

## Ep #156: Change Fatigue



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Angela Kelly**

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Hello, empowered principals. Welcome to episode 156.

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 empowered leaders. Welcome to the podcast and happy Tuesday. So excited to be here with you today. And I'm really happy because we are in full holiday celebration mode over here at the Robeck residence.

Here in California, we have just been moved back to the most restrictive tier. And what that means, basically, is we're back to shelter in place, we're back to non-essential shopping, don't do it basically unless you have to be out, work from home, no bars and restaurants, no gyms, no places of worship, all of the above. Don't do it. Stay home. Wear a mask. Wash your hands.

You guys know the drill, right? We're back at it. So, my husband and I just decided, we're going to enjoy this month as much as possible by jumping fully into the season. We are decorating. I have spent more money on candles than I can even believe. It's crazy. I am a candle fanatic this year.

So, we've been writing cozy candles. We've been watching our favorite movies. We've been baking. I have my mom's Christmas cookie recipe. I can't wait to make that. All of the fun things.

So, Alex will be coming home. This is the week before Thanksgiving as I'm recording this. So, he is going to come home this Sunday and he's basically going to stay with us for a couple of months. I don't know that he's

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going back to school. They're not open. I don't know that he'll go back to school between Thanksgiving and Christmas, unless there is something he has to do.

But it's going to be really great to have him here. And, of course, our hopes are that the COVID numbers get in check and in control so that he can experience some of his senior year in college. This has been such a disappointment for him. He is doing his senior project. He's a screenwriter at Chapman University and really wants to be able to do his project. So, we'll see what happens. Stay tuned. We're really grateful he's home and we can't wait to be with him again and we're going to make the best of our holidays and have some fun here with the three of us present, together.

But I do want to take a moment and I want to acknowledge that many of you have been through a significant struggle this year. And while the holidays are providing comfort for our family and to some of your families, I want to acknowledge and recognize that this time of year is also very difficult for many people.

So, whatever feelings are coming up for you during this season, I want you to know that the Empowered Principal group is a resource for you. You are not alone. I'm here for you and you have colleagues all over the world and throughout this country that are going through what you're going through, who understand, at least understand the job.

And I want you to know that you don't have to process these heavy emotions all by yourself. So, come on over. Join us in the Empowered Principal Facebook group if you are on social media. And let us know what's going on and how we can be of help.

I try to check the group every day. I try to post things in, either a prompt or a question or I give some coaching. And I'm really happy to help you and

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provide you with tools that can help you navigate this holiday season however you are feeling. And if you want personalized support with this, please reach out. Don't suffer on your own. I want you to know you have support available to you.

So, speaking of the holidays, speaking of COVID, speaking of 2020, we're going to talk about change fatigue. I originally wanted to break down fatigue and have it be the entire month of December. But I eventually came up with some other ideas I thought would be more powerful for you in terms of getting to know yourself professionally and personally. So, those two podcasts came into existence as I was working on some of my own things and getting to know myself at a deeper level. And I know those tools, those strategies will help you develop as a leader much more quickly.

I am going to talk about fatigue today. I'm going to focus on change fatigue. I will highlight some of the other fatigues that do happen and come up in school leadership, but I'm going to talk about it in the context of change fatigue because that is the fatigue that school leaders are feeling the burn of the most.

So, we're going to talk about this year in particular because it has been no joke. We are fatigued in so many ways. We're COVID fatigued. We're tired of hearing about COVID, even though it's not going away. We're really tired of social distancing. We're just fatigued from election drama and decisions and learning fatigue. There's been such a huge learning curve this year.

I have heard so many principals say to me they're tired, they're exhausted. There's so much change. There's so many new decisions. There's so many new things to learn. And they're physically, mentally, and emotionally fatigued and exhausted.

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So, in this quest to understand yourself professionally and personally, you want to understand what triggers fatigue for you personally so that you don't go week after week, month after month feeling drained and feeling exhausted but not really knowing why, not understanding where it's coming from.

Our brains want to default to just attributing the fatigue to the job. We kind of chalk it up to, "Well, that's just the way school leadership is. We overwork. We're underpaid and we come home exhausted." We want to just write it off.

