

Ep #187: The Value of Questioning



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Angela Kelly

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 187.

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. Happy Tuesday. Welcome to the podcast. I just love how fast this podcast is growing and how all of you are sharing it. If you could all do me a big, huge favor and take five minutes to write a review of the podcast. This is how people find us.

It's how I know who is listening on the other side, how the podcast is benefiting you, how I can be of greater service and value, the topics you want me to discuss. Giving this a five-star review and letting us know what you love about the podcast and sharing it with your friends is a way to ensure that we are growing and evolving not just you but the podcast and helping other people out there as well.

So I really want to thank all of you listeners from the bottom of my heart. It really means so much to me that you take time out of your week to listen to the podcast and to ruminate on these concepts and ideas. Because what I'm trying to offer is something that's innovative and interesting and unique. Something that is different than what other leadership mentors and coaches have to offer. That is this mindset piece.

Today in our work on mindset throughout the month of August, we're going to talk about the value of questioning. So I've been spending a lot of time over the course of this summer talking about how to increase your value as a school leader. We talked about the value of fun, the value of constraint, the value of connection. Now I want to talk about the value of questioning and why it is one of the most simplistic yet most powerful tools you can use

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as a school leader to create more value as a leader. To contribute more to your school and to your community and to your staff. So let's dive in.

Today I'm going to cover the value of questioning. Why it's so valuable. I want to sell your brain on why you should put time into your day and into your week to pose questions and spend time thinking about the potential answers to those questions. We're going to talk about why we question and what we don't, and three keys to creating high value questions. All right? Let's get started.

So when you think about why the human brain questions, it's funny. The first thing that pops into my head, I think of toddlers. I think of kindergarteners too, right, little ones. Where they're always questions. Why? Why? Why? What is this? What is that? How does this work? What does this do? How does this run? They want to know how things in the world work. If you've ever been around toddlers, you know this to be true, right? When I taught kindergarten, kids would come blasting in the door and asking questions all day long.

Our brain is designed to ask questions. Questions are based out of curiosity. What is this? Why does this work? Who is this? Who is that? What are they saying? Why are they saying that? What does that mean? Questions are designed to help us learn and grow and evolve our thinking. It helps us innovate and update our practice as a leader, and it helps us innovate and update the experience of our lives and the experience of other people's lives. That's why we're in this business, right? We're in it to help people evolve their lives.

So three reasons why I believe questioning is essential to becoming a school leader. So number one, questions spark engagement. When you think about a classroom and you're thinking about a person who lectures all day long and talks at students versus a teacher who has a high level of engagement, who's asking a lot of questions, who's getting students to talk.

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Children are speaking to one another. They're talking to the teacher. They're talking to their classmates. They're writing things down. They're engaged.

Questions wake the brain up. It puts the brain on alert. When you ask questions, it says, "Hey, pay attention over here. Look this way. Listen up. Get ready to engage." Questions prompt the brain to wake up. It engages our mind. Our brains love questions because questions are simply a puzzle to be solved. It's a game. It's a puzzle. It's a mystery. Questions are put into our minds in order to problem solve. Our brain wants to do this. That's its job.

That's why it's also, on the flipside, hard to turn off our thinking about work because our brain does love to problem solve. When a question is posed to it, it wants to answer it. It wants to find solutions. Now, in school leadership, it feels like there are many puzzles to be solved.

Sometimes it's hard to turn that off but know that questioning is how our mind works. It's wired to do that. It gives the brain a way to hook in and be engaged. The more engaged we are in our questioning process, the more questions we ask, the deeper that we go, the more invested we get in the process. So the more that we question, the more invested we become in the solution process and the more committed we are to creating a solution. It's really important to understand that we want to question. We want to ask a lot of questions. Both of ourselves and of others because it sparks engagement.

