

## Ep #139: Other People's Emotions



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Angela Kelly**

## Ep #139: Other People's Emotions

Hello, empowered principals. Welcome to episode 139.

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 this week? It's the end of August. You are one month in, maybe two months in by now actually. I have to tell you how I'm feeling. I'd love to share with you. I'm feeling really aligned to the work that I've been doing, and I'm signing clients like crazy for this coming school year.

So if you want to get in and have a coach for this year, hurry up, or I'm going to be full. It's really amazing to me to know that within three years of committing to becoming a life coach and supporting school leaders, that it's truly starting to help evolve each of you as a school leader, which is going to then evolve the way we educate.

It is wild for me to think that we are changing an entire institution one coaching session at a time. One person at a time, one school year at a time. But that's really how change happens. That's how it's done. I've had this dream for so long and the struggle and the work that I have put into this business and the leaps of faith and the financial investments that were so scary, I have ached to see this take off and be successful, and I've had some success and a lot of failures.

Way more failures than successes. But for every person who has worked with me, they have been able to apply what they've learned through the coaching to other aspects of their leadership journey, not to mention their personal lives. It's just been astounding to see the growth and the changes that especially new school leaders, there is no value you can place on the growth and the learning and the evolvment of these empowered leaders.

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I'm just so amazed by their coaching and their willingness to be coached and their growth and their application of the tools and strategies that we're using. I feel so much gratitude for each person who has been eager to get the support and courageous enough to say yes to the investment, yes to themselves, yes to their biggest dreams and their desires for what they want out of their career and their personal life.

They've said yes to their empowerment and yes to possibility. Schools have been set up by what has been done in the past. We've been trained to look backwards to our past to see what we think is possible, like what our potential is.

Every aspect of school is based on the past. And so we make decisions for ourselves in our careers, in our lives about what we believe is possible, but only from the lens of looking backwards. So we judge students on their potential based on their past performance. We do the same with teachers.

And we as leaders are judged by others, by the past performance of our schools. What we haven't learned to do and what we don't do in education is focus on future possibility. I have so much information to share with you and to say about this topic that I'm going to save it for an entire month of podcasts.

I'm going to make it a theme and we're going to talk about possibility. I know that the only way we're going to make schools better for all kids is by focusing on future possibility and not on past probability. So to each and every one of you I say thank you.

Thank you, listeners, for applying this content of the podcast into your work. Thank you for sharing it with your colleagues and friends so that they can benefit from the experience. Thank you to every one of my clients for having the courage to try something radically different. What I offer for professional development is not out there by any means.

There are other coaches out there, but I promise you, this work is new and different to education, which is what makes it so exciting. I want to thank

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my future clients who are going to create changes in education beyond anyone's expectations. Even my own. I can't wait to see that unfold.

And I want to say thank you to my past self for having the courage to start this business when I had no evidence to prove to myself that it would work, or even that it would be helpful. I was so afraid to leave my job and sell my house and invest tens of thousands of dollars, and maybe even now up to hundreds of thousands of dollars into my belief in future possibility.

And hey, if this podcast resonates with you, can you please take a moment to write a review which helps other principals find the podcast and will encourage them to listen in and get the support that they need. I would super appreciate you taking five minutes of your time to write a quick review and thank you for doing that.

Okay, let's get on with it. This month we have been talking about emotional resiliency. Last week, we had on Dr. Julia Barrow as our guest, and she talked about her experiences as a leader of color and the emotions that she's had to experience in her journey.

Today, we're going to dive into how we handle other people's emotions and why other people's emotions impact us so deeply. So again, when we think about emotions, we learned from a young age that some emotions are safe and other emotions are scary.

So if you had a parent who expressed intense emotion, you might have felt really afraid when you witnessed them being angry or sad or depressed. And as a child, we absorb all of that and we learn very quickly to avoid feeling and expressing the emotions that feel scary to us.

And we also want to avoid other people who are expressing those intense emotions. So I can share a personal experience. I remember getting the look if I expressed any sort of frustration or anger towards adults. Like, the rule in my house was children are not allowed to be angry or express anger.

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So I wasn't allowed to roll my eyes. I would get called out for rolling my eyes or slamming my door or stomping my feet or giving somebody the stink eye. And I would get the look back. So I learned that kids don't have permission to be angry, but the parents sure can be angry.

And I also learned that adults who don't have the emotional resiliency tools react to their emotions, which got really scary to observe. So I found myself trying to avoid people who were intense in their emotional responses. And I also remember thinking like, wow, if the adults who are supposed to keep me safe, the people I'm supposed to trust and love the most, if they're seemingly out of control of their emotions, then what is safe?

So I'm sure you have your own experiences, and everybody has received slightly different messages from their family. Some people are much more comfortable with emotion than others. And there are some people, and I'm sure you've seen this in your schools, where there are students or families who have no emotional awareness, no emotional resiliency.

