

## Ep #109: Empowered Decisions



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With Your Host

**Angela Kelly**

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Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to Episode 109.

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. Happy Tuesday. Wow, I can't believe it. As this episode airs, it is already the end of January. I felt like January was such a great month at school. It usually seemed to go so quickly. Kids and teachers and yourself, you're all refreshed after the long-anticipated wait of the holiday break.

And you've had time to catch your breath and regroup yourself. And we're also still riding on that energy that comes from the fresh start that a new year provides us. And you also get that little three-day break in the middle of January for MLK Jr. Day. So, as I record this, it's the last day of 2019 and I have been working through the month of December to get back onto my schedule and get back on track.

I've really been out of it for a couple of months. And let me just share with you, from personal experience, there are going to be times when you are totally on point and on your game with your time management and your school and you feel like everything's going smoothly and amazingly and it's wonderful.

And then there are times where everything seems to just go off track and that has been happening for me. And I'm glad it's happening because I want to experience the things my clients are experiencing so that I can better coach them. And I practice self-coaching myself in order to be of better help to all of you listeners and to my clients.

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And I have to say that I've been observing myself and noticing that I'm a person who is either totally on point or I get really distracted and really off track. And here's my personal take on this and my personal tips or suggestions for you.

Number one, try not to harass yourself and beat yourself up. I feel like we do this so often. It's so ingrained in our brain to be really mean and harsh with ourselves and I catch myself doing it all the time. I have to tell myself, nope, it's not going to do ourselves any good to say mean or harsh things to ourselves and to tell ourselves that we're off track and to reiterate all the things that are going wrong that does not serve you in any way, shape or form. So when you catch yourself doing it, stop immediately.

And number two, try not to let the off-track times become a spiral where you give up on trying to even regain a sense of balance with your time. And like I said, I tend to be an all or nothing person. And I either am very focused and disciplined with my schedule. And most of the time I'm a very productive person. But when something throws me off track like this last couple of months, it can really be a struggle for me to get back into the habits that I prefer.

And 2019, I look back and I think, "Wow, this was a series of getting on track and off track." So, if that's been your experience as well, just know that other people go through this. It's totally normal. And the way that I approach getting started back on track is to take the very smallest, easiest step possible into getting back into your ideal routine.

So, for example, if you were honoring your schedule of, let's say like checking your email a limit of twice a day, maybe in the morning and in the evening or at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day and then a huge blow up happened at work and you couldn't help yourself. You were checking and checking and checking worried about this blow up that

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happened and then the blow-up kind of dissipated. It's over with. But you still are back in the habit of checking your e-mail all the time. If something like that gets you off track, just notice it.

And to say yourself, "Okay, you know what? I am checking e-mail constantly. I am going to start with five times a day and then go down to four times and then down to three times." And eventually you can get your way back to checking in the morning and in the afternoon.

I'm getting back on track by choosing one thing per day to complete. I'm allowing myself the grace and time to give myself time to get back up and fully running. And I'm breaking that one thing into even smaller parts and giving myself a little more time than I normally would to get it done because I've just been really distracted.

I'm still working through the emotions of losing my mom and I'm giving myself some grace and time to be a little more distracted, to get a little bit less done and to allow myself more time than I usually do to get it done.

So, for example. Well, if I have a big project that I'm working on, I will break it into components and when I get one little component done, I give myself a break. Maybe I treat myself to 10 minutes on social media or I read a chapter in a book that I'm loving right now. But my goal is to treat myself very kindly through the process of getting back on track and that's not always easy, but it is really helping me.

I hope that this tip helps you. It's definitely a side note from today's podcast, but I really wanted to share it with you because I'm going through it in this moment and I want to share with you the process I'm using. So hopefully it can help you because coming back to work, sometimes it can take a few weeks to get feel like you're back on track. So anyway, I hope that that has been helpful.

