

Ep #254: Teacher Evaluation Philosophy



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 254.

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 power leaders. Happy Tuesday. So happy to be here. Guys, so much is going on. I can't believe how fast fall is going. Now I know it might feel very long for you. We talked about that last week. But I have so many new clients. I have so much going on. I'm loving life. I'm loving all of you. Love this podcast, love coaching. I love my life, and I want you to love your life too.

Today, I'm going to talk to you about your teacher evaluation philosophy so that you can love the teacher evaluation process. You spend so much time and energy on teacher evaluations. So I want to address this aspect of your job.

I first want to say that any task or project that consumes this amount of significant time and energy in your work week, in your work month, in your work year, it deserves some intentional planning and reflection time. That's what we're going to talk about today.

Okay, you want to invest some time planning how you spend your top resources. Your top three resources are your brain, your time, and your energy. That's what you have to give every single day to your school community. Now, you want to make intentional decisions how you're spending your brainpower, your time, and your energy. The teacher evaluation process for most school districts uses an extensive amount of your time and energy. So you want to be very intentional about the purpose of it, and the outcomes you're intending to create with it.

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So I want to talk about the purpose of teacher evaluations. When I bring this topic up with my clients, well they'll bring it up with me is what happens. They're like oh, I gotta talk about teacher evaluations. I want to coach on teacher evaluations. I always start by asking them what they believe the purpose of teacher evaluations are. They usually respond with something to the effect of well, the purpose of teacher evaluations are to improve instruction so that we can create better outcomes for students.

Yes, on the surface, this is the purpose. But you hear how generic and nebulous that sounds? It is not specific. It's very ambiguous. We also know on the sidelines here that the purpose of completing these teacher evaluations is because it's a job requirement as a principal. This is a check the box. It's a compliance issue.

Every district has a teacher evaluation system that you have to follow. It usually involves a certain number of meetings, pre-observations, post observations, the actual observations, the write up, the conversations, the deadlines, the repeats, whatever you have to do. There's rules for new teachers, rules for tenured teachers, the number of times you have to meet, all of that jazz.

Okay, I get it. This is a compliance issue on one level. This is we're trying to improve the world of education on the other end of the spectrum, right? There's compliance, and then there's like the utopia of fixing all the things. Okay.

So yes, we do invest time and energy into teacher evaluations because number one, they need to be done, which is fine. Number two, the goal really is to improve instruction. Of course it is, but we're going to talk more about that in a minute. Number three, the system of education has a current belief system that the way we're doing it now is how instruction is improved.

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What I mean by this is in the institution of education, we believe that the way we're doing observations and feedback is how we improve instruction. That's our theory. The theory is how do we improve instruction? We go into classrooms, we observe teachers, we give them feedback, and then instruction improves. That's our theory that's currently in process right now. It's in play right now.

I just want to point that out because we want to step out and see that it's one way of improving instruction. We want to ask ourselves is the way we're currently approaching teacher evaluations the most effective way to reach our goal, and get very clear on what our goal is and get very specific about that, okay.

But there is another purpose of the evaluation process. We're going to dig in a little bit deeper to that. So the process currently in place gives you and the district, it gives you a formal invitation to observe and evaluate teacher performance. There needs to be employee performance and a measurement of that, and this is the formal way you do it. We don't want to argue that. There's no problem with that. Every industry has its way of doing it.

But the good news is, as a school leader, you get to dive in a little bit deeper and go beyond the surface of just checking the box and aiming for some ambiguous improve instruction goal. So let's talk about what we're really doing with our time and how to make this process of teacher evaluations a highly effective use of your time and your teacher's time.

You're going to create a teacher evaluation philosophy, okay. I've been working with my clients on this, and I want to share it with you because it's been so successful. So this goes beyond checking the box or wanting to just have a pulse on what's going on in your classrooms or being able to improve instruction and improve student outcomes, okay?