And they are always in a chronic churn of reacting and responding to whatever emotion comes up for them. This is why having conversations about having emotions in our schools and from the very beginning is so critically important.

And I also want to say that we subconsciously do this in our schools. We remove kids who are experiencing emotion, intense emotions, and our thought behind that action is that we don't want them to disturb others, which I understand. But it also sends a message that those kind of emotions shouldn't be seen or expressed or heard or observed.

We teach children that comfortable emotions are acceptable and appropriate, and that other emotions, the bad ones, result in getting into trouble or being removed from the group, which you know children don't want to have happen. Or if they do want to have it happen, they're expressing that emotion to get removed for something much deeper.

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Now, I'm not saying that if a child's reaction to her emotions or his emotions is to become violent or physically aggressive and not to remove them for their own safety or the safety of others. Of course, we want kids to feel safe and physical reactions to emotions can result in injury. So we have to be mindful of that.

What I want to point out is those subtle messages, maybe unintended messages that kids and students learn from the way we handle the emotions of others. So we learn it in our families and then our social and community circles such as church or sports groups or school.

And in general, our culture is not comfortable with emotion. We're taught to subdue intense emotions, and really only show the happy, safe, and positive ones. And by the way, a thought just came to me. Have you noticed that most coaches, like sports coaches, they can allow and hold space for intense emotions?

When you think about the NBA or the NFL, it's been so long since I've seen sports I forgot. But when you think about sports and coaches, coaches allow their - and actually maybe they encourage it a little bit - for their players to feel intense emotion. And they use it to their benefit.

So depending on the environment, we might allow people to express intense emotion as long as it doesn't physically impact themselves or others. I think about football, how fired up they get, or basketball or soccer. These players get totally emotionally hyped and it enhances their performance. It's allowed. It's not a negative thing.

But the message tends to be different at home versus school versus church versus sporting events. I just find that very interesting that we can allow intense emotions in different situations, different scenarios. Something to think about, right?

So when we think about other people's emotions and observing their emotions or being present in their emotion, what is it about other people's emotions that triggers our own emotional reaction? You know that feeling of

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fear you get when a parent is getting more and more intense during a meeting, and as they're expressing more emotion and more intensity, you feel yourself kicking into fight, flight, or freeze mode.

Well, this happens for a couple of reasons. One, in the moment, we are triggered, our emotions are triggered based off of our past experiences. So if we were taught that conflict is negative and emotions are scary, our brain's going to respond in fear. And that's when we get into wanting to freeze.

It's the flight or freeze part of fight or flight. We want to get out of the conflict, we want to avoid it, we want to freeze. We don't want to respond to it because we're afraid.

Then there's the other reason. We are wired to match other people's emotions. It's called emotional contagion. Isn't that fascinating? Given we're in a pandemic right now. There's also emotional contagion, and it's when we "catch" other people's emotions and respond with a similar level of emotion, and that's when we puff up, we defend ourselves, we want to stand our ground, we want to push back, and we absorb the same intensity level as that parent.

That's when we're in fight mode. Both of those reactions are subconscious reactions to our emotions. We are responding and acting according to our emotional state without acknowledging what that emotional state is. And we're choosing to react versus choosing to respond in an intentional space and decide how we want to address the situation.

But when you're emotional resilient, you are aware of your emotional state and you can acknowledge the emotion you are feeling in that moment. So for example, if a parent's getting heated during a meeting and starts coming at you sideways, you're most likely going to feel your own emotion spike.

Now, I want to highlight something here. This is normal. You're supposed to feel that spike. Emotional resiliency is not that you're no longer going to



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feel that emotional response. It's knowing that you will feel that emotional response and that spike and that you can acknowledge it without reacting to it.

It's choosing to feel that emotion and know you're going to get triggered but not reacting to it blindly. That's the difference. So one of my clients was like, "I feel bad. I have to share with you I still had an emotional reaction when one of my parents fired off at me." No, you're going to feel that emotion, but the key is to acknowledge it, wink at it, I see you, I know, there's the spike, there's the pang, there's the angst, but not react to it. To be cognizant of the emotion.

So when the parent's coming at you and you feel that intense reaction, you take a second to just mentally acknowledge your feelings. You just say inside of yourself, "I'm feeling scared or I'm angry or I'm worried or I'm furious," whatever it is.

And when you do this, you are giving yourself a few seconds to shift from that reptilian reaction, that part of your brain that wants to fight, flight, or freeze, it gives you just a few seconds to put your focus back into your prefrontal cortex where you can reason and rationalize and decide what action you take.

You just acknowledge it. I remember when I had a parent yelling at me during a huge public meeting. I just stood there, and the person's coming at me and I'm listening to what they're saying, I'm acknowledging them, but inside, I'm like, this is the part where I feel embarrassed, this is the part where I'm feeling fear, this is the part where I'm uncertain what to do, this is the part where my cheeks are flushing.

