

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to Episode 113.

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 friends. Happy Tuesday. Welcome to the show and to the end of February. What? Oh, my gosh. You are heading into the last few months of the school year. How is that possible? If you're like me, when I was leading a school, I bet your brain is already starting to drift into thoughts about next year.

Leaders really should be thinking about what's on the horizon as well as what's in front of you today. You have to have that skill, and it is a skill, to balance our thoughts about the future and create thoughts for today that are going to drive our approach and in terms of the actions we're taking right now in order to create that future.

So, it's really easy to get overwhelmed by thinking about what you need to accomplish this year and how you're going to adjust and make improvements for the next year. Here's what's really a trip. Our brains are always thinking that our future will feel better than today.

When we're in this school year, like this one right now, '19, '20, we're working and dealing with all of this year's situation. Our brain likes to daydream about how it's going to be so much better next year, and we're going to change all these things, and then next year is going to be great. It wants to implement new things and make them better. We're thinking about that future school year and we're feeling renewed excitement, which makes us want to take time to think and plan about next year.

[The Empowered Principal Podcast](#) with Angela Kelly

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

Meanwhile, we're still in this year, and we're thinking about how great it's going to be to get to next year. Then to get this year, let's just hurry up and finish this year and say adios to all the problems we've had this year, and the drama we're dealing with, and get into next year. We want to rush into the next year because we believe it's going to feel better than this year. We do this year after year, by the way. Do you notice that?

So, when we do this, we're actually creating the result of this school year not being better because we're spending time planning out the next year versus planning how to finish this year and make this year better. We're always chasing our future because of the thought, "Next year is going to be better." Then in that thought, we lose the opportunity to create fun, and joy, and success here in this year right now because we're daydreaming about next year. We're spending our time and energy already into the next year. I want you to be cautious about that.

This totally came out of nowhere. I just was thinking about it, and it came out of my mouth, but what I will say in response to myself is that good leaders do need to have an eye on the future while making decisions and taking actions right now that will create the future you are envisioning.

This is why I'm offering coaching packages right now at this point in the school year. There is never a bad time to hire a coach, by the way, guys. Right now is the perfect time because it will help you finish out this year and stay present while also setting yourself up for an amazing school year for next year.

If you are struggling to make it to the end of this year, like if you are burning out, or you don't think you're going to make it, or you're so over it, or you're just purely caught up in the excitement of thinking about next year already, which we do all the time, this is the perfect time and opportunity to work with me. We will keep you focused on this year's goals and get you prepared for setting up for next year. This is the time to get started.

[The Empowered Principal Podcast](#) with Angela Kelly

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

A link to schedule a call with me is in the show notes. We just jump on a call. It's free. I spend an hour with you. We talk about what's going on. We talk about what you want, and where you want to be, and then we talk about how we're going to get there. That's what that call is about. Then we decide if it's going to be a match to work together. It's totally fun. I love it. So, give me a call. It'll be great.

All right. Today, we're going to talk about one of the big buzz topics in education. A heavy topic, by the way. Trauma-informed schools. I first want to say congratulations, and thank goodness, and it's about time that we're having these conversations on such a huge platform.

The mental and emotional well-being of our students is the most important thing that we do. We've known for decades that kids aren't available for learning when their attention is somewhere else. Children who experienced traumatic events, of course, are thinking about what they've experienced, and they're thinking about that well over they're thinking about our math lessons or the homework assignment.

Why do we know this? We know this because we experience it ourselves. When something big is happening in your life, isn't it really challenging to stay focused on your work? I know it was for me. Our mind gets consumed with thoughts about that event. It has our full attention.

What I can think of recently is just with my mom's passing, I could not get that out of my head. Even when I was trying to work, and trying to get back to a normal routine in my life, it was consuming my thoughts. I had to let myself process the thinking, process the emotions before I could get back into action.

This has probably happened to many of you, whether it's been like you've lost a parent or a loved one, maybe your own children are going through a really difficult time, or having struggles in school, or getting into trouble.

[The Empowered Principal Podcast](#) with Angela Kelly

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

Maybe you're going through a divorce, and it's consuming you. There's all kinds of things in life that consume us and that feel very traumatic at the time.

