

Ep #142: Personal Development for Professional Growth with Dustin



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, empowered principals. Welcome to episode 142.

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.

Angela: Hello, my empowered leaders. Happy Tuesday. And welcome to the podcast. I have a special treat for you today. I have one of my new clients, his name is Dustin. Dustin is a former assistant principal of an elementary school. And this coming year, he has taken on his first tenureship as a full principal at a middle school. So, Dustin, welcome to the show.

Dustin: Thank you, Angela, I'm really excited to be on.

Angela: I'm so happy you're here. This has been so fun to work together so far. So, let's just dive right in and tell the listeners your school leadership story and what brought us together.

Dustin: Yeah, sounds great. I've always loved working with people, back to my college years when I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I wasn't actually an education major. I just knew that I liked to work with people, but I wasn't sure in what capacity that would take me. I studied Spanish, and so I traveled quite a bit during my undergraduate years. And then actually, after I graduated, an opportunity presented itself for me to teach in Spain.

So, I taught abroad in Spain with no training and loved the experience. And that got me really interested in teaching. So, I was a teacher for nine years;

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five years as a fifth-grade teacher and then four years as a culturally and linguistically diverse education teacher, mostly at the elementary level. And kind of throughout that time, I found myself in leadership opportunities at my schools. I really like collaborating. I really like working on teams. And I never had any intention of becoming an assistant principal or a principal. It just kind of organically, that's where the path took me.

I started a Master's degree about five years into my teaching career and again, there was never a plan to be in this position. It just sort of naturally happened. I just really like leadership and self-reflection and self-improvement and growing teams and organizations. So, just being in a school leadership role is a nice fit for what I like to do and it's a really meaningful experience in life for me.

And so, two years ago, I was an assistant principal for the first time and was completely overwhelmed by that when I got that job. You know, I didn't know what I was doing. And it's interesting, throughout this conversation, some of these themes will come up. I didn't feel like I knew what I was doing in the beginning. And then two years later, I find myself interviewing for a principalship at a middle school.

I got hired in March at this school and I'm really excited about it. And I immediately was like, "I need some help here." I want this to be a good experience and I feel like I need some sort of coaching or a mentor or something. And I actually found your podcast in February when I was on a vacation in Mexico, right before the whole pandemic blew up.

So, I was in Mexico running on a treadmill and I found an Angela Kelly podcast and I was listening to it. and I just had been listening to your podcast. And then I was interviewed for this job, got the job, and I think I called you that week...

Angela: You were still in the middle between the two positions, for sure.

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Dustin: Yeah, so that's kind of how it all came to be.

Angela: Yeah, it's been a really interesting journey for you. And your journey is so similar to other principals who are out there. and I know that a lot of listeners are aspiring principals. So, maybe teacher leaders who are interested in getting into the role of leadership, to some capacity. So, tell us a little bit about your transition from teaching into – there was a thought at some point that drew you into thinking it might be possible to be a school leader. And you mentioned it a little bit in your journey here. But what specifically, do you remember the moment of thought?

Dustin: I remember having some principals who really believed in me and they would have me on committees like the building leadership team, for example, when I was a new teacher. And actually, in my second year teaching, I was asked to be the math department chair. So, really, I was put in these leadership positions.

And my thinking was, like, I could have a really big impact on a lot of people in a positive way. And it just felt good too, to be in those leadership roles and to be making that impact. And so, I would say having principals who put me in leadership positions kind of just gave me that itch and gave me a spark of a thought of, "Maybe I could do that. I think that could be a really meaningful experience, to lead a school and to really positively impact the lives of students and the adults in a bigger way."

Angela: Yes, so what I want to point out to the listeners is that if you are thinking about a school leadership role, or perhaps you're an AP interested in going into leading your own school, that the thought of possibility is really that first stage, that first step in achieving the actual goal. So, in order to achieve the goal, you have to believe that it's even possible in order for yourself to take the action.

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So, as Dustin was saying, he – actually other people kind of pointed out to you, it sounded like, “Hey, you have the potential to step into these leadership roles.” And then as you gradually took on teacher leadership roles, your belief in yourself grew.

Dustin: Yeah, I don't think I realized it myself at the beginning. And that's kind of been a theme for me, just I'll get to the next position and then don't think I'll be able to do it. And then I do a good job and then it's like the next thing presents itself. And so, it's just interesting how – and we've coached on this a little bit, about overcoming that self-doubt that I think a lot of leaders have. Maybe we can get into that later.