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But today I want to talk about decision making, what impacts the way we make decisions, how our decision-making process affects us and our leadership, and why some decisions feel so much more difficult than others. As school leaders, we are making decisions all day long. We make them at home with our families. We make them at school with our staff and our parents and our kids and our communities.

I could remember coming home from work and my husband would ask me, "Where do you want to go for dinner?" And I'd say to him, "I don't want to have to make one more decision. Can you just decide for us?" And of course, he'd decide something. And I would say, "No, how about Mexican," or "No, I feel like Thai tonight," or "Oh, I just want a cup of soup or a salad."

And this is such a running joke in my family because I always tell Mitch to decide and then pretty much always, I nixed it. And then he'll give suggestions until I say whatever sounds good. And now he's decided actually just over the holiday break, he said, "I am not offering suggestions anymore." So now he makes me decide on my own. It's so funny.

But it's true, as leaders we do make decisions all day long and it can be taxing to our brains. There are many small decisions that we make. We don't really ponder or spend a great deal of time and energy on. And then there are other decisions where we spend a great deal of time and energy deliberating the decision.

In episode 14 I share the importance of being a decisive leader and some different approaches that you can take as a leader in terms of different ways to make decisions. And you can refer back to episode 14 on that kind of decision-making content. This episode will focus more on the emotional aspect of decision making and why many of us struggle with difficult decisions. Why is it so difficult to make some decisions and others we make with little to no stress at all? Let's talk about this, okay?

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And I want to start with bringing our awareness to our decision-making process. Have you stopped to observe yourself making decisions? Have you really thought about how you go about making a decision? And it's very crucial to know how you make decisions because the way you make decisions impacts everything in your life, everything in your career.

Very few people actually notice how they go about making decisions. And because we make so many decisions per day, we do so without the meta cognition of what is influencing our decisions and why we're using the process we're using. When we first step out of it and we're looking at ourselves and we're analyzing how we decide something, we can see that our thoughts are impacting how we decide just using the stair cycle, which is true always, always, but we can see it intellectually.

But when we first step out and analyze how we decide something, we can see how our thoughts are impacting our decision-making process. So, for example, people who need a lot of information regarding a decision are thinking thoughts like, "It's important to make an informed decision. I need more information."

Or people who make decisions really quickly might be thinking, "I like being decisive. I want to make this decision now. I'm ready to decide." And other people want to run their decisions by other people versus some people who want to make the decision completely on their own. They want it to be their decision. And, guys, there's no wrong way about this.

We might believe there's a right or a wrong way to decide and we probably question those who make decisions differently than we do. But that's only because decision making preferences are very strongly rooted in our belief system and it's one of the most challenging aspects of our brains to change.

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The reason we need to be super aware of our decision-making belief system is that the way we make decisions is how we became who we are, right now. Every decision you've ever made, the decisions you made to this point, have created the life that you now have. Your decision to go to college, go into education, to become a teacher, to accept a leadership position all have landed you right here in this moment.

Same holds true in your personal life. The decision to marry or not? The decision to have children or not? The decision to move into a house or not? The decision to buy a house. All of the things we decide, they all have created the life we have right now. It's really awesome to know that we have full control of our decisions based on our environment and the decisions we make around it and how we approach our decision-making process.

So, if we want to continue evolving our practices leaders or if there's something in our lives that we're not particularly happy with that we've currently created based on our current way of thinking, we need to evolve the way that we make decisions. We want to open up our awareness of how we make decisions and create an awareness that allows us to be open to making decisions in a very different way, in a way that feels unreasonable and uncomfortable.

The only way to create change is by making decisions in a new and different way and it's really hard for our brain to do that. So, what impacts the way we make decisions? I used to believe that every decision we made was based on the way we believed it would make us feel. And I have said this on multiple occasions, but as I've pondered this idea and as I prepared for writing this podcast, I now believe that we make decisions based on two things how it will make us feel, number one. And number two, how it will make others feel.