So, we know if adults have a hard time with it, then the children who don't have the years of experience we have and the tools and strategies that we have to process their emotions, of course, they're going to be consumed. If we don't address this as a priority for kids and for staff members, by the way, then we are going to continue to flatline on our test scores, and what good are the test scores if kids aren't learning? We've got this so backwards.

So, I'm really excited and really happy to know that this conversation is coming up in our industry. This is a major part of the work that you do as a school leader, a major part of the everyday lives of your teachers. It is also a part of the conversations that come up in the work that I do with clients.

Let me first be clear. Let me say something before I get into how I work with clients on this conversation and on the topic of trauma. I'm not a licensed therapist, and I'm not a psychologist or a doctor. So, I don't have a license in trauma psychology or trauma therapy.

I do, however, have a certification in life coaching, which helps school leaders see how their thoughts impact their emotions, their approach, and the results. So, I do believe that the tools that I use with clients are exceptional and highly effective in helping people process emotion.

When we break down trauma to its absolute essence, trauma is the experience of feeling emotions that come from an experience. Trauma is defined as severe physical or mental pain. The tools that I've learned through my coaching certification, and coaching my clients, and what's coming up for them sometimes is traumatic and very intense.

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

These tools are designed to help people process and understand their mental and emotional pain, and where it comes from, and how to process it. I am so honored to be the only coach that I know who's offering these tools to school leaders.

I anticipate that in the upcoming years, that my services, services like this, coaching on emotional and mental well-being, is going to become mainstream in our schools. It's essential, and it's so exciting that we're talking about it now because education can no longer continue to ignore the mental and emotional needs of students, staff members, and all of the leaders who themselves experienced traumatic situations both personally and professionally.

I will share that when I was a principal, I felt traumatized some days. I have been physically threatened. I've been heckled by parents in multiple public meetings. My second year as a school principal, I walked into a classroom after school. My entire staff was meeting privately and talking about me.

There was one teacher who wanted to oust me and wanted to override my decisions in my leadership, and she had so much clout and tenure in the district. She pulled together all these people, and I walked into that. It was my second year. I was traumatized. I have so many other things that I won't share on the news here, but lots of things happen to school leaders that feel very traumatizing in our work, let alone what's happening in our personal lives.

So, it's really crucial that we open ourselves up to first acknowledging it, then processing it, and then being able to help ourselves release and let go so that we can continue to lead our people. Really, when I think about all that went down in those seven years of school leadership, those experiences were actually the reason I created this type of service.

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

There wasn't this kind of support out there when I was in the field. So, I decided just to make it happen. Now, here I am. I'm available and willing to help you. I want to help you lead your schools, and I want to help lead you through the traumatic experiences you've been in your leadership position or personally, but also to help you, help your staff, and your students.

How do you become a trauma-informed leader? I know there's a lot of literature out in the books and in the magazines on this. I'm simply going to give you my personal take and my slant based on the way that I coach.

The first thing I believe that's important is to process your own traumas because in order to acknowledge trauma in other people, you have to be able to acknowledge it in yourself. This is not easy because as leaders, we focus on being strong and emotionally stable. Society tells us that having strong emotional responses to situations is weak, and that we're buying into being a victim, and that we should be sucking it up, and staying strong, and pull ourselves up by the bootstraps, and all those things that we tell leaders to do.

Yes, I do agree you need to be emotionally fit to be an exceptional leader. You need to be emotionally resilient and build up your resiliency, but that doesn't mean you don't experience negative emotion. It means you know how to process it. You know that you're capable of handling it versus caving into it, and reacting to it, and feeling like it's out of control, and that you are a victim to it. There's the difference.

Certainly, I will say that the whole kind of suck it up and hide your emotions and don't show intensity, that is one approach that you can take, and I think you can make your way to a certain extent using that approach. But we know that stuffing our emotions down will end up costing you time, and energy, and focus.

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

Unprocessed emotions are going to come up in some way. They find a way to make it to the surface, and they always will rob you, time and time again, of your time, your energy, and your focus. Think about it. When you're perseverating on something, think about how much time you spend thinking about it, how much energy it takes to think about it over and over again. Your focus goes out the window. You're only thinking about that thing. You're not thinking about work. Right?