And I want to offer that the goal is to understand what's creating our fatigue, acknowledge that fatigue. We're not saying we're not going to feel it or that we're going to completely eradicate it. But we do want to understand what types of fatigue trigger us the most so that we can, number one, just expect that it's going to happen. And when it comes up, we can be like, "Okay, I'm acknowledging you. I see you coming. You're here." And you can kind of have a plan how to deal with the fatigue when it strikes.

So, let's dive in and talk about change fatigue. Change fatigue is basically just when you feel completely burned out from chronic change, from this constant churn of one day we're doing it this way, one day we're doing it the next way. We're going to be remote learning, we're going to be hybrid learning, we're going to be in-person learning, now we're back, now we have a COVID outbreak, now we have to quarantine people.

The stories that I've heard from all of you and my clients have been – it's unbelievable, to be honest. It's hard to wrap my head around how much change you're going through.

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Now, in a regular school year – so, if you're a brand-new school leader, you don't even understand that in a regular school year, we thought there was a lot of change, we had no idea what was possible in terms of change.

Now that we're in it, we're like, "Whoa, this is a lot." So, change fatigue is really just that burned out feeling from the chronic change and it wears us down. When things that are normally routine for us have a change, especially big things that we're used to being very stable – school leaders, they can adapt and you guys are all pretty good at being able to go with the flow and make changes. That's part of the job.

But when big, giant, huge things change, things that we expect to be stable in our lives and in our careers, it forces our brain to get out of autopilot and it requires a lot of focus. And that focus requires energy. And when our energy drains, we feel fatigue.

When we're in a massive change such as this year, what happens is we have to slow down our brain. We have to slow our thinking down and process and focus and pay attention for longer. We don't get to just push play and go for it. We have to slow our thinking down, which in turn then slows down our ability to take action and approach the job.

We have to slow down our thinking. We have to slow down and process our emotions. And then, we have to slow down how much we're getting done. And as school leaders, we don't like this because we want to get to that to-do list. We want to get it done. We want to be effective and efficient with our time. And we don't want to slow down. We don't like the feeling of slowing down.

Our brain wants consistency. It wants status quo. It wants to be in the know. It likes efficiency. It wants to go fast because that means it gets to be on autopilot and cruise.

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So, when there's a lot of change, the brain gets thrown off and we have to switch gears without warning, which makes the brain have to work harder. And it puts your brain on a constant alert. It's out there bracing for the next change. It's like, where's it coming from? I'm looking for it. And what happens is, your chemical reaction in your body, that adrenaline rush, it feels like it stays constant because your body is always preparing you for the next wave of change that you're going to have to face. So, you're on the defense all the time. You're in fight or flight mode constantly.

The other part of fatigue that settles in with change is that we don't like the way that change impacts other people, particularly the people we are leading. So, this year, most of my clients – all of my clients – have had to communicate changes to their staff and their community many, many times over. And they've had to go out and say the opposite of what they said the week before, which to them just feels so devastating because they feel like they're losing faith and trust in their community and in their staff.

Some principals have had to delay the start of school. Others have had to switch back and forth from remote learning to hybrid learning or in-person learning and they've been on the merry-go-round of how they're going to teach and where they're going to teach. And other principals have had to quarantine people. They've had COVID outbreaks at their schools. They've had to quarantine anywhere from individuals in some small groups all the way up to entire grade levels.

One of my clients had to, I think two, he had to quarantine two of his three grade levels at his middle school. It's just crazy, right? But every single time that a new change comes down, it upsets you as a school leader because you know the impact it will have on other people. And you don't want to have a negative impact on other people.

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It's upsetting to you because you know how upsetting it will be to your teachers and your students and your families. And what happens is, you're thinking to yourself oh gosh not again, I don't want to have to communicate yet another change. People are losing their patience. They're tired of the constant change. Nothing is stable. Your brain kind of spins out thinking about how the change is impacting you and your brain is spinning out, thinking about how the change is impacting other people and what they're going to make that change mean about you. It comes full circle.