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So, for example, what we spend our money on is a product of either how we are going to feel about that expenditure or what we believe other people will think and feel about our expenditure. So, when we buy things, we either buy them because we personally love them and we don't care what other people think or we buy things because of the way we think other people will think and feel about us than about what we bought.

So, things like our cars, our homes, what kind of vacations we go on, the clothing that we wear, we all want to fit in and belong. And that's really normal because other people's opinions matter to us because we're a tribal species. We want to fit in. And back in the day in the caveman day, we had to fit into the tribe or we'd be socially outcasted which meant death.

And our brains still believe that even social death, what I call social death is just being outcasted from our peer group or from the people that we want to be in our lives and we respect our family, our friends, our colleagues. So, we make decisions based on the way that other people will think about us and we want that acceptance and that belonging.

So, just know this, that this need for belonging and acceptance is present within us so that you can be aware of its influence on your decisions. And at work the same holds true. There are times when we make decisions because of the way it will make us feel and times when we decide based on what we think other people want us to decide on.

We make these decisions based on what the teachers will like or what a parent will like or what we think our boss will like. A common example that I hear from clients is decisions regarding student consequences for certain behavior that's happened.

So, principals get really uptight about this because they feel like the decision is a no-win because almost certainly someone is going to be



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unhappy with your decision. Either a teacher thinks you didn't do enough or the parent feels like it's too strict or the parent whose child was involved but not the perpetrator maybe thinks that you went too soft and that you should be more firm or you should have a harsher consequence.

So everybody is going to have opinion about your decisions and these opinions can weigh you down and impact the way that you make decisions if you're not aware that you're bringing them into the equation. And this is where we get into fear-based decisions. Fear-based decisions are decisions we make when we are fearful of the outcome. And here are some of the reasons we make decisions out of fear.

Number one, wanting to be liked. The majority of us want our staff and community to like us as leaders and even those who put on a very tough exterior and say, "Oh, I don't mind if people don't like me and I don't care what people think." On a deeper level and at some level, we do care.

Wanting to be liked isn't inherently the problem. Making decisions based on wanting to be liked is where we get off track. When we make decisions from the thought, "I want people to like me," we approach decisions from the place of what we think others want. And we know that this isn't an empowered way to decide, but it's surprising how often this fear sneaks into our decisions.

Where I find it creeping in is when we decide not to do something. We avoid having conversations with teachers. We agree with our boss even when we don't really agree. We justify these actions as social graces, but often we're choosing them because we want to be liked and we want to fit in.

The second one, fear of judgment. This is similar to wanting to be liked, but it goes further in the sense that not only are we worried people won't like

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us, we worry they're going to judge us or criticize us either directly to our face or behind our back and talk about us to other people. We don't want others to respond to our decisions negatively, and this can paralyze us from making a decision we would have if we weren't concerned about any judgments or criticisms. So, just notice that, okay?

Number three, not being supported in your decisions. As a school leader, you want your team to support the decisions you make. Making a decision and then not having your staff or your boss support you can really impact your confidence in your decisions. Your goal is to make decisions and inspire people and that leave a positive impact on your school. And the more often you make a decision and then it's not supported by somebody in your network, you feel less and less confident in your decisions and in yourself as a leader.

Number four, this is a big one, being wrong. We fear being wrong. No human wants to be wrong, except in the case of like something horrible happening. If we think something horrible is going to happen, we're like, "Oh, God, I hope I'm wrong about that." But 99% of the time we want to be right. That's just what the human experience is.

Being wrong feels very intense in the body. We want to be able to defend or explain ourselves. We try to convince others why our decision is best or why it's right. And us humans spend a lot of energy trying to be right, and we make many decisions based on our need to be right and avoid the feeling of being wrong.

And then finally, having to change your mind. This is another fear that we are going to have to change our mind. And this goes along with being wrong, but it goes further than that. We believe that if we change our mind that our first decision was wrong and not only is it wrong and now, we're incompetent as a leader because we made a wrong decision.