I was just kind of saying that over and over. That's where you give your brain just those few seconds to shift out of that reaction mode into more intentional action mode.

There are three sets of emotions we need to consider when we're working with other people. And I mentioned this briefly a couple of weeks ago, but I



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want to review this concept again. I call it the emotional Venn diagram or the emotional triad because there's three parts to this.

Number one, there are your emotions. There's how you personally feel in a given moment based on what you are thinking. So you go into work and you're having your thoughts and you're in an emotional state based on those thoughts.

And then on the other end of the spectrum, there are other people's emotions. So everybody's coming into work and they're thinking what they're thinking and feeling what they're feeling. So there's other people and then there's you. Two separate diagrams. Two separate parts of the Venn diagram.

Then there's the third part. There are your thoughts and emotions about their emotions, and the flip is true. They're having thoughts and emotions about your emotional state. But as it relates to you, there are three parts to this. There's you and your stuff, them and their stuff, and then the middle mucky ground where you're thinking about their situations or their emotions.

So in order to remain calm and centered while somebody else is experiencing intense emotion, we need to understand that these layers of emotions are happening. So for example, let's say you scheduled a parent meeting with a parent because this parent has been bringing their child to school late every single day.

And you're thinking to yourself, "Hey, what's the problem here? Why can't they pull it together? Get to school on time." Maybe you're judging a little bit. They're lazy or they're sleeping in. Especially when the kid comes in and you ask them why they're tardy and they're like, "My mom didn't wake up in time," or, "She told me to say there was traffic."

Kids are so honest, and they'll tell you the truth what's going on. So you have this meeting and you might be a little judgy in your head thinking you understand what's going on and this parent better pull it together. So you

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have the meeting, but then during the meeting, the parent shares with you that they've recently lost their partner and completely breaks down.

Sobbing, crying, hysterical. Your initial reaction, your emotional response is going to shift because what's going to happen? You're having different thoughts all of a sudden. You're going to feel a little bit of guilt for having judged. That's you in your head thinking about, oh my gosh, that was so wrong of me to judge them, I feel so bad.

So you're going to feel some guilt. It's going to happen very instantaneously, but you're going to go into your head, and then you're thinking, wow, you feel empathy and concern for this person. And you are experiencing emotions about your perspective, feeling guilty, then you shift into feeling like, wow, you get into their headspace and what must they be thinking and feeling.

And you start to feel empathy and concern. And you might lean into their emotional reaction. So even though you aren't personally experiencing the loss, perhaps you don't know the parent or the partner or the spouse, whoever it is that they've lost. Maybe you haven't even met them. But you might feel the pain of loss because you are experiencing that person's actual experience, even though it's not you.

Does that make sense? So you're projecting your feelings into their situation. So there's your thoughts and feelings about you, there's their thoughts and feelings about them, and then there's your thoughts and emotions about their situation and their reaction to it.

So if a parent breaks down and they're crying hysterically, you might feel uncomfortable. You might try to console them or try to make them feel better, or tell them it's okay, stop the meeting and let them go home and grieve. You might be super uncomfortable with that.

Or you might totally lean in and be like, oh my goodness, and totally jump in the pool with them and feel terrible right along with them. And complete

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empathy. So there are different ways you're going to feel based on what you're thinking and feeling about their situation.

So what do you do? How do you handle intense emotion? When someone is having an intense emotional reaction, what you can do is practice what coaches do. What I do for my clients. It's called holding space. And you do this when a person is experiencing intense reaction.

It's basically allowing a person to experience their emotions while you continue to stay in a more neutral space. You hold space for that person to be angry or be sad without jumping into that same emotional state. Basically without allowing that emotional contagion to take place.

And it doesn't mean you're not compassionate or that you're allowing or condoning whatever conditions their situation is presenting. It's not about being callous or completely reacting indifferent to their emotion. It's being empathetic without experiencing their same emotion.

So you're not contagiously buying into their story. You're hearing the story; you're feeling for them in the sense that you're going to hold the space and allow them to process that emotion without giving your emotional reaction to the same situation at the same time.

So the goal is to stay as neutral as possible so that you can be a source of strength and encouragement for that person. When you hold the space, especially when somebody is angry and you hold space, it also helps them bring down the intensity of the meeting or of the situation because you're not matching it.

So typically, when people tell us a story that's emotionally shocking, we kind of lean into the story. We buy in and we feel the same way. We do this with our friends and maybe when we watch the news or read social media. We kind of get sucked in and our brains love this.

And there's a time and a place for that, but at work, the goal is to practice emotional resiliency and separating our emotions from the emotions of

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other people's experiences. Because the more you can learn how to do this, the easier your school leadership experience is going to be.

