

Ep #116: Your Thoughts Vs. You



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to Episode 116.

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.

Happy, happy St. Patrick's Day, my fellow principals. I hope that you remembered to wear green today. Otherwise, the kids go absolutely nuts when they see you not wearing green. I can remember a couple of years, I think in a row, where I forgot to wear green, and the kids were like, "It's a tragedy." I remember being in the lunchroom, and they wanted to pinch me, but they're a little bit afraid because they don't want to get in trouble. It was so funny.

I had this green blazer, and it was one that I basically wore one day a year, which was St. Patrick's Day, but in an emergency when I forgot, I had this little shamrock pin that I would keep in my office so I could throw it on my blouse if I forgot my blazer that year, but the kids would just go nuts over whether or not I wore green. It was so fun, and I hope you guys are enjoying the day. So, have a very happy St. Patty's Day, and may the luck of the Irish be with you.

Today, I'm going to share a concept that dives deeper into thought work. It's more of a metacognitive practice, but it's really key in learning how to be more specific as you determine your approach to situations at work. You can use this practice when you're really stuck on something, and you can't seem to stop thinking about it.

You know, when your head is spinning over and over, or you feel something really intense about something that's going on at work, and you can't seem to turn your mind off. This is a really helpful tool that will allow

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you to feel better and to neutralize the thoughts when something has a grasp on your mind.

So, if I were to ask you to define what a thought is, define the word thought, what would you say? How would you describe thought? It's hard to put it into words, isn't it? Of course, I looked it up in the dictionary, I love dictionaries, and I was shocked. The dictionary had 10 or 12 lists of what thought means. Things like the product of mental activity, the act or process of thinking, an idea, a notion, a judgment, opinion, belief, intellectual activity. It had a whole list of things.

I was laughing. I thought to myself, "Even the dictionary writers grappled with the definition and wrote down just everything they could think of that relates to thought." Whether it's an action, or a product, or a capacity, or a type of thinking like meditation. It was so interesting.

Anyway, what we at The Life Coach School define as a thought is just a sentence from the mind. A thought is something that's created in the brain, and because thoughts are created in your brain, which is a part of your body, we tend to believe that we are the owner of that thought because the thought was created in our mind, and we own our mind, we own our brain. It's connected to our physical body.

Therefore, we believe that we must own that thought. We believe it's about us because it came out of our brain. It sounds really logical because we buy into the idea that our thoughts are us because they were developed by us in our brain. What I love about this concept is that yes, it is true in the sense that we can own the thought.

When we own the thought, we have control over it because it's ours. It's our thought to have or not have, to believe or not believe, to act on or to not act upon. But it's also not true in the sense that the thought itself does it mean

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anything about who we are as a person. It doesn't mean anything until we decide to give it meaning.

The sentence is just words running through our head kind of like a ticker tape. It's neutral, but what happened so quickly is our brain has this thought, and then it's like, "Oh." It catches our attention, and all of a sudden, we have a series of thoughts about that thought generating evidence to prove it either true or not true. Then we make this decision whether it's true or not true, and if it's true, we hang on to it, and if it's not true, we tend to dismiss it and move it on.

Then there's subconscious thoughts running around in the background, but we're talking about the thoughts that come to our attention. So, I want to see how this plays out and show you what it will look like in a fairly neutral work scenario. Okay?

Let's say your brain is thinking about next year, and I know that it is, and you're probably thinking about your staff assignments. You're looking at your list of staff, and you're figuring out who's going to teach what, and where you have to hire, and who is leaving, and who you would like to leave.

Your brain pops up with this thought. "Mrs. Johnson really needs to retire." It just pops into your head. You're looking at the list, you see her name, you're like, "She needs to retire." Now, you might not even be aware you're thinking that, but let's just say that it does catch your attention, and your first reaction to that thought might be, "Oh, my gosh. Why did I think that? I shouldn't think that. That was crazy. That wasn't very nice. Why am I thinking that now?"