Angela: Yeah, for sure. And let's talk about your decision-making process for choosing to hire a coach. Because the decision-making process for going into a principal role and then your ability to believe in your capacity to lead, it's the same process over and over really. And I know you're starting to see that pattern as you're evolving in your career. So, talk about the decision-making process in terms of hiring a coach and I'm thinking about, like, what were the fears? What were the problems you were thinking about? What were the potential solutions you were looking for and why you believed coaching would work? That kind of package story or series of thoughts that you had about that mentorship, that coaching, and why you believed that would help you over that threshold.

Dustin: That's a great question. So, I'm actually a pretty young school leader. I'm 33 years old. And I think my lack of experience as an assistant principal is something that is creating some self-doubt for me as a new principal. And so, I interviewed for this principalship and I only applied for this one position because it's in a district I'm really excited about, working for a leader who I really respect in a town that I really love.

And I didn't fully expect to get the job and then I got the job. And immediately, I was totally overwhelmed. Like, what just happened? I

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honestly did not expect it, just applying was a big deal that my wife and I talked about is this the right move. And we kind of came to the conclusion that you've just got to go for it. You've got to take a risk and apply and what's the worst that can happen? You don't get it. What's the best that can happen? You get it.

And I didn't really think I was going to get it. So, when I got the job, it was all sorts – I mean, there's so many emotions. I was excited at first and really thrilled. And then it was like, what have I got myself into? You know, I don't know how to be a principal. I've just been an AP for two years at an elementary school and I don't really have very much secondary experience.

So, I was really grappling with all of that for a week or so. And I just kind of realized, if I'm going to enjoy this and if I'm going to have a successful first year, I think I need some outside support. And so, I immediately talked to my wife and said I'm going to call Angela, get this consult call. I think I need somebody with an outside perspective who can just really help me with the emotional side of the job. Because I still want to be a good dad and a good husband and have a life outside of work. And this is a very all-consuming thing and without somebody to help me through those issues, I would burn out, I believe, pretty quickly. That was my thought process and I'm really thankful that I made the call to you and the work we're doing is incredibly important, especially now, two weeks before school starts. I just need that as a part of my weekly routine so that I can make good decisions and stay grounded and you just can't do it alone.

Angela: And I want to thank you for your vulnerability in all of this. So, to the audience, I want you to hear that I personally asked Dustin to interview right now when he's in the thick of it. So, he started with me when he was still the Ap, transitioning into the principalship. And so, that was kind of a toggle for him back and forth. And he has a lot of things juggling on two plates, almost. And then, when he came full circle into the principal position, another set of overwhelm came in, not just being new, but the

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COVID thing, trying to keep people safe, trying to come up with multiple plans, the plans were always changing. You guys know, you're in it.

But I asked him to do this in this moment while he's in the thick of it, while he's in real time. Because I want you to hear how his thoughts are creating his emotions, are impacting his results, and how he's choosing to proactively and intentionally take the actions he believes he will need in order to be successful, versus suffering in silence, suffering on his own.

And I think for so many school leaders, I know I was included in that. I felt like it wasn't allowed, to show weakness, or it wasn't acceptable to show emotion. You had to fake it until you make it, be really strong, be the leader, be competent, be confident in yourself. And when I wasn't really feeling that way, I didn't have a mechanism to process those thoughts and feelings. So, thank you for being so vulnerable and coming on the show and talking about this so that other school leaders can benefit. Really, this is the work that we do.

Dustin: And for me, it's great because I'll look back on this time, and it's such a unique time for me personally in my life and for the country, for so many reasons, for the world, such a unique time to be in education, and just to be a new leader. I'm just curious. And in a few years when I get to relisten to this podcast, kind of where I was at and how much I've grown. And one thing I'm proud of myself for is reaching out for more help. I think that's an important leadership quality, to be able to do that. So, that is something that I encourage other school leaders to do.

Angela: one thing I want to touch on, only because it holds so many people back from either reaching out or saying yes, is the money objection. We either feel like it's going to be too much time and we're too busy, or we feel like it's going to be too much money. And I definitely have noticed that in education, we do tend to have a scarcity mindset around time, money, resources that kind of a thing.