So, we're thinking about the impact it's having on us and we're thinking about the impact that it has on others as it relates back to us. The fatigue of change for the school leader feels like a domino effect. And I know you guys are feeling tired. You're tired of all these changes because of the work required on you and the work that you're asking of others. It impacts people and that makes you feel bad.

In fact, the principals I work with, they're actually more resistant to that impact on other people than they are on themselves. What I notice happening is that when something impacts just them, they're able to kind of coach themselves through it and navigate their way and decide, "Okay, I can do this. I can handle it." And they pick themselves up and they take care of it.

But when it impacts other people, the greater the impact, the more people, the bigger the bubble of impact that the decision has or the change has, it feels more exhausting when it involves others. And here's why. Because when you're doing it for yourself, you just have to hold space for yourself to create that change and process the emotion that comes with that change.

When you have to tell an entire school community, you not only have to manage your own emotions. You have to hold space for everybody else's reaction to that change. That is what feels exhausting. Taking on that



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emotional responsibility for other people in the sense of you're holding emotional space for them, you're letting them feel the feels, they're coming to you complaining, they're stressed out, they're fatigued, they're tired, they don't want any more change and they're letting you know.

You have to be able to help yourself and you have to be able to support other people. That is what feels exhausting. They come to you. They want to vent and blame and have you take the responsibility for the impact of the change, even when the change isn't in your control. And that's one thought I've noticed that my school leaders tend to have.

They'll say, "This change isn't even my decision. Why do I have to be the one to communicate it?" That thought, "I shouldn't have to be the one," can create a lot of pain. I want you to notice if you're thinking that. I'm not saying it's right or wrong. I was in positions all the time where a decision was made, and as the school leader, I had to communicate it. So, I had to clean up my own thinking before I set foot out and actually did the communication.

So, your work as a school leader is to recognize how the change is impacting you personally first of all, the thoughts that you're having about how the change directly affects you, and then you have to notice your thoughts about other people's reaction to the change and how their reaction impacts you.

When you think they're going to be mad and hold you personally responsible, of course you're going to feel resistant to telling them. You're not going to want to do it. You're going to wish you didn't have to, right?

But when the changes keep coming, and they will, you might get to a place where you have this thought, like, why even bother? This year, there have been so many changes and it's easy to slip into that why bother mentality.

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Nothing is stable, so why bother? So many changes, why bother? We want to throw out hands up in defeat.

And that's understandable. It's totally understandable that you feel this way. Just know that the fatigue is coming from the way you're interpreting the change, the way you're processing what the change means for you and for other people.

Because here's what's happening. Your brain's thinking, "I don't want this to change. I don't like change. Why don't I like the change? Because it's slow and it's hard and there's no stability and I don't know what to expect and other people are getting mad at me. I don't want them to be mad at me. I want them to like me. They can only handle so much change. I can only handle so much change."

All of this change means less effective instruction and less impact for students. And that thought is really painful. Just saying it out loud feels painful. So, I know, school leaders. I know you're feeling the pain of the change meaning that you're not being effective as a school leader, you're not being effective as a school in terms of teaching kids. Those thoughts are really painful.

We are pushing teachers to the limit, that by being the messenger of this change, we feel like we're hurting people when we think that we're pushing teachers to the limit and they're at their capacity.

You don't want to inflict change on others because we don't like when change happens to us and when it's put upon us. So, we don't want to do it to other people. So, it's normal and natural for you to feel that resistance to all of this change. And it feels very tiring to think about all of this and to go through with it.

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So, what do we do? What can you do with it? There's two options. They're simple, but you're not going to love them. You can either resist it and allow it to fatigue you and drag you down, or you can acknowledge the thoughts that you're having and process the emotion of fatigue.

There's a difference between feeling fatigue from resisting change and feeling fatigue from allowing change. You're not going to be in control of the change. You're not going to be able to stop the change. So, you have to decide if you want to feel fatigue from a place of resistance or you want to feel fatigue from a place of allowing and accepting.

You can allow the fatigue to be there. You can process it and you can still show up as the best version of yourself at school. You don't have to not feel fatigued to be a great leader. Great leaders feel fatigued. It's sometimes part of how you show up and how you feel. 50-50, guys, right?