Two, questions ignite innovation. Questions are an invitation for the brain to think outside the box. This is where brainstorm comes into play. The more engaging the questions are, the more creative the brain becomes. We want to ignite innovation. We want people to think about new solutions, new ideas, new concepts. We don't want to do the same old, same old, same

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old. When we do the same old, same old and we don't ask questions, we plateau. That is not the goal.

The goal of education is evolution. We want to create more questions. Not just questions, solved, done, check the box. We want our questions to lead to more questions. That is the evolution process, which is number three the ultimate.

Questions evolve us personally and the world we live in. Questions are what makes us become a thought leader. When you think about anybody in the world who has added massive value into the world, people like the founders of Apple, the founders of IBM, the founders of Ford. All of the people who have created brand new innovative things did it by asking a lot of questions. They are people who go deep into questioning.

So we want to question things that are new, things that we don't understand, things that don't seem to work, the status quo. We want to question possibility. What else is possible? What don't we yet know that we want to know? What yet haven't we created that we want to create? What do we want to believe? We want to evolve our questions so we can evolve the answers that we come up with.

Now when I come up with questioning, it sounds so simple. Just ask a lot of questions. If questioning is the solution to being more creative and being more valuable, why don't we do it? Great question. The reason we avoid questions, you probably can answer this already. Why don't you ask more questions? Why don't you put time on your calendar to just think deeply about questions? Why don't we do that?

The biggest reason we don't do that is because of other people's opinions. It's what you think people will think about you if you ask a question. Are they going to think, "That's a dumb question. She doesn't know what she's doing. He is new obviously." And judge you. Or they're going to say,

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“You're asking too many questions. You should know more.” Or maybe you're thinking they'll think, “You're being aggressive. You're being defensive. You're kind of attacking people with questions.” People think sometimes when you over question or you ask a lot of questions that you're saying that something's wrong with them or with their ideas or concepts. So we hold back because we're worried about what other people will think about us asking questions. That creates discomfort.

That's another reason we avoid questioning. It feels uncomfortable to ask questions. We don't like to not know the answers. We don't like to have to struggle to figure out the solutions or the answers to things. We want other people to answer them for us. It's much easier to the brain. It feels uncomfortable to have to tell somebody, “Hey, I don't know. I have no idea how to do this. I'm confused. I don't understand. Where is this? How do we do that? What is your process for this?” So we get uncomfortable.

The reason we feel uncomfortable is because we think that we should know. We think we get into a school leadership position, and all of a sudden, we're supposed to know everything. No. Teachers know if you're new, by the way. They know when you're new. There's no hiding that. So don't pretend that you have answers to all the questions. Don't not ask questions because you're new. That is the perfect time to ask questions. You should be asking a lot of questions. Embrace your newness. Let yourself be new. Ask all the questions.

Now, I want to talk about high value and low value questions in a second. Coming up with high value questions, it pushes our brain. So high value questioning, the reason we avoid it is because it's hard. Our brain's default mechanism is to make things as simple as possible. It wants it to be easy and fast and simple and quick and put a little bow on it so that we can check the box and say that we've answered that question. We've solved that problem. Move onto the next thing.

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So your brain wants to be effective, and it wants to problem solve, but it wants to do it as efficiently as possible, as simple as possible. So I like to joke with my clients that your brain gets kind of lazy. It's lazy. It kind of wants to know the answer, but it doesn't want to do the work. So it's like, "I'll just ask somebody else to do the work to solve my problem. What's the answer to my problem?" Asking somebody else is much easier than having to think about the answer.

So answering the question requires a lot more work than asking the question. This is why we have rhetorical questions. It's easy to ask a question. It's harder to answer it. When it's a high value question, it's challenging. It's difficult. It stimulates the brain. It takes some grit, focus, energy, attention. It takes time. We have to be patient. Our first, second, or third answer isn't always the best answer. So our brains do not like this at all. It doesn't want to have to grit and grind it out. It doesn't want things to be hard. So we avoid.