Let's say, first of all, it is true that your brain did come up with the thought. You do, in one sense, own the thought, but it's also true that you don't own

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the thought, and it doesn't mean anything about you because you don't have to attach a lot of meaning to that thought.

It could just be like, "Oh, that's interesting. You don't have to believe it's true like, "Yeah, she needs to retire. Let's get her out of here." You don't have to believe it, and you don't have to keep the thought. You don't have to hold on to it and think it over, and over, and over, and over. Or you don't have to act on the thought. That's if you don't want to just.

You can notice the thought. It's just a thought, and this is a very important distinction. There is a thought. Then there is what you do with that thought. Just having a thought doesn't mean anything about you personally. It doesn't mean you're rude for thinking it. It doesn't mean you're a bad person or a bad leader. Whatever thoughts you're having about your staff, they're just thoughts.

Thoughts are neutral until we give them meaning. What happens when we have a thought, and it catches our attention is that we judge the thought. We think to ourselves, "Oh, I shouldn't think that, but I do kind of believe it, but I shouldn't be thinking that. Oh, I'm so terrible for thinking that."

We place judgment thoughts on top of the thought that we're judging. So, we make that whole process mean something about us, who we are as people, who we are as leaders. This is when we need to recognize that our thoughts are separate from us. There is a thought. Then there's you.

So, even though a thought appeared in your brain, it doesn't mean anything about who you are. You are not that thought, even though it came from your mind. It's just there. Where we get confused is when we think that the thought came from us, and so therefore, we have to take care of that thought somehow.

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We have to act on it somehow. It's like we think we need to do something with the thought. We either need to shame ourselves for thinking it, or we say we have to believe it, and then we have to do something about it, and take action on it.

So, if you think that Mrs. Johnson should retire, and that thought makes you feel bad about thinking it, then you're going to have a series of thoughts about yourself in an attempt to try and stop the thought from having it because you're going to think, "Oh, I shouldn't be having that thought. That's not true." You're going to feel bad for it, and then you're going to try and push the thought away.

Or if you do think the thought, and you believe it is true, then you're going to feel an urge, you're going to feel a need, to take action on it in some way to try and make that thought become true in the real world. So, she's not currently retired. You really believe she should be retired.

You're going to have an urge to want to figure out a way to support her into getting into retirement because you want your brain, what your brain is thinking, and the reality in alignment. Or at the very least, you'll believe the thought, and every time you interact with Mrs. Johnson, the thought is going to be in your mind, which is going to impact the way you approach her.

It can be very subtle, but when you're thinking the thought in the background that she should retire, even though she's not, and there's that dissonance, your brain is going to approach her slightly different than it would if you didn't believe at all that she should retire. Can you see that?

The way I ask my clients to practice separating their thoughts from themselves is to write down the thought onto paper. When you write things on paper, it takes it out of your mind and your body. The thought becomes written words on a page, and your mind can then see it as a sentence

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versus viewing it as a part of you. It can't differentiate when it's inside your body. You have to get it out onto the paper so that you can feel that separateness.

You'll notice when you do this that you will have an emotional reaction to the thought. Even though it's on paper, you're still going to feel when you think the thought. That doesn't go away, and that happens because you're believing in that thought to some level. If you have absolutely no reaction to it or you're like, "No, that's not really true," you don't really attach a lot of emotion to it.

But when you're thinking a thought about somebody or something, and you feel it, you can put that thought onto paper, and every time you read it, you're still going to have the reaction to it, but this thought is outside of you now. It's onto the paper.

So, the stronger the emotional reaction you have to the thought, that's just because you believe it more to be true. You have a strong attachment to that thought. The stronger the emotion, the stronger that you believe it's true, and that's okay. It's totally okay to believe that Mrs. Johnson should retire, and it's also totally okay not to believe that it's true. Both are fully acceptable, and actually, both are true.

