feeling about math that's not driving them to teach it? You might offer instructional coaching or support.

You might help the teacher see the value in math instruction. Perhaps you get them some tools for their classroom, or you offer to send them to a workshop on instructional strategies for math. You can take tons of action on your own in a very loving and supportive way.

And by the way, let me add that this can also include firing them. You can lovingly fire somebody. We'll get into this more in just a minute. For now, I want to invite you to see the difference in accountability where you believe

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you should control other people's behaviors and outcomes versus holding people accountable based on the actions that you will take.

I want to talk for a second about a culture of accountability. One of my clients, who is a new principal, has been working with me on changing the culture at his school. He noticed at the beginning of the year that there were inconsistent expectations and it seemed that people were not holding themselves or others accountable.

His fear in having these conversations as a new principal were that people weren't going to like him or give him a chance to be successful, and this is understandable. Inheriting a culture of low accountability can be intimidating as a new leader, but it can also give you the chance to create a new culture where accountability is nothing to fear and that it can be really fun.

Keep in mind, you guys, there are teachers in your staff, usually your rock star teachers, who want a principal to come in and build a culture of loving accountability so that all members of the team can thrive, and some members aren't pulling the weight of everybody.

So, let's get into it. How do we create fun and loving accountability? And you know my first step. It's going to be you must start with yourself. You must be the model. You start with working on your mindset around accountability.

If you have really negative feelings and emotions about accountability and thoughts, you're not alone. Lots and lots of leaders have very negative emotional reactions to accountability and what it means. So, you want to spend some time cleaning up your thoughts around accountability so that

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you can approach others from a very neutral and clean space when it comes to accountability and what it means for you and other people.

Share with people. Share with them your work on this. Share with them how you're willing to let others hold you accountable and that you're working on embracing accountability from a place of love instead of fear and that you want to be the example of what it means to make accountability fun and loving.

Number two, this is really huge, you have to agree on the goal. When you're holding people accountable to a goal, the goal can't be your goal imposed on them. That doesn't work, just like it doesn't work for somebody else to have a goal imposed upon you. What you want to do is you want to help people see the value in the goals that you're setting as a team, and the goals have to be individualized and personalized for each teacher. So even if the group goal is five points higher on the math tests, you want to individualize why is that important to that individual teacher?

Now, group goals sound like a lot of fun, but they're actually harder to hold individuals accountable to because our brains are going to default into thinking that somebody else is going to pick up the slack and that we don't have to personally push ourselves to the degree that we would if we were being held personally accountable. When you have a group goal or a site goal, know that you have to find individual ways of making that goal fun and meaningful to each individual teacher.

And as leaders, our job is to actually inspire people into action. That's what influence is as a leader. We have to help people see why achieving that goal is good for them. I know when we're in teaching we say that it's all about the kids, but to be honest, as human beings, what truly motivates us is we want a win-win.

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We want to contribute, yes, and contribute to the greater good, but we also want to know that there's something in it that's worth working for it on a personal level, because it's hard work for teachers and it's hard work for us. We have to know that getting scores up by five points has some personal meaning to us.

We have to have the win-win. It has to be for them and for us. There has to be joy and fun for the person who's going to make the effort and the contribution towards the goal. It can't be all give and no take.

So, we have to ask ourselves, how do we make this fun? Have you asked that question as a leader, how do we make accountability fun? I think this question is brilliant. We need to focus on creating rewards for accountability and fun along the way and celebrations and make the process of accountability much more enticing, much more motivating, much more fun versus saying, "Okay, if we don't do this then a consequence will be had."

It's basically like how can we make this fun versus how can we make this fear-based. We want to take the fear out of failure. We want people to fail. We want them to fail. We want to encourage failure, reward failure, because failure is closer to the goal.

And when we focus on motivation and achievement, what we do as leaders is we paint the vision of what it will feel like and be like to be in that goal, to have achieved that goal, to be the school who has five points higher on their math. What does that mean? What does that even mean, five points higher? Why do we make it a goal in the first place? How do we make it tangible and what is the emotion that we're looking for?

We're looking for that celebration of success, for that feeling of accomplishment, to see the kids doing well, to have them be excited for

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their own learning and growth. We want to spin our culture and create this vision of excitement for accountability, and that accountability is fun and it's a challenge and it's why we're here on this earth. It's why we're leading schools. It's why we're teaching kids.

We want to make it fun, and we do this from a place of love. We hold people accountable in a loving way by asking them how can we help, what can we do to support you, what is it that you need, I'm here for you all the way, I'm cheerleading for you.

And on the flipside, when it comes down to holding people accountable based on a consequence, that consequence has to come from a place of what you will do as the school leader when a goal isn't reached. So, for example, a teacher has a goal of, let's say, improving her classroom management, and yet you don't see any changes throughout the first entire trimester.

You meet with her, you want to get into her brain, what is she thinking and feeling about this goal? What's hard about it? What kind of support does she need? And you give high levels of support, but also high expectations, and you have to say, "I'm noticing that children are not sitting in their seats. They're running around. I'm noticing this is ineffective because the scores are dropping. Therefore, we need to come up with a plan, well, what will happen if we don't take action towards achieving stronger classroom management?"

You agree on those consequences, but they come from a place of if you don't achieve it, then perhaps you have to take a class, or perhaps you spend more time with the instructional coach. They're all consequences that are based out of love and with the intent of growing the capacity of this teacher. But ultimately if this teacher makes a decision to not follow

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through, to not grow in her ability to manage her classroom, at the end of the school year you may also lovingly decide to hold that person accountable, which means, as a school leader, the action that you will take is letting them go.

So, part of accountability is lovingly supporting people and also lovingly let them go, and there's an entire podcast on how to do that. I won't get into it on this podcast, but for now, I want you to ask yourself the question, how can we make accountability fun? What can I do personally to hold myself accountable in a fun and loving way and what can I do to hold my staff and students accountable in a fun and loving way? And how can I create a culture of accountability that embraces accountability and that holds people to their goals in a very motivating, compelling, and fun way?

Have an amazing, empowered week, guys. I'll talk to you next week. Take care. Bye-bye.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *The Empowered Principal Podcast*. If you enjoyed this episode and want to learn more, please visit AngelaKellyCoaching.com where you can sign up for weekly updates and learn more about the tools that will help you become an emotionally fit school leader.