Furthermore, when you have traumas you haven't processed, another person's trauma can trigger your own trauma, and it brings it right up to the surface. So, for example, if a teacher comes in, and she is telling you that her husband left and she doesn't think she can teach today, and you've been through a divorce, but you haven't processed those emotions, that is going to trigger you. You're not going to be able to hold the space and stay neutral and present for this teacher to help her process her emotions.

To be able to fully handle other people's trauma, you have to have dealt with your own. So I implore you, hire a therapist, join a support group, talk to your spiritual leader, hire a coach, whatever works best for you. Whatever method you feel helps you process, please consider doing that. Have somebody help you with it. It's really hard to do it on your own. I promise you, it will be money so well-spent, and it will help you grow tremendously as a leader in multiple capacities. So, step one is processing your own trauma.

Step two, then, is to understand that trauma is an intense emotion caused by thoughts about an event. When a person experiences a traumatic event, there is the experience of the event itself, when it's actually happening in their physical space and presence in that moment.

Then there is the experience of your memories of that event. Those are just the thoughts you have about it over and over again. Your thoughts can provoke the same level of emotional reaction as if you were actually

[The Empowered Principal Podcast](#) with Angela Kelly

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

experiencing the same event in real time. Your body can't tell the difference. So, when your brain is thinking, thinking, thinking about trauma, all of those emotions and all of those chemicals get fired up, and you can feel really intense even though it's not happening to you in the actual moment. That's the emotional trauma we're talking about.

Keep in mind that when somebody is experiencing trauma, or you are experiencing trauma, there's the actual experience of it. Let's say you're being attacked in the parking lot. There's that actual experience of it happening to you.

Then all the rest of the experience is your thoughts about it, your memory, your perception, what you made it mean, how it made you feel. All of those thoughts, when you think it over and over again, the body still can feel the same way, even though it's not happening to you. So, know that there's two different kind of levels of the trauma experience. There's the actual circumstance of it, and then there are the thoughts about it.

When someone experiences something they have perceived as traumatic, and they think about it over and over again, they are retriggering that intense emotional vibration in their body. When they're in that state, they're going to act and respond to it in a certain way. It's a very intense emotion.

That's why children have very intense reactions if they're experiencing something really intense in their body. They're young enough that they don't know how else to deal with it. So, that's why you'll get all kinds of different behaviors going on.

What we have to keep in mind as a leader is the thought they are having thoughts about a situation which feels very traumatic for them. So, there's the experience, and then there are thoughts about it. It sounds like this would be simple to do, to kind of extract the two and say, "Well, there's the

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

experience, and then there's the thoughts about it," but it's really challenging. Here's why.

It's challenging because we get triggered by our own thoughts about another person's experience. So, when we learn of the horrific things that kids go through and that kids experience, we have a reaction to their experience. We have our own thoughts and emotions about that situation.

So, we feel intense emotion when we think about another student being physically abused, or a parent being deported, or a teacher being sexually assaulted. These situations require us to do our own thought work so that we can hold the space and be a support to those in need.

You can't be fully supportive and available to somebody if you're dealing with it yourself. Can you see that? It's pretty wild, but it definitely happens. This whole piece of us identifying their trauma versus our own thoughts about their trauma, and being able to see the difference between their pain and our pain, can be really, really challenging.

It involves separating our thoughts and emotions about their situation and being able to view their situation as neutral. This is really hard. We call it jumping in the pool, like when a coach listens to a client's traumatic story, and we have an emotional reaction, we jump in, we cannot be available to coach them on their thoughts about that traumatic experience because we too are experiencing it.

So, as a leader, it's the same thing. You have to kind of clear up your thoughts about it so that you can hold space for your staff member, or a parent, or a student and neutralize it. It happened to them. It's over. They're telling a story. I'm listening to the story, and I'm neutralizing my reaction. I'm staying neutral. That's a very challenging thing to do. But it is what creates really exceptional trauma-informed schools and trauma-informed leaders.

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

This is hard. It means that we have to see that child abuse is simply a situation and it is a neutral circumstance. How do we know it's neutral? Because it happens. Child abuse happens. Our thoughts and our own attachments to our beliefs about child abuse are why we feel such intense emotions.