I'll get to that in a minute, but it's not so much about whether you believe the thought is true or not true. What's important is how the thought makes you feel and act. When you think that Mrs. Johnson should retire, but she's currently working, how do you feel, and what do you do, and what do you say, and how do you think about her, and how do you approach her, and how do you interact with her, and how do you plan the teaching roster?

Notice. Notice how the thought impacts what you think, and feel, and do. Or let's say you don't believe she should retire. The thought pops in your head and you're like, "No. You know what? After thinking about that, I don't think

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that's even true. She's been teaching for a long time. Yeah, that's true, but she's still one of the best teachers I've got, and she's great with student teachers. She's a good role model. Yes, she's opinionated in the meetings, but you know what? I appreciate that. She's honest, and she's not afraid to speak her mind. I can live with that. It's so funny I had that thought.”

You recognized the thought, you noticed the thought, but you don't really have to believe in it. Your brain immediately listed up some evidence as to why you don't believe it, and then it moved on. It didn't make the thought mean anything about you or about Mrs. Johnson. So, there was a thought, your brain processed the thought, didn't believe it and found some evidence to prove it not true, and boom, it's gone.

Now, there is a third option when it comes to having thoughts and separating from them. We can think that a thought is true, deeply believe that it's true and react to it, which is typically what we do. We feel a thought to be true. We feel such intensity, and we have to take action somehow right now.

Or we can think that thought, and feel that vibration in our bodies, and not react to the vibration. We can just notice the thought. We can notice that it resonates true for us. We can notice the way we feel when we believe the thought is true. Then as we experience the emotion in our body, we can allow it to be there without doing anything.

We don't have to change the thought. We don't have to react to the thought. We don't have to plan out how we're going to act or handle the thought. We just sit there with it and notice it. It's separate from us. There's us. There's the thought. We can see it on the paper. We can feel ourselves believing it's true, and we know that it's still just a thought.

It won't feel neutral. That's okay. The practice is putting it onto the paper and seeing, “Wow, that's a thought. That is an interesting thought. I'm

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having a thought. I'm noticing my brain is thinking this." You're just trying to separate who you are from your thought. What happens when we look at thoughts as separate from us, our brain is going to want to reattach back to the thought. It's going to come up with a new thought or a new series of thoughts that makes us want to relieve the emotion that comes with the first thought.

So, when we put it down onto paper, and we look at the sentence, and we really do believe that Mrs. Johnson should just retire, and we notice the thought, "I'm having the thought that Mrs. Johnson's should retire. I'm having the thought. My brain is thinking this thought."

We feel it to be so true. We're going to have this urge to take some kind of action because the uncomfortableness that comes with the thought that she should retire when she's not going to retire, there's a dissonance in the body. There is a vibration in the body that doesn't align. It doesn't resonate well, like it's rubbing up against each other.

It's like, "She should be doing this. She should be doing this." When you feel that, you get this oh in your body. You get this tightness maybe in your chest, or in your jaw, and in your brain, and your brain is going to want to go back to believing that the thought is true versus looking at the thought and just saying, "Wow, I'm having a thought that she should retire, and it feels really true for me, but it's just a thought."

Your brain is going to be like, "Yeah, it's a thought. You know what? Here are some more thoughts to confirm the first thought that I told you that I was thinking about." It's going to say, "She's been teaching for 40 years. She does the same thing in her classroom every year. Her colleagues express concern. She argues in meetings. I don't think she likes me," and on, and on, and on. More thoughts.

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These are all just neutral sentences as well. So, you can write them all down. Get them all onto paper. Separate them from you. None of them have meaning until we let them have meaning. We have to practice noticing them, we have to practice feeling them, and we have to practice feeling them without taking action on them.

When we notice the thoughts, and we look at them without taking action, it helps us to see how we're separate from our thoughts. The thoughts have no power unless we give them power. Let's take another thought that's a little more charged.

So many people panic about test scores, and students failing, and we often think the thought, "Students are failing." When we really believe that's true, just saying it to me, "When I think, 'Oh, students are failing,'" I can feel panic in my body. There's a part of my brain believing there are students failing out there.