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I don't remember exactly what your objections were, if it was more on time or money or something else. But can you talk about the process? I know you talked with your wife about it before you made the decision. But what was your thinking in terms of the value of coaching for yourself, this investment in yourself and why you value making this investment for yourself?

Dustin: Sure. I do remember our conversation. And I wasn't really thinking about money going into it. And then we talked and I realized that we would be a great fit. And then we talked about the cost and I just said I need to talk to my wife. And immediately she was like, go for it. She was almost more gung-ho about it than I was at that moment because she saw the value in my just being happier and being more confident going into this new opportunity.

And I don't think you can put a price on self-investment in terms of how you present yourself daily, how you show up as a leader, how you show up at home. And the work that we do together really, it's focused on school and what's going on at school, but a lot of the lessons I can apply to my life outside of school too. So, I think it's just an investment in myself.

And what we've talked about it it's going to accelerate my growth as a leader and my career if I can master these skills earlier on in my principalship. I'm just going to have a much more enjoyable career and I'll be able to achieve a lot more than I would be able to do otherwise.

Angela: That just reminded me of one of our conversations. And I'd love to talk about this because I felt like it was such a great moment for you. So, my overall question is, I want to ask you, how you feel about having a coach and the experience, what's it been like for you, just on the day to day? But one of my favorite memories so far of our work together was when you – I think you came back to our call the following week and you really had the realization, like, wait a minute, I can decide that this can be

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fun. Remember that? There was a moment where you were like, the whole point of this is feel emotion and actually create some fun with this...

Dustin: Yeah, to feel good. And I think I went into the principalship just – I'm kind of a serious person as it is. And it can feel like such a serious job and feel like so much responsibility. So, just being able to kind of flip my thinking on that and intentionally go into meetings and say, "How can I make this a fun experience?" You know, we're going to talk about the hybrid plan and all of these things. But what can I do to spark some joy here with my group? And that's going to be really important for me this year as we navigate these challenges, is just to have fun and you have to be intentional about that though, is what we've talked about, and really think and play on it and think about ways that you can have joyful interactions. Because if not, it can be really serious and overwhelming. So, that was a breakthrough session for me, absolutely.

Angela: Can you share with the listeners, like, in general, some of your thoughts and feelings about having a coach and what our week to week experience has been? What's been great, but also in honesty, what's some of the harder things that you feel like we've had to work through?

Dustin: Well, I will say I look forward to my Thursday calls with Angela. I think my wife looks forward to them as well. It's amazing. Fridays are always a really good day to me because we coach on Thursday afternoons. So, usually it's good time too because then I can go into the weekend and kind of be grounded. But then by the time Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday rolls around, you know, enough stuff has piled up and I'm like, I've got to talk to Angela about this situation or that situation.

And so, really, what I love about it is you helping me process my thinking and be aware of my thoughts and how those are creating my emotions and giving me specific tools. Because I'm a guy that likes to have a tool. So, for example, last week, we talked about this tool called flip the thought. Where

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I would be having a negative thought that's creating a negative emotion. And then you coach me to write down the opposite of the negative thought and just stopping and doing that type of activity. And I have quite the toolbelt now after a few months of coaching with you.

So, sometimes it's tough though. You will point out things to me about my thinking and maybe my biases or my mindsets that I haven't even realized I have. And I think that's valuable. But it's not all rainbows and butterflies every coaching call. I mean, it's really nice to have an analytical outside presence to help me look at my thinking and who I am. So, I think it's incredibly valuable. We've had some tough sessions for me personally because I just didn't realize my thought patterns and how those were impacting the way I show up. But that's kind of what it's all about. And I think I get a lot of value out of that in the long-term. And so, it's been really wonderful to have you.

Angela: Oh, good. Is there one biggest shift for you that comes to mind when you think about the biggest change you've had – it's been about three months now...

Dustin: Yeah, I'm just thinking about some of the topics that we've coached on. I'll never forget, one of the first things we tackled was the hiring situation where I think you did a podcast about this. But the first time I had to hire a new teacher and we had three candidates and one was brand new and one had five years of experience and one had 20 years of experience, and I didn't realize this but I wanted to make the right decision.