There are amazing leaders who are fatigued mentally, emotionally, physically. Change fatigue is not going away in education. We've always had small changes every single year. But we haven't had any significant changes of this capacity in the last century.

This year has thrust education into massive change and it's built up our capacity to allow for bigger and more impactful changes. So, here's what I want to offer you. As a school leader, you can choose to think thoughts that generate excitement about the change.

You can think thoughts like, "I'm leading during a time in education when big things are taking place. I'm going to contribute a significant impact as a school leader. I'm open to the fatigue of change that will come from time to time, but I'm going to focus on the bigger picture and the bigger impact that I'm going to be a part of."

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If you can allow yourself to step out of this year and this one moment in time and look at the amazingness of what's happening right now, no, it does not feel good. Change is messy. It's kind of ugly. It feels sticky. It feels like a grind. It's that grit. It's not fun to be in the grit of the work.

But with that grit, with that change, with that churn, beautiful things evolve. Amazing things can happen for kids. Look, we weren't serving all of our kids before COVID. And of course, we're not serving them now. But through this process, we're going to figure it out. Our goal is to figure out how to be more flexible, how to reach more students, how to teach in more abundant ways so that more kids have access to growth and progress and learning as it relates to building and evolving them as human beings.

And let me say this. If being a part of that change doesn't light you up, doesn't truly excite you and motivate you, if instead it feels really draining and you don't feel called to be a part of this level of change in education, I want you to allow yourself to acknowledge that your deeper desire is just not going in that direction. It doesn't mean anything's wrong with you or that you're not good enough or that you should be something that you're not.

This happened to me. I was in education for 25 years. And I had to get real with myself and serious with myself and say, "Hey, what's your path here? Do you still want this? Is education still a yes for you?" And the honest answer that came up for me was no. I wanted to impact education but in a different way.

I wanted to figure out how I could love my career and make an impact. And this is what I came up with. I created a career for myself. You can do the same. Yes, there will be a point that you will acknowledge that you don't want to follow this career and pursue it any longer. You will feel a sense of mourning, a sense of grief at the loss of what you thought was going to be a forever career.

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But you will gain, on the other side of that, the freedom to explore new options for yourself. I don't want any of you to not want to be a school leader yet to feel like you have to stay in the position and then live through all these changes and hate it all along the way. That would be horrible.

This is why getting to know yourself and what you want at your deepest level is so important. So, when these changes come – and they have. They've already started coming and more is to come – you have to ask yourself if this work is still what you really want to do. And let yourself be honest.

If you do love this and you're excited and you're just tired, that's okay. We can get tired. You just rest up and you go back again and do it again the next day. Schedule in some rest. Get some self-care, and then get back to it.

But if not, I want you to be honest with yourself and give yourself time to explore what it is you really want to do with your career and with your time and with your life.

Now, that being said, I'm not saying go out and quit your job tomorrow. You don't have to make any significant changes or take any action right now other than to ask yourself the question, let yourself answer honestly, and think about if not this, then what? Just be honest with yourself.

And a little sidenote here that I have to point out. If you are thinking to yourself, "I want to leave this job because I don't like change and I want to have a job that doesn't involve change," first of all, that isn't a thing. You can't go find a job that has zero change. And how boring would that be, by the way? But number two, I want you to notice and ponder that a little bit longer. Just notice your thinking, like, I've got to get away from the change, I don't want it.

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If that's the sole reason, go a little deeper into why it's bothering you and what you're not processing in terms of the change. But if you do decide that you don't want to continue pursuing education, notice that not wanting this job means having to change jobs.

So, you will be experiencing change no matter what. I just want you to see that ahead of time so you don't jump ship and be like, "All this change, all this learning, all these decisions, I'm fatigued." Any job is going to be 50-50.

So, when you ask yourself the question, it's either going to light you up or it's not. And decide from that place, like, what's my true calling? What is it that I want to do? There is no wrong decision, but just don't do it from a place of you're just tired today and you want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Just keeping that in mind.

Change fatigue tires you physically, mentally, and emotionally. And oftentimes, it's all three at once. So, you can feel really worn down. And I want you to understand that when you're going through a lot of change, the impact it has on you is physical and mental and emotional. Your body fatigues. Your brain fatigues. Your heart and your soul fatigue. We grow physically tired from long work hours. We get mentally fatigued from long hours of processing ideas and thoughts and plans and schedules and conversations and meetings and all the decisions.