The more firmly we believe that child abuse shouldn't happen in the world, and that it's wrong, and that it's terrible, and I judge anybody who does it, doesn't end up helping us help others who are experiencing child abuse. Because we're going to be so caught up in our own thoughts about how it's wrong, and how it's horrible, and the parents are terrible, and how we want it to stop.

We will have created our own version of trauma inside of ourselves by the way we're thinking about child abuse, which makes us less available to be a support. So, it isn't wrong to think child abuse is wrong. What I'm trying to point out is that our resistance to thinking it shouldn't happen, and we get so fired up about that, and we take tons of action to try and stop it from happening, and then it continues to happen, and we get more and more invested in trying to make it stop.

We're kind of at war with child abuse instead of letting go of the resistance. Not liking it and being completely available and supportive, but also not being in this fight, this resistance, that it shouldn't happen in the world because if bad things weren't supposed to happen in the world, they wouldn't happen. Unfortunately, part of the human experiences is that bad things happen, and even to kids. It hurts my soul to say that, but I know that resisting that truth will only make me less available as a coach.

What most people will say in response to me is, "Okay. So, I'm just supposed to be okay with child abuse? I'm just supposed to make it mean nothing and just not care? I'm not supposed to worry about it? Or I'm

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

supposed to be happy about it? What are you saying?" No, no, guys, that's not what I'm saying.

What I am saying is that we need to be aware of our own thoughts and emotions, and how it impacts the way we're able to approach traumatic topics which happen in our schools. We can hate that child abuse happens. I hate that child abuse happens. I'm perfectly fine with my decision to believe that I don't like child abuse, and I feel badly whenever I hear of children being abused. It makes me physically sick.

What I can do to help is acknowledge that it happens, and that I dislike that it happens, and I decide to approach child abuse by acknowledging that it happens, and then being open to serving and supporting any student and their story about their experience.

When we dive into the pool and get lost in our own thoughts and judgments about child abuse, we're not able to hold space and listen to that child's story, and not understand where they're coming from and to hear their thoughts and feelings. So, can you see the separation? There's your thoughts and feelings about them, and then there are their thoughts and feelings about the situation.

Being trauma-informed is the ability to recognize what another person has experienced, and to know that that experience is neutral, and that their trauma, which is the emotional pain, which is coming from their thoughts, is what's creating their intense emotional reaction.

So, thoughts about the trauma create emotions about the trauma, and understanding this at a deep level is what will help you stay in that place of neutrality so that you can then offer the supports that your students need.

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

Step three, or a third thing to consider when you're being trauma-informed, is that it's imperative, I believe, to include supports that help people process emotions because at the very core of being human is the experience of emotion. We all have thoughts, therefore, we all have emotions.

Being a trauma-informed leader means understanding where emotions come from, how to process them for ourselves, and how to help other people process their emotions. Most of us don't have a background in or a deep understanding of the process of processing emotions. So, investing in the training, in the coaching, and in the support that you and your staff need to understand these emotions is going to pay off in so many ways.

Think about it. Think about the problems that your teachers deal with. Think about the problems you deal with on a regular basis at school. How many of those problems include emotions? I'm going to guess that about 100% of them have an emotional component. Right?

We are in the business of people. That means we're in the business of emotions, thoughts and emotions. Learning how to navigate and process those emotions, in my opinion, is one of the most impactful acts that you can take to become a trauma-informed leader. Not just a trauma-informed leader, but an exceptional leader in all areas of your work. All right?

It's a lot. This was a heavy topic. It's deep. So, I want you to be sure to join us for our last free Mastermind training. It's today at 4:00 p.m. Pacific Time. I'll cover step by step how to process emotions. What we talked about today, we'll talk about it tonight on the call, and I will coach people on how to help you hold space for yourself and for others, and how to process emotion without getting pulled in, and offer you specific coaching on whatever situations you're dealing with.

Ep #113: Trauma-Informed Leadership

You have to register beforehand. The link will be in the show notes and be live on the call because I'm not offering this as a replay. You have to be present to win. So, click on the link. Get registered for the class. Be there live. Ask your questions. Get coached. Get the support you need. I will see you there.

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.