And kind of the idea of the right and the wrong decision is a big breakthrough for me, because there's not really a right or wrong decision, as we've talked about. And for some reason, I was thinking that the teacher with the most experience is the right decision, despite the fact that my interview committee unanimously wanted to hire the first-year teacher. And I was really struggling with this because I felt like it was a big risk to hire a

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new teacher. And we kind of unpacked that and it led back to prior experiences I've had, of having to work with new teachers and how much time that took for me and then being a new principal, I felt like I didn't have the time.

But truly, this person was the best fit and was awesome. I just had that mental block. So, that was a real breakthrough in my thinking and I ended up hiring the brand-new teacher. And I'm so happy about that because he's wonderful. But that's just an example. You know, every week, it's a different situation that we can talk through. And I probably would have hired the 20-year veteran had I not had you as a coach and gone against my committee. And that would have set up a whole new situation for me. And so, just having somebody to talk to with your experience – and sometimes, we'll just talk about school leadership stuff too. It's not always coaching on my emotions or thoughts. Sometimes, I'm like, "Angela, how would you run this staff meeting?" You've helped me with that type of thing too.

Angela: Right, I yeah, I think one of the things I've learned and honed in on my own coaching ability is just there are times and places when people want mentorship. They want direct mentorship. They want to tap into my experience as a leader and just hear directly what my thoughts are on it or what I would personally do.

So, I like to balance those two things. And I try to be very explicit about when I'm coaching and when I'm mentoring, but we kind of eb and flow in and out of that pretty seamlessly, I think. So, what do you think are going to be the long-term results of your coaching with me, with any coach? And I want listeners to learn from your courage and your experience thus far. What do you think is the value, not just this year – having someone in your corner is always of value. It's that immediate value. But I'm thinking, what do you see as the long-term results of this coaching experience?

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Dustin: Well, long-term, it's going to help me tremendously with my self-awareness, with my emotional resiliency, my ability to navigate really difficult situations and conversations and just all of those tough things that happen in leadership. If I can learn how to navigate those now in my first year as a principal and still show up every day, grounded in my core values and who I am and feeling empowered in my ability to make decisions, I think that's going to accelerate my growth as a leader. I think it's going to make me more effective as a leader. And all of those things, I think, will make me feel more fulfilled and excited about future opportunities.

So, like we kind of talked about earlier, I really look at this as investment in my future self. It's helping me in an immediate time of, quote unquote crisis, to get through that in a sane way. But really, it's building skills that I'll be able to use for the rest of my career. And that's why I see a tremendous amount of value in it and why I make it a priority every week.

Angela: I also want to highlight Dustin for a little bit here because he's really being modest in his efforts. So, it's one thing for me to coach a person, but it's another thing for that person to show up with full intention and fully open to hearing the coaching, reflecting on it, and doing the work. And Dustin's a Rockstar A-plus student when it comes to showing up each week with full presence, full intention, and full willingness to kind of go to the places where we've got to clean up some thinking for him.

And I can only do half – like I can meet him halfway and I can believe for him. I can support him. But ultimately it really does come down to the client and how badly they want this transformation. Can you speak to that a little bit?

Dustin: Yeah, I mean, I do the work. So, one of the things that, when we coach, you have this incredible ability to transcribe our sessions. So, I don't know if you're typing or something. But you'll send this PDF after our coaching session and it has all of the thoughts we talked about. It's really

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concise and well-written. And it usually has some homework or a tool attached to it.

And so, I set the intention, you know, I want to get the most out of this as I can. And so, I'm going to do the homework that you assign. And I've been seeing positive results in how I feel by doing all of that work. So, for example, flip the thought, like I already described, that was my homework this week. So, I printed out the worksheet you send me and I have it in my planner. And when I have a negative thought, I jot it down during the day. And then I'll flip the thought and write the opposite of that thought.

So, that's just an example of how I'm committed to doing the work that you're providing and you're right, it's more than just the 45-minute conversation we have once a week. It's really, to get the most out of this and what I've had to do is implement on my own the strategies and the tools that you suggest and listen to the podcast and talk about what I'm learning with my wife, you know, I think you should go all in. I think that's how you get the most out of anything. So, that's what I've done.

Angela: For sure. And I just want to commend you for that and I want to highlight that Dustin is – like, if I could have 20 clients like Dustin, I'd be all in because it's so fun to coach with him. We laugh a lot. I know we sound very serious on this podcast, but we do have a good time. We do laugh. And both of us are doing the work. We're both showing up and that's where the magic happens. That's where the transformation does take place. So, if there's anything you could tell the listeners, from your perspective, I'm not going to prompt you, like, what would you want to say?