And most people, and I mean parents and teachers, people outside of you, and maybe you, but most of us don't realize that we use our emotions to get what we want. So you will have parents who have no emotional awareness, no emotional resiliency, and they will want something from you.

They want you to do something, and the only way they know how to get what they want is to be intense with their emotions. They are intense because they have had experiences in the past that it scares people, which makes us want to resolve the situation as quickly as possible, which typically means giving in to them and stopping their tantrum, because that's basically what it is.

It's an emotional tantrum. My coach calls this emotional childhood. It's when people see how their emotions are contagious and then they use that subconsciously, mind you, to intimidate you as the leader to get what they want.

It's why they threaten to go to your superintendent or they're going to go to the news, and they will push you to try and get you to feel fearful of their emotional reaction, and they're going to threaten you so that you will eventually kind of cave in.

When you can learn how to separate yourself from their emotional reaction and allow them to be angry at you without matching their emotions or running from their emotions, that's holding the space. You hold the space, you let them be angry, and they will see that their reaction isn't being productive.

So they do one of two things. They either calm down, or they storm out and they might come back at you with a bigger emotional reaction and an attempt to get you to kind of hunker down and cave in to fear. But when you learn how to hold the space by allowing that emotion to be present, checking yourself where you're at, not reacting, not saying something out of

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space or out of turn but just letting them be present, then you will be able to build up your capacity for influence and impact.

So when you're in this moment, you're basically going to do a lot of listening. You're going to take a deep breath. They're going to come at you or they're going to say what they need to say. You're just going to do a lot of listening. Holding space is allowing for a lot of silence, for uncomfortable amounts of time, and letting that other person speak and show emotion for as long as it takes.

You can agree with them whenever possible, you let them say. So for example, person comes in at you, they're angry that their child is pushed off the swing. You can say, "You're right. It's not our goal to have kids pushed off the swing. It wasn't okay that your child was pushed off the swing. You're absolutely right, I acknowledge that."

And when you acknowledge and you can say yes and agree, you're right, I see you're angry about this, you can be angry, that's okay. You acknowledge their emotions, you agree with them, and you just sit in a lot of silence. Is there anything else you'd like to say? Is there anything else you'd like to say? And you let them get it all out.

Eventually, they will kind of vent out. It will pass. So you let them say what they're going to say without response as much as possible, while being genuinely concerned. You can ask them some questions; seek to understand the thoughts they're thinking. What's making you feel this way? What are your thoughts?

And you're not trying to force a solution so that they'll feel better and so that you'll feel better. You're not trying to rush to a solution just to get them out of being upset so that you can feel better. What you're doing when you hold space is you're allowing them to express themselves without rushing to a solution.

You're willing to listen, willing to let them be upset without trying to solve it right away. Maybe you have a solution that works, fabulous. But holding

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space is that moment of letting them get it out without you reacting emotionally.

And finally, the practice of holding space is acknowledging and processing your own emotions. And in the moment, you just do a mental acknowledgment like hey, I'm feeling the burn, I'm just going to acknowledge you right now.

You can process your emotions after the fact. What we talked about a couple weeks ago. But in the moment, do a mental acknowledgment and then later on go home and process the emotion. And two, then you have to clean up your thinking about the other person's situation.

What are your thoughts and feelings about what the situation they're in? What they did, what they said, what they haven't done, what they're threatening to do, all of that. You're going to have to self-coach on that and clean up your thinking to try and get your brain to see that person as separate from you and as neutral from you as possible.

And then when you're able to clean up that space, you're going to be so much more able to hold space for people and their emotions when your thinking is neutral. This is a big task. It's a big part of emotional resiliency because we are innately wired to react to other people's emotions, to mirror their emotions.

We're contagious. Those emotions are contagious. So just spend some time this week noticing. Noticing the way that people react emotionally, notice how you respond to that emotion, notice when you're able to feel more neutral about some emotion.

You know when a kid's throwing a fit, you feel much more neutral, versus when an adult's throwing a fit it feels very different, just notice those differences. And just play around with that this week and see what your reaction is to other people's emotion and practice processing your own emotions and seeing how your emotions and their emotions and then that

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layer in between, how that all plays a role in who you are and how you show up emotionally as a school leader.

My friends, have a wonderful emotionally-empowered week. I can't wait to hear from you and let me know if you're ready for coaching. I'll talk to you guys next week. Take care. Bye.

Hey, principals, listen up. I've created a professional learning program for you and your team to build your capacity and lead your staff through the empowerment process. I've designed personalized growth experience for you and your school. You'll learn how to apply the leadership triad to empower your staff and students.

This is the moment where the perfect time and opportunity meet. Education will never be the same and I have the tools to help you navigate the change. To learn more, sign up for a free consultation at [angelakellycoaching.com/programs](http://angelakellycoaching.com/programs). I'll see you on the inside.

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