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What you want to do is get a very specific philosophy, a personal leadership philosophy, on the purpose of teacher evaluations. You want to have a philosophy that aligns to you specifically as a school leader and to your values. This is a useful way to spend your time because of the amount of time that you invest in teacher observations. Okay.

Now, I know many of you know, you need to do this to comply. But when you think about it as a compliance issue, you're often frustrated with how much time it takes you away from doing the other things you would rather be doing. It makes the process more painful when you're like this is a compliance issue. I have to get to all these things. It takes forever. Teachers don't get that much out of it. I don't get that much out of it. It's not very useful or valuable. It's very frustrating.

I know many of you dread them because you don't see them as valuable. A lot of you procrastinate them because you don't like doing them. It's not fun. It's not very engaging or motivating. You feel that there's other things that are more valuable or more important in terms of use of your time. This all comes down to the perceived value of the teacher evaluation process.

When you have to spend such a great deal of time on something that you don't think creates results, the results you want to get, such as tangible evidence of improved instruction, you're not going to be that invested in the process. You're going to do it out of obligation and compliance. But you won't believe that this is a great investment of your time because you don't believe it's going to create the outcomes that you desire, the outcomes that teachers desire, or the impact that you want to have on students.

When you don't think it's going to create results, teachers definitely don't think it's going to create results, and they're not going to see the value in the teacher evaluation process. Trust me. All of us are going through the motions in most districts, even the district. Even district employees. Now I've worked at the district level, and I coach district level administrators.

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They'll say like yeah, it's a compliance issue or yeah it doesn't really do anything because tenure is so strong, and they don't really change. It's just something we have to do.

I want you to know, even the people at the very top don't necessarily see its value or believe it's working. They see it as compliance to some level. Now, there's some people who are super gung ho and really into it and are really trying to coach and mentor, but they are looking at the teacher evaluation process differently. They have a very specific philosophy. So let's create one for you. Okay.

Now, I do want to say this outright. The system, the process, the type of evaluation system your district is using, we're doing it this way because it's the only system we have in town. It's what we're currently doing to cover the bases. You personally don't have control over the choice of system that your district chooses. Don't worry about that. You don't have control over that, but you do have control over the value that you create with the system you've been given.

This is where you do have a say. As the school leader, you can decide your personal philosophy behind the teacher evaluation process, and make it your own and make it super fun, super enjoyable, super valuable for you and teachers.

So your philosophy, this is what it contains. What you believe the purpose of teacher evaluations are beyond the template ones that we just talked about, how you want to feel about the process, the amount of time you're spending, the results you're creating, the actions you're taking, the write up you're doing, how much time you're spending on it, all of that. How do you want to feel about the teacher evaluation process?

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Then how you want teachers to feel about the process? What is the way you want to approach teacher evaluations? What are the outcomes you want to create from the teacher evaluation process?

So let's talk about the purpose. What do you want the purpose of the teacher evaluation process to be? You can make it as compliant and hands off as possible. Just to check the box if you want. If you want that to be the purpose, if it's just a get er done kind of a thing, you can totally do it that way. Most of you don't want that though.

You want to create an evaluation process that is engaging and connects you with your teachers and connects teachers with their learning and opens up dialog with rich conversations about what's actually working and what's actually a problem and what they actually perceive as the challenges and the obstacles. What they think the solutions are, and how they might approach the solutions and create those solutions, right? You can make this as rich of a process as you desire.

So I invite you to consider that the purpose of the teacher evaluation process is not for administrators to get people, to catch them, to document them, to tell them what they're doing right and wrong. It has nothing to do with us. It has everything to do for the teacher. The process should be one for the teacher. This is their evaluation process. This is their professional development program. Okay?

When we're coming in to their classrooms, they are the ones who are boots on the ground working. They are the ones who are in that classroom. They know what's working. They know what's not working. They're the ones who know these kids. They know what skills they possess. They know the skills they don't possess, even if they don't admit them because they're afraid. Because they're afraid they will be perceived as weak or incompetent and lose their job. This is scary to them.