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And this is why some people tend to dig their heels in with their first decision, even when there is evidence that demonstrates a different decision is warranted. We worry that, gosh, if we change our mind, we're going to be perceived as incompetent and that's not good, so we're going to stick to our guns and stay with the decision, even if it's not in the best interest or we have new information to show us that there may be another way to decide.

So, those are all of the different fears. I'm sure there are more of them, but those are the primary fears that come up when we're making decisions and we want to avoid any of those consequences or emotions that come with being wrong. Being judged, not being liked, not being supported, those kinds of things.

The next question I like to pose is what do you make your decisions mean about you? When you make a decision and you implement it and it doesn't work what do you make that mean about who you are as a leader and even as a person? We have thoughts about our decision before we decide and after we decide.

Beforehand, we wonder what the outcome of our decision will be and we weigh the perceived costs and benefits of that choice, of each of the choices. And then afterwards we either analyze and judge ourselves and our decisions really intensely, or we kind of disconnect from them because we don't want to experience the emotions that come with taking responsibility for our decisions.

And this happens, you'll see people do this when they overindulge, like in shopping or eating or gambling, just as examples. They decide to indulge. Then they ignore their bank statements or the scale because they don't want to feel the consequences of those decisions that they made prior.

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So, in order to become an empowered decision maker, we have to do two things. Number one, we have to neutralize what we make our decisions mean about us. And two, we have to take ownership and responsibility of our decisions. And these two are really intertwined. We neutralize our decisions by making the outcome of the decision neutral.

If you made a decision about a class placement for a student and the placement isn't working out, practice looking at the placement itself as a neutral situation. So, your decision becomes a result, which is now a new situation. You made a decision. The student was placed. The placement isn't working. The new situation is just that. A new situation.

It means nothing about you. Nothing about the student. Nothing about the classroom or the teacher. You just now have more information based on the placement in order to make a new decision. It doesn't mean you're not a good principal or that you made a bad decision. It means nothing until our brain makes up a meaning for it and our brain comes up with a story about the situation.

Notice that the meeting is just a bunch of thoughts running through our head. If you felt neutral about the placement and about making a placement change, how would those thoughts be different? So, in a stair cycle put neutral in the emotion line. And if you were just feeling neutral about the whole situation, what would you be thinking that's differently than your thoughts when you are worried or fearful about your decision being a bad one or a wrong one?

When we neutralize what we make our decisions mean about us. It's much easier to take responsibility for them because we don't make ourselves feel terrible about the decision. It's just neutral. We see it as a blank slate and we go from there. When we take responsibility for our decisions by actively neutralizing them, it's easier to take responsibility for them.

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So, it's really turning a negative spin cycle, avoiding fear-based decisions., and then we ignore them and we don't take responsibility for them. And then we make them mean something horrible. We're in that negative spin cycle. We turd it into, "Oh, it's just a neutral thing. Oh, it doesn't feel so bad if it's just neutral, it doesn't mean anything about me. Therefore, I can make a new decision and even my new decision doesn't mean that much about me. It's just a decision." And you can spin it in the reverse into a more positive cycle.

And finally, why do some decisions feel so difficult? We really agonize as school leaders when we're weighing heavily in our minds a decision that we believe is difficult or challenging, or that there are too many pros and cons and we can't make a decision. We feel this indecisiveness and we get stuck. Why is that?

And the simple answer really comes down to how attached we are to that decision. Difficult decisions are difficult because we are more attached to the outcome and the consequences of the decision. We make some decisions mean more about us than others.

When you decide to call indoor recess due to a heavy storm system, you don't make that mean anything terrible about you. You just make the call and move on. You don't worry about the outcome because the staff already knows the protocol for rainy day recess. You're not worried about parents calling and complaining because you're making the decision to keep kids safe. You're confident in your decision and you're not making the decision mean anything about you or other people.