We feel emotionally fatigued when we're dealing with highly charged, highly emotional issues. And that compounds when we're both physically tired and we're mentally strained. So, those three are always in tandem. When our bodies are depleted, we lack the stamina to manage our thoughts and our emotions and we feel less in control.

Our body, our brain, and our emotional state are all intertwined. And I know you know this on an intellectual level. But I want you to stop and

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acknowledge it. We don't usually take the time to stop and acknowledge that. So, truly empowered leadership is about listening to the way your body speaks to you. Build a relationship with your body and honor what it's telling you. Build that relationship. Listen to your body. Listen to your brain. Listen to your heart. When all three are given attention, your ability to manage your fatigue will increase significantly.

So, I just want to highlight and acknowledge – I'm not going to go into these two, but there are other types of fatigue. There is decision fatigue. That is when you have so many decisions to make, your brain does not want to make any more. I do break down the decision-making process in episode 131 on empowered decisions, so check that one out. But know that you can get into a loop of just pure fatigue from having to make decisions all day long.

And then finally, there is learning fatigue. And I know you know this well. It's that feeling of being in a week-long training when your brain can't take in any more knowledge, or it's trying to learn a new technology that you just can't seem to figure out or get. It's something that takes time and it's the discomfort of not knowing how, not understanding, not getting it. It's that struggle of learning.

We all experience this. And it's good for us to experience this as school leaders because it reminds us what our teachers are going through and what our students are going through. And I hope that our experience with learning fatigue this year will help us evolve the way we teach and the way we approach teaching and learning for kids and for teachers.

Many times, a stress that's associated with learning comes from the pressure to master something in a short time period. So, we compound learning fatigue when we add time pressure to it, when we give it a time limit.

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If kids had more time to learn and teachers had a little more time to learn and you had some more time to learn, wouldn't it feel so much less stressful? I would imagine so.

So, what happens is, we want to learn quickly so we get out of the discomfort of having to be new and having to learn. We want to be good at our jobs in one year. We want our kids to learn to read in one to two years. We want to figure out the new technology ASAP so we can get down to business.

But the truth is we are always in a cycle of learning. There are moments in time that feel like everything is smooth, but more often than not, we're in a cycle of learning. And learning is change. Learning is the process of changing the way we think, changing what we believe, expanding our knowledge, our intellect, our skillsets. That is education. It's a process of evolving and changing. And that's what being human is.

So, let's summarize this. How do you navigate school leadership fatigue? Number one, acknowledge its presence. It's a real thing and it's totally normal. Number two, ask yourself what's making you tired? Write down all the thoughts that come up. Step three, notice the thoughts that are making you feel tired. What kind of tired are you feeling? Physical, mental, emotional, all of the above?

Notice how thoughts trigger the feeling, the emotion of fatigue. Then ask yourself, what does your body want most right now? Can you provide that now for your body? If not, put it on the calendar. When can you do it?

Step five, process the emotion of fatigue. What does fatigue feel like in your body? It's different for everybody. Can you describe it? If you went to the doctor and you said you were feeling fatigue, what would you say? Where



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would it resonate and feel in your body? Can you allow that feeling, that emotion to be present?

Step six, explore your thoughts about change and fatigue. What do you think about change? What do you think about being in charge of decisions? What do you think about learning new things? What makes you the most tired and why?

And then finally, you can ask yourself, what do you want to do with your career, your time, and your life? Is this a yes? Is this a no? Are you all in or not? Either answer is 100% acceptable.

Fatigue is a part of being a school leader. Learning how your body responds to fatigue is a very important insight. The more aware you are of your own reactions to fatigue, the better you will be at handling yourself and knowing when you need to take a break. Rejuvenate, rest, and get back at it.

So, stay in touch with yourself. Tune in. Know what you need and be willing to treat yourself with lots of care and lots of kindness. You are in change fatigue. And I've got your back. It's okay. Have an empowered week. Take great care of yourself and I'll talk to you next week. Bye.

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