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But when we turn this around and make the process about the teacher and making their job easier, better, faster, more successful. What I mean by making their job easier, I really mean like helping them to solve a problem they're currently facing.

When we turn this conversation around and say, hey, what is working well in your classroom? What's going great? Where are you struggling? What is the challenge that you are having? What would blow your mind to fix? If you could fix one thing in your classroom this year, what would it be, and why? What's the purpose of fixing this? What's the value in fixing it? How does it make your job easier, better, more effective?

Okay, asking them what's going on for them and making this about them will change the dynamic and the energy around the process. Because now it's no longer about you having the burden of going in and trying to figure out what to coach them on and how to coach them and what to tell them and what to fix.

It turns the tables to giving the teacher the power. It puts the work on the teacher when you're asking them what do you think is working? What isn't working? What do we want to change? Why do we want to change it? What do you think the solution is? What do you want me to look for? What do you think is missing?

Okay, that makes your teacher have to think harder and get more reflective and get more clear and specific about what actually is working and what isn't. It makes them do the thinking, right? We want them learning. They're doing the lifting here, not you. Okay.

So, I also want to come in with this philosophy from the perspective that every single teacher wants to be the best version of themselves. They all want to do a good job. They want their classrooms to run smoothly. They want to shine as a teacher.

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Nobody goes into teaching to see how badly they can do. No one goes into teaching to harm kids or to not be able to have a successful classroom or know how to manage kids and classrooms and have great strategies. They all envision themselves being the best version of themselves. We want to come in with positive intentions and positive assumptions, and believing in our teachers. So that means as a part of our philosophy, we have to establish trust with our teachers and trust in them.

I talk about the trust triad all the time. You have to trust in your teachers. You want to trust that they want to be good. That they have skills, that they have brilliance within them already. Trust their perspectives. Trust that they know what's working and what's not. We've been telling them for so long that they've stopped trusting themselves, their own intuition and their own gut feeling about what's working and what's not.

Instead of the old mentality that the purpose is for us to come in and fix them, for us to be the experts, for us to be the guru and telling them here's what you're doing well. Here's what you're not doing well. Here's a little fixer upper. Try to do this better. Instead of us being that kind of expert energy, let's shift the expert energy back to them. You're a brilliant teacher. Yeah, you're new, and you are bringing brilliance. You have a lot of value to offer. What do you think is going on here? If there's something you could fix, what would that be?

Having a conversation that reminds them that they have a say. They have got skin in the game. They've got to say. That they have some control and agency over themselves and their professional development and their personal development and their classroom experience. Okay.

So how do you want teachers to feel before the evaluation and the observation and after? Do you know how nervous and scared and intimidated and worried they are? And nervous, and how many hours they put into their observation lesson? We have generated a system, a process,

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that feels very intimidating. But that's because we've shifted it into like we're the expert, and they're the person who knows nothing. Versus having them feel I want to shine. I want to feel empowered. I want to show what I know, right?

Creating a culture where the teacher evaluation process is about tapping into their brilliance. Giving them permission to ask for help and to be vulnerable, and to say hey, I don't really know how to do this whether I've been doing it for one year or 10 years. This is something I want to learn how to do. Or this is something I've always struggled with. I don't see what's going on here, can you help me? Giving them a safe space and permission to ask for help.

So how do you want them to feel before the observation and afterwards? Do you want them to dread it? Do you want them to fear it? Or do you want them to look forward to it and enjoy it and learn from it? How do you want them to think about the process? How do you want them to think about you as their leader? How do you want to feel about the process? What would make the process more enjoyable, more productive, more meaningful? How can we create tangible outcomes as a result of all this time and energy we're spending on teacher observations?