Decisions we find challenging have much more attachment and meaning for us. When we're deciding whether or not to apply for a new job the outcome of that decision has a much bigger meaning for us than a rainy-day recess decision. A decision regarding a career change will impact our

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overall career path, our finances, perhaps our commute. It will change our colleagues, our school community, and really our daily life as a leader.

So, we're much more attached to these potential impacts and we weigh heavily and we consider them more deeply in an attempt to know what we think is going to happen after we make that decision. Do you see that? When a decision has a heavy attachment, we spend much more time and energy trying to speculate the outcome and try to guarantee an outcome and try to know the outcome because we we're so attached to what we make it mean.

Some people make a decision about a career change and they're like, "I'm just going to try it if it works, great. If not, no big deal. I'll try something new." Some people are like that. Other people weigh decisions very heavily because they're very attached to what will happen and what will it mean about me? And what if it's a wrong decision? There's nothing wrong with taking time to decide about something that you are more attached to, but stay aware of how you are processing the decision.

Notice that if you're gathering tons of information, but you're not making a decision, sometimes we do this, we say we need more info as a way to stall our decision-making process. Do you feel you have to ask other people for your input? Are you not lacking the confidence and the certainty that comes with making empowered decisions for yourself by yourself?

One of the things that I've learned to do is make a decision for myself even without my husband's consent or input. I ask myself if I didn't have a husband, what would I decide? Because I want to know who I am as a human being, as a woman, as an empowered woman who's owning a business. I want to be able to make decisions from a state of complete ownership because when I ask my husband for his input and I take it then

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it's his responsibility or his fault if something doesn't go the way I planned it to.

So, one of the things I'm practicing is what decision would I make if I could not ask anybody else for input? It is one of the most powerful exercises I've ever done. And here's what's even more fascinating. When you ask yourself from that space of what would I decide? It empowers you and you have the answer. You align with who you are, what your values are, the integrity in which you want to live your life. And all of a sudden you just know there's no more confusion, there's no more overwhelm.

So, be aware. Are you a person who doesn't feel confident and needs to ask people for input? Are you a person who spends time gathering a lot of information? Are you a person who just like willy-nilly makes a decision and then ignores all of the outcomes and the consequences? Notice what your process is. Notice what makes you uncomfortable.

Does it make you uncomfortable at the thought of not asking somebody for input or asking permission? Like, for example, a lot of my clients say I have to ask my husband permission to pay for coaching. But what if you didn't have to? What decision would you make? Why do you want the coaching? It's so powerful to know within yourself to not feel like you need to go outside of yourself to find your answers for your life.

And this is another one, what about when you stall in making the right decision and you feel trapped because you don't know what the right decision is? What if there weren't a right decision? Or what if this, what if they're both right? What if both decisions were correct? Were absolutely the right choice? Like if you couldn't lose, then what would you decide?

If there were no losing in your decision at school or in any area of your life, what if they were both right? What if you couldn't make a wrong choice?

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Then what would you decide? Notice where your brain gets stuck or feels highly uncomfortable. Becoming a more empowered decision maker requires us to make decisions in new ways.

We have to stop expecting a full guarantee. We have to notice when we're letting fear make our decisions. We have to ask ourselves and decide on our own. We have to allow others to be wrong about us. We have to allow ourselves to be wrong. We have to allow ourselves to make new decisions and have others not like our decisions sometimes. Guess what? It's okay. It's just an opinion.

We have to learn how to trust ourselves and be very aligned with our decisions and with what we want and what we value. Leaders out there, being able to make a powerful, strong decision for yourself and your school that is fully aligned to your values is one of the fastest ways to create change and impact.

So, this week, I'm going to challenge you, go out and find an area in your work life or personal life where you've been avoiding making a decision or your decisions have been very fear-based decisions and try out an empowered decision. When you learn how to make empowered decisions, you will no longer be afraid to decide. Have an amazing week. I'll talk with 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](http://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.