Now, let's shift gears and talk about the three keys to questioning really high value questions. So things to consider, number one, the type of question you ask. You want to think about the value of the question. There are high value questions and then there are low value questions. Low value questions puts you kind of on default. You don't have to think. You don't really have to try. It's like when somebody asks you, "How are you today? How's it going? Fine." Your brain doesn't really register. It's not engaged. It's not an innovative answer. It's not evolving your day or who you are. You're just evolving to the easiest answer possible, "I'm fine."

Versus when you're walking on campus and you ask people, "How are you feeling today? What are you excited about? What are you looking forward to today? What's going on for you today?" The brain has to stop. It pays attention. It gets engaged. It has to think about the answer to that question. Versus, "How are you doing? How's it going? Fine." Do you see the difference? Okay.

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Number two, the second key to really productive questioning is to consider the intent behind the question. So there is an energy and an emotion behind the way we ask questions. So when we question something, that's an action that we're taking. That means there is a thought and an emotion that's driving our action to question. We want to understand what we're thinking and how we're feeling and why we're posing questions.

Let me put this in a real tangible example. So if you have a teacher that's chronically late to work and you want to ask them why, you want to be sure you're thinking is clean on this. When you're asking them, "Why are you late again? What's going on with you?" That kind of energy is coming from this like, "I'm unhappy. You have no good reason. I'm frustrated. I'm attacking you with questions to try and get you to behave and come to work on time."

Versus genuinely being curious and saying, "Tell me what's going on for you. There must be something really big going on that's got you running a little bit late. Is there something I can help you with? Is there something you want to share? If not, how can I help you solve this so that you can get here on time for kids. The reason we need to be on time for kids..." And you can go on. When you're coming from a neutral place, it's a very different intent and energy behind the question. Being angry versus being curious or compassionate or understanding.

Number three, this sounds like the most obvious key to asking questions, but I will tell you what. It's the thing we do the least. At least in my opinion, at least in my experience. So the most obvious key to asking questions is answering them. Think about it. How many times a day do you ask a question and don't answer it? How many rhetorical questions do you ask yourself all day long?

Rhetorical questions provide zero value. They are of zero value. They're not even low value. They're zero value because you give your brain no time

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to answer the question. You don't hold your brain accountable to actually spin out a little bit and have to grit and think and figure it out to come up with a solution. Answering the question is what feels hard. Asking the question, not as hard. Especially when we're asking ourselves. So the key to questioning is considering the type of question you're asking, the intent behind the question, and then actually answering the question.

Now, I referred earlier to low value questions and high value questions. Low value questions are questions that spin us out, that have no answers, they're rhetorical in nature, or they make us feel really terrible. They're those questions like, "Why did I screw that up? How did I not know that? Why did I miss the meeting? How come I can't pull it together?" They're self-deprecating. They're self-judgmental. They're self-criticizing. They're questions that we don't really answer. We just use it to beat ourselves up.

There's also times where we're like, "I wonder why I am missing so many meetings." We want to really try and divulge all of the reasons why and explore. We kind of use questions to buffer ourselves from actually getting to work and doing the things and asking the high value questions.

So low value questions you'll know that you're asking them when they feel heavy, when they feel yucky, when they discourage you from focusing on positive, powerful questions. Low value questions don't really have an answer. They don't have an answer that feels resolved. If there is an answer, it's kind of a flatliner. It doesn't feel completely resolved for you. It doesn't solve the problem, or it doesn't feel like a viable solution. It feels more like an open-ended question, kind of a cycle that keeps spinning around over and over.

So when you say like, "Well, what's wrong with them? How do I do this? Why don't I do that?" When you just ask these questions but they're kind of flatlined, they're not creating value and they're not providing you with solutions to the problems and the questions that you have.