Dustin: Well, I would just say I'm a new principal. I'm totally overwhelmed most days. And like I said earlier, I don't want this job to be so all-consuming that I'm an unhappy person. I want to show up and enjoy the job. I want to lead my school in a way that I can be proud of. And I think that having a coach is going to allow me to do that. I'm working with

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Angela. And I just don't think I could do it by myself. I don't think I would be as happy as a leader or as effective of a first-year principal.

So, I would just say go for it. If you are thinking about getting coaching or any sort of support, there's nothing like investing in yourself, in your future self. And so, that would be my advice.

Angela: Thank you for that. That's so sweet of you. I have one last question. And I think this is something that I know, for me, I did not see the difference in it. And I'm interested to hear your thoughts on this. There's lots of professional development opportunities. You're probably inundated with opportunities for professional development. And I see, like I see the large companies and large organizations offering lots of PD, lots of trainings, webinars, online learning, all of those things for school leaders. What are your thoughts on those types of trainings? What are the benefits of those and how is this different?

Dustin: Yeah, those are the tools, the nuts and bolts of our profession. And that's all incredibly important, professional development. I mean, all morning I've been in a session about diversity, inclusion, equality, and equity for the past six hours on a Zoom conference call and I have three pages of notes about all of that. And it's incredibly important.

But this is a little bit different. You know, what we do is really focus on my emotional wellbeing, so I can show up and implement all of the stuff that I learn in the PD in an effective way and take care of myself and recognize my thought patterns and how those create results in my life and in my job. So, it's not really the same as professional development at all. It's working with somebody who has been there. And that's another thing I appreciate about you, Angela, is you were a principal for six years and so you understand the challenges of this job. And you can really help me navigate those challenges in terms of my emotions and my thoughts. And that's not something anybody I've ever met can help with in that way.

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When we started coaching, I was really totally unaware of my thought patterns and what that meant. And I'm not an expert by any means now. But even in three months, I can recognize when I'm feeling crummy and see what thought I'm having, and just kind of that recognition has already helped me in a lot of difficult situations. So yeah, it's important work and it's not being done in education. I'm going to highly recommend that everybody check it out.

Angela: Thank you so much. My big vision for the world of education is to bring this work to our school leaders, but really so that it can have a ripple effect on teachers, staff, students, families. I think once kids understand the potential of their emotions and their thoughts and how they're interconnected and that they have so much more control than they believe that they have, I think that that is what's going to embrace them in the will to learn. Like, the will and the drive and the desire to continue learning, even when it feels hard, even when it feels uncomfortable.

And emotions just aren't something we've been really open to talking about in schools. And I think it's the magic bullet. I think it's going to be definitely one of the things we can do to evolve education at large. So, of course, I'm all in. That's what I'm doing...

Dustin: Yeah, and I think there's that trickle-down effect from the leaders. So, if the leader is doing this work and is in tune with their emotions, the teachers are going to feel that and see that, and that's going to impact our kids, which is really what it's all about. So, I feel like the work we do is good, not only for me, but it's going to be good for our school and the culture and hopefully will help positively impact student outcomes kind of in an indirect way.

Angela: Yes. So, listeners – first of all, Dustin, I just want to thank you so much. I know I took a half an hour of your busy workday and I'm going to talk with you tomorrow, so I'm looking forward to that. And what's even

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more fascinating, I think, will be Dustin and I are going to continue this conversation throughout the year and we will do another podcast towards the end of the year so that you can hear his growth.

So, right now when we're talking with him, he's three months into coaching. We're going to check in with him towards the end of the school year. And I just want you guys to be able to hear the difference in where he's been, what he's experienced, how he's thinking and feeling, and how it's impacting his work, and his professional and his personal life. Because I know that one of the goals we have is to create that balance for him and his family. So, we are going to continue the conversation with Dustin throughout the year. And I just can't wait.

Dustin: I'm excited too. Thank you so much for this opportunity.

Angela: Awesome. Thank you, Dustin. Have a great week. I'll talk to you tomorrow.

Dustin: Okay, bye.

Angela: Okay, bye.

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