How can we break down an outcome into smaller, easier, doable steps? What is the one thing for that particular teacher to learn for the school year? An implement that's going to make her daily life better and easier? Maybe for one teacher, it might be a classroom management strategy. Maybe for another teacher, it's about lesson development, or how they actually teach it or how they evaluate progress.

There's a whole spectrum of ways that teachers can improve and professionally develop themselves. But we want them to kind of take the reins on that, and invite themselves to like let them go where they think

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they need to go. The more we trust in them, the more they trust in us that our feedback is actually valuable, and it's for their benefit.

So I invite you to consider that the process is for the teacher, okay. We really want to understand that this process is all about trust. Trusting that our teachers know what's working and what's not, and what they need to do next. Trusting that they have the skill set and the brilliance within them to figure it out with our feedback and support. When we trust them, they trust us. When they trust us, they're going to trust our feedback.

Next week I talk about coachability and how you can be more coachable in order for teachers to be more coachable. The teacher evaluation process is all about out coachability, right? So you can coach on any aspect, but you don't want to coach on all of them.

You want to be very specific and very clear when you're developing your, like part of your philosophy is becoming very clear and direct and specific. Not trying to coach on all the things at once, but going in and asking for one thing. What is one piece of feedback you are looking for? What is the problem you're trying to solve? What have you tried? What solutions have been working? Haven't been working? What do you think the solution might be? What can I look for to help you figure this out for this year's class?

We really want to ask the teacher what they think because it helps us be a better coach for them. When we come in thinking what we know is working and not working, nothing's going to change. Because the only thing that changes people's approach is a change in thought.

So our purpose in the evaluation process is to understand what the teacher is thinking and feeling so that we as the leader can then understand why they're approaching teaching in the way that they currently are, and to ask them what they see the solution is so that we can have an easier time coaching them. You see? This is all about your STEAR cycle and their

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STEAR cycle. What you're thinking and feeling, what they're thinking and feeling, and then your thoughts about what you're observing. Okay.

Now, this doesn't mean that we're not going to ever give feedback or make suggestions. Or we might jump outside of what they asked for if we see something really egregious or something that's glaring that's going to help that teacher have a better teaching day tomorrow, right? We want to give feedback that they can implement immediately and feel relief and feel better about themselves as teachers and more productive and more effective as a teacher.

It doesn't mean we're never going to give that feedback, but we want to make the process about them. So the feedback that we give our philosophy we want to include is every piece of feedback I give, I'm giving it for their benefit to help them have immediate relief and immediate effectiveness, right?

Because here's the truth. There's no one right way to teach. There's only the right way that's right for that teacher. Teaching isn't an industrialized, standardized, one size fits all job. It's an art. There is a skill and an art to teaching. Yes, there are some standard skills that come into play here. But even then, the teachers uniqueness in the way that she or he approaches their style, their flair, their interpretation of the skill set is what makes teaching an art. It's what makes kids learn in a variety of different ways. We want that. We want teacher styles to vary because student learning varies. Okay.

So consider your personal philosophy of teacher evaluations. What do you believe the purpose is? How do you personally want to experience the process? How do you want your teachers to experience the process? What are the outcomes you're trying to create? What is the whole reason you're doing teacher evaluations in the first place? How much time do you want to

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invest in them? What would make the process easiest for you and teachers? What's going to make it fun and enjoyable?

What is the value in it for you, the teacher, the students, the district? Why is this the best use of your time and your teacher's time? You want to be very sold on your philosophy of teacher evaluations because you spend so much time doing them and spending time meeting with them, observing them, writing them up, talking with them, coaching them, mentoring them, doing classroom walkthroughs.

You want to get very clear. The simplest way to do that is to come up with a very clear and specific philosophy on the purpose of teacher evaluations, who the purpose is for, and what the outcomes you're trying to create. Next week, we're going to talk about giving and receiving feedback, and how to become more coachable ourselves, and how to teach teachers how to become more coachable. I'll talk with y'all next week. Take good care. Bye.

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