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On the opposite end, high value questions and answers are questions that create high impact and fast results. They push you to think outside of what you believe is currently possible. They focus on possibility instead of probability. So you're not thinking about, "Oh what could probably happen, and I wonder if that's going to happen. I wonder if this is going to happen." You're thinking about what's possible.

So you're going from like the worst-case scenario thinking and questioning all the things that could go wrong to wondering and being amazed at all the things that could go right. We never stop to think about what could go right here. We're always on the defense thinking about what could go wrong.

So high value questions are energizing. They're exciting. They're engaging. They're interesting. They're different. They push us, and they're fun questions to answer even when they're hard. They feel good. It's like solving that mystery or that problem or that puzzle. It feels good to solve these problems. Ultimately high value questions create results. That's how you know they're of high value.

I want to offer you this. I want to ask you and invite you to give yourself permission to question. Give yourself permission to ask and answer questions to yourself. You can have a dialogue with you. So asking questions isn't just about asking other people questions. Asking questions is really more about asking ourselves the questions. What do we think the answer is? What is our opinion? What is our idea? What is our thought on this situation, this question, this problem, this issue that I'm trying to think of a solution for?

You have to give yourself permission to question yourself, your belief systems, the current way, the status quo, all of it. You also want to give yourself permission to ask other people questions and be okay with the discomfort that comes with asking questions. Because asking questions is how you create results. It's actually how you create results. You have to

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ask the question in order to get the result. You have to earn the solution by doing the work of thinking about potential solutions.

So what is the cost of not questioning? You can go through life and not question anything. A lot of people in the world do that. What is the cost of that? How does it negatively impact your life and your career? When you do not actively and intentionally spend time asking questions, you lack awareness. You go through the motions of work and life without understanding or being curious.

What it feels like when you're doing this, it feels like life is happening to you. Work is happening to you. You feel a lack of control over your life, a lack of agency over your career, the lack of power to create what you want to from your career and your life. You just feel like you're passively living. Things are passively happening to you, and you just have no agency over any of it. That is one of the costs of not questioning what's happening, what's going on, what's working, what's not, and what do I want to create.

Another cost is that it avoids the truth. When you're avoiding the truth, when you don't question because you're afraid of the answer, you're afraid to tell the truth to yourself and to other people, there is a misalignment that happens.

There is an incongruence within your body between your mind and your heart. Your heart can know the truth of something, but your mind doesn't want to hear it because it doesn't want to have to do the thing or have to be honest. So it doesn't acknowledge it. But you will feel an internal conflict within yourself when you're not actively seeking the truth of the answers to your questions and avoiding asking questions at all because you don't want to know the answer.

This involves work. It involves emotional work. It involves understanding why we're triggered, why we don't want to ask the question, what we're

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worried we're going to see in that question, and understanding that the outcome of asking a question is simply seeing the truth for what it is. When you do that, there is so much relief in seeing the truth.

So the cost of not questioning is not feeling alignment and relief. I call it integrity, as Martha Beck calls it, right, but there's this alignment that happens within you that just feels right. It's that feeling of this feels good. This feels right. This feels like truth to me.

Then finally the cost of not questioning, not spending time on questions is really lackluster results. It's having this very dull life experience. It's doing it just because the way it's always been done. We're not going to ask questions. We're not going to change the way. We're going to do status quo. It feels very numb, very boring, very robotic. It creates the same result over and over and over with no new solutions, no new experiences, no innovation, no creativity.

It's like people who date the same kind of person over and over again. They have a date. They're dating somebody for a while. They have a conflict. They break up. They go out. They meet the same kind of person, go through the same thing, same amount of time later they have the conflict, they break up. Then they can't understand why they're not in a relationship.

It's because they haven't questioned, "What is true for me? What's going on for me? I want to create more awareness for myself and who I am in my partnerships, and what I'm looking for in my partnerships." And really being clear and concise with themselves about who they are and who they want to become and the person they want to attract.

