

Ep #266: Decision Audit



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 266.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal™ Podcast*, a not so typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host certified life coach Angela Kelly Robeck.

Hello, my empowered leaders, and happy Tuesday. I actually had a different podcast planned here for the end of January, but this topic came up, and I'm in the moment of experiencing it now. So I wanted to share it with you because it has been one of the most powerful exercises I think I've ever done. It's so amazing. I just came up with the idea out of my own brain. I'm not even really sure what sparked this, but I have been finding it to be incredibly powerful and useful.

So I'm going to teach it to you right here, right now. I'll record the other topics at a later date. I wanted to talk to you about the mid-year reboot, but I will save that for another podcast because today we're going to talk about decision audits.

A decision audit is when you take an intentional look at every decision that you make throughout your day. Now, you might think that I'm crazy for suggesting this because it sounds very tedious. I admit it is. You're not actually going to be able to catch every single decision that you make, but you can catch several of them. Enough to create awareness around your decision making process.

So I've been doing this, and it has fascinated me how much more intimate I have become with myself and with my thoughts and with the reason behind my actions and my decisions. I want to share this with you today, just my experience. Okay.

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So I've recently started the practice of creating an extreme awareness in my life around all the little, tiny decisions that I make throughout the day. I look at decisions from the beginning of my day to the end. So as soon as I wake up, there's a decision to be made. There's a decision to get out of bed or not. If I don't get out of bed, what am I going to do? Am I going to go back to sleep? Am I going to grab my phone and play on my phone? Am I going to pick up a book and read it? Do I have something inspiring that I want to capture and grab my computer and write down some notes?

Or am I going to decide to wake up? Am I going to decide to make my bed or not? Am I going to decide to go out for a walk that morning? Or do a workout video or go to the gym? Am I going to do none of those things? Am I just going to jump in the shower and start my day? Like, why am I making the decisions I'm making? It sounds very minutiae, but it has been so revealing about how my brain works and the sentences that my brain offers to me and how my brain justifies or rationalizes decisions.

What I've noticed is that our brains have an incredible skillset of being very convincing in the immediate. Because what the brain wants is for us to be comfortable and calm and safe. Like it wants to seek out pleasure, avoid anything that it deems painful or hard, and make things as easy as possible.

So when you get up in the morning, if you have not made a decision about how you're going to get up and spend your morning ahead of time, and you let that decision present itself in the morning. So you wake up, and your brain starts to wake up and function and thoughts start to appear. You have tons of decisions to make. I mean first of all, am I going to get up now or am I going to stay in bed? Am I going to go back to sleep, or am I going to wake up? Am I going to stay in my bed, and then what am I going to do with myself if I'm here and not sleeping?

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So it's fascinating to ask myself like, first of all, what am I going to do? Yes or no, and why? So, some days, I have gone back to sleep because my body has said you're extremely tired. You're going through a lot here personally. This is an ongoing thing in my family. So there are times where I feel energetically and physically spent, and I need more sleep. I've decided I love that reason. I sleep.

Other times, I just feel kind of sad or down. I don't feel like getting up. I feel like just laying there and feeling my feelings, right. Feeling sad or just thinking about life, or I just sometimes buffer. I just get on my phone and scroll. I scroll on social media or read the news. We've had a lot of incredibly crazy weather out here in California, from December until January. So it's easy to kind of pick up what's going on and just get all caught up in the drama that is the weather out here.

So I've noticed all these little minutiae decisions, these little, teeny, tiny decisions, and they impact my life on a regular basis and in the long term. So I might decide that it's too cold to go out for a walk, or it's too wet to go out for a walk. It's been raining ridiculously here for over a month straight. So my brain is like well, I can't go outside. It's too wet. It's too stormy. It's not safe. Whatever. So that gets me off the hook to go for the walk. Then I have to make a new decision. If you're not going to walk, are you going to exercise?

Do you see what I'm saying? Like there's a lot of chatter that goes on in our brain instantaneously. Like our brain just makes these decisions without our awareness. That's the whole point of the audit. So the decision audit is really looking at how you make decisions big and small in your personal and your professional life.

Doing this exercise creates an insane amount of awareness of what your brain offers and its desire for immediate gratification over long term

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gratification. Its commitment to your immediate gratification now versus your commitment to the gratification of your longer term goals. Okay.

So, for example, I did this the other day with eating. So before I put anything in my mouth, I asked myself what decision is driving my action of eating this particular food at this particular moment? Sometimes the answer is uh, brain, hello, I'm hungry. My body's hungry. It requires some fuel right now. This is a healthy thing. This is the right time. This is the right kind of food.

This is what I want. It feels aligned. It doesn't feel like any drama, right? If I'm having a cup of soup for lunch and a salad, I'm good. Like it feels aligned. I like my reasons. It's the right time. It's the right food. It's the right place. It's available to me. It's a no brainer. Like the decision feels fine.