We're going to have a strong urge and a reaction, and based on that emotional reaction, we're going to want to take action to make ourselves feel better. When we think students are failing, we want to kick into high gear and do everything we can to relieve that panic and that fear that students actually are failing.

The reason we want to take the action is because we want to feel better. We want to not believe that students are failing. We think that if we take a bunch of action, then students will no longer fail, and then we can believe the thought, "Students are no longer failing," and that thought feels so much better. So, we want to chase the opposite thought when we're feeling a thought that we're thinking is giving us a really intense emotion.

Instead of taking action towards making that statement not true, we can start by questioning the belief in the first place. So many times, we just think the thought is true. "Ah, students are failing. The sky is falling, the sky

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is falling,” and we jump into tons of action without ever just noticing the thought.

“Students are failing. Wow, I really believe students are failing. Wow, I really feel responsible that students are failing. I really want to push my teachers when I think that students are failing. I really want to blame my teachers for being lazy or not doing enough. I’m noticing this. Wow, there’s a lot of thoughts going on around students are failing. Noticing this, I’m feeling it in my body.”

When we’re able to separate from our thoughts, we can take a look at these thoughts with a little less judgment. “My brain really wants to believe that students are failing. That thought makes me really panicked. It makes me want to crank up the accountability, and get into classrooms, and make sure everyone is teaching. I feel stress and urgency. It’s really tight in my chest. I feel a need to take care of this immediately. I notice how much I want to blame teachers and push them harder, even though I know they’re already working hard.”

Do you see what happens? You can see how the steer cycle works in real time when you put that thought down onto paper. The skill of separating ourselves from our thoughts is a very critical step in managing our emotions. It allows us to see that the emotion is coming from the thought, and it shows us how we want to react in that emotion. We kind of get to play out our steer cycle before we actually play it out.

It’s like a practice round. We get to see it on paper. We get to notice what we’re thinking. We get to notice how it’s making us feel. We can say and write down all the things we want to do in response. If you had to write down, “Students are failing. How do you feel, and what are you going to do about it?” You would write an essay.

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You can do that before you take any action and notice how it's forcing you to want to do something in a certain way versus thinking the thought, "Students aren't failing, or not all students are failing." You can find other neutral thoughts to think, but it's important to allow the thought that came up that you are attaching to, and just to put it on the paper and see it play out.

When we allow ourselves to notice the thoughts as separate from us, we can then start to have an approach that's a little more intentional and a little more planned. It also helps you build a healthier relationship with yourself because you're no longer blaming and judging your thoughts and using them to define who you are, and adding judgment on top of the thought itself.

So, when you see that you are no longer your thoughts, you become an observer of your thoughts and emotions, and who you are is the person who observes, and notices, and consciously plans out your actions. It sounds super high level, but it's really as simple as writing the thoughts onto paper. This is the first and the easiest step you can take as you begin to manage your mind. You will feel such relief knowing that any thought you have is just a thought.

All thoughts are true and not true at the same time. If we go back up to, "Students are failing," it's true. You can find tons of evidence to show that students are failing, but you can also find evidence to prove it's not true. This is what I mean when I said at the beginning about owning your thoughts. Yes, it's true you own your thoughts, and no, you aren't your thoughts.

They don't define you, but you do own them in the sense that you get to decide every single thought whether you want to believe it's true or not. You own that thought, and you own the power of deciding what you're going to make that thought mean, and how you're going to show up, and

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how you're going to react to it, or act to it, or intentionally plan for it. All thoughts are true and not true. You can find evidence to support them either way every single time.

Knowing this, and taking ownership of what you want to think and feel, and how you want to act is how you step into the full power of deciding what you want to believe about you, about yourself, about others, about your career, your family, your husband, your partner, your kids, all of it. This one strategy can change everything. Give it a try. Let me know how it goes. Have an empowered week. I'll talk to you next week.

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.