So there is a high cost associated with not taking time to ask questions. Now the beautiful thing about questions is that you have the permission to question anything. You can question anything you want, but I encourage

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you if you're going to ask the question, be sure to answer it. You'll catch yourself asking questions or you'll say a question to somebody else, but you won't ask them for an answer or yourself for an answer.

So things like, "What's the top priority for the school this year? I don't know. What's the top priority? What's your top priority?" Do we really ask the question deeply? Why is it a priority? What should it be, and what is it right now? Are we in alignment?

I was just coaching a client the other day, and I asked him. He was talking about next year, and he needed to make a decision about professional development. I said, "What do you think it should be?" He goes, "It needs to be numeracy. We need to work on math." I said, "I want you to drop down into your body. Slow down, take a couple of deep breaths. And I want to ask you the question again, but you have to answer it from your body, your heart, not your brain. Not your mind."

Then I asked the question again. What is the top need of your school? Right away he said mental health. He's like, "Wow, that's crazy." I said, "That feels aligned. That feels like truth. That's the awareness." When you're asking yourself from a place of integrity and truth, you have the answers within you. They come to you very simply, very easy, very quickly. The body will answer in words, phrases, or short sentences. The mind will chatter and ramble on and on and on. You want to ask yourself from a place of clarity and integrity and honesty.

So you can ask yourself anything. What do I think about grade levels? What do I think about schedules? What do I think about my calendar? How am I spending my time? How am I allocating my resources? How am I spending my money? What about the bell schedules? What about current instructional practices?

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You can ask any question you want but be willing to answer it first for yourself. It's not to say you won't ask other people's opinions and get their input, but you want to value your own answer at least equally to other people's. You have a lot to offer. You need to ask yourself and answer the question.

One of the ways you can create high value questioning is by focusing on what is working. What is working? What do you know? What are your strengths? How are you already shining? How is your campus shining? What is your team great at doing? What's possible for kids? What's possible for the staff? What's possible for this community? Then what's possible after that?

All of us have a glass ceiling of possibility. We can only believe that so much is possible before our brains start to say, "No way. That can't be. That can't happen. There's no way." I want you to keep asking yourselves until you can expand that portal of possibility. That's what I call the portal of possibility where you're expanding how big that portal is of what you believe is possible for yourself and other people and students and staff and community and education at large for that matter. You want to focus on what is working and what you do know.

Then finally when you're asking yourself a lot of questions and you're in the space, you're putting it on the calendar, you're taking time to do it. You want to analyze how you've learned. How you're answering questions. Are you evolving your question asking and your solution making? Are you getting more creative? Are you coming up with better solutions more quickly? Are you transforming more quickly over time?

I teach my clients the HOW method. Being honest, open, and willing with themselves. So you want to be honest with your answers, you want to be open to hearing the truth, and you want to be willing to adjust based on that truth and try again and again. That is the solution. That is the secret sauce

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to asking high level questions and getting high level answers which create high level results.

I know this has been helpful. This is amazing. I love this work. I just really came up with this today, which is fabulous. I feel like the more I ask myself what I know and what you need to know and the value of coaching, the value of leadership, the value of education, the value of what we're providing to the world, we are becoming thought leaders. That's what the empowered principal program is designed to do.

So if you are ready to become a thought leader in the field of education, if you want to be the best of the best, join the empowered principal program immediately. Ask yourself the question: what's holding you back and why? What's the cost of not joining today? Let's do this. I will talk to you guys next week. Have an amazing week. I love you all so much. Talk to you next week. Bye.

If this podcast resonates with you, you have to sign up for the Empowered Principal coaching program. It's my exclusive one to one coaching and mentorship program for school leaders who believe in possibility. This program is designed for principals who are hungry for the fastest transformation in the industry. If you want to create the best connections, impact, and legacy for yourself and your school, the Empowered Principal program was designed for you. Join me at angelakellycoaching.com/work-dash-with-me to learn more. I'd love to support you in becoming an empowered school leader.

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