Other times, I find myself like oh, why are you grabbing this piece of pizza? Or the other day, I have to tell you. The other day I grabbed some chocolate covered almonds. I have this little, tiny bowl of dark chocolate covered almonds. They were sitting there on the counter. I grabbed a few, and right before I started to pop them in my mouth, I asked myself like, hey, Angela, what was the decision? What was the reason behind grabbing these almonds and eating them? What was going on there? Before I ate them. They were still in my hand.

I caught myself. I was creating awareness through this decision audit. What was the decision? I realized oh, that wasn't even a conscious decision that I was making. I literally visually saw them. They grabbed my visual attention. Without – Now there was thought there. I wanted to say without thinking, but I was thinking. The thought was just those look good, or those would be yummy right now or something like that. But I saw them without being conscious. I grabbed them, and I went to pop one in my mouth, but I stopped because I'm doing the decision audit.

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What was the decision to pick these up and eat them? Really, I thought, oh, they were simply there. Without consciously being aware of that thought behind it, my reaction, the action that I took, was to grab a few, and I intended to eat them.

But I asked myself the question: are you hungry right now, and that you need these almonds for sustainability? Or are you eating them for pure pleasure, which is okay. If I decided these are just for pure pleasure, I'm okay with this decision. I'm eating five. I'm not eating a hundred of them? Or was I just eating them with no intention for a very short term immediate gratification?

I thought to myself look, doing this one time, eating a few almonds, that's not a problem to me. But if I continue to make decisions around eating that are unconscious for the rest of my life. If it becomes a habit, and I continue to make these kinds of decisions, would that impact my future self? Do I like the result of that impact?

Do I want to eat any kind of food, not just almonds? I know I'm picking on my chocolate almonds here. But if I'm picking up food and eating it without intention and without conscious awareness, what result does that have for me in the long term? Do I like that long term result? Is that a net positive for me?

In that moment of my decision audit, I actually changed my decision. I didn't need the almonds, and I really didn't even want them. It was just a subconscious urge that I was answering without being conscious of what I was deciding and why. I asked my future self, do we need these almonds right now? I know this sounds so silly, but it works really well.

My future self was like no, we're good. We don't need those. I don't want you to develop a habit of eating subconsciously that I might have to then break a habit of. Because my desire to not have to think about it and not

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want to think about it. This is so small and tedious. Why would I be thinking about almonds or not almonds?

That whole I don't want to deal with this right now, like this isn't important. That little story my brain was offering. It is important because my future self now has a habit of eating unintentionally and subconsciously, which could create a health issue for me or a result that I don't want in my future that I will have to deal with. So my present self wants to be aware now so she doesn't create a problem that I have to solve for myself in the future. Okay.

So I was thinking about this. The process of making decisions, to take action or to not take action, directly impacts the results that we create for ourselves in all areas of our lives. Of course, this podcast is about your career, your profession in school leadership, but I just offer it that it impacts everything. Your physical wellness, your mental wellness, your emotional wellness, and the results that you want to experience in your life as a school leader and otherwise.

So I've been thinking about decisions that you have to make on a daily basis. I want to say this. School leaders are in the business of making lots and lots and lots of decisions. We don't even realize how many decisions we're making, and there are times when you have made so many decisions like conscious, intentional decisions that you might feel decision fatigue.

I have a podcast about decision fatigue that I made eons ago at the beginning of this podcast creation. I will look that podcast up and put it in the show notes for you guys. Because it is real. It's a thing. You do feel decision fatigue because when you're making intentional conscious decisions, those decisions require your time, your effort, your energy, your attention, your focus.

But as you go into the decision making process as a school leader, you walk into school, you're making decisions on the way to school. You're

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thinking about what you have to decide, why you have to do it, what has to get done, what's the priority, who you got to talk to, who you've got to deal with, who you've got to call back, who you've got to email, the reports you have to get done, the observations you need to do, the teachers you need to coach.

Your brain is going 100 miles an hour with decision making. What we want to do is an audit of how we're making those decisions so that we can understand our brain's decision making protocol and how it processes decisions. Okay?

Now, making decisions requires you to use your attention and energy and effort. Your brain will not want to do this. It's like a little petulant toddler. It's going to fight against you. But it's important to do this because we don't recognize how many decisions that we're making at a subconscious level without intention.

So this exercise has been very revealing to me personally about my own decision making process that my brain has been taught to use or it's developed on its own, not really sure how it came from. It's probably a mixture of both my own doing and the influence of my external world around me, but it does slip into a very habitual decision making process routine based on what my brain wants and how badly it wants it.

There's some times where, like the almonds, it was like I could scoop them up and eat them, no huge consequence, but I also didn't really want them. I didn't really need them. So that kind of a thing. Your brain might really want something. I've seen this happen when you talk about addictions. I'm not an addiction specialist, but I have been studying addiction. I have been looking into it because there are family members that are experiencing addiction. I'm fascinated by the brain and addiction and the connection to all of that.

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But anyway, my point is that when your brain or your body wants something so severely, it actually steers your decision making process off course in terms of how you might want to make decisions and the process you might want to make decisions. So that immediate gratification can be really intense and really hard to bring up to a conscious level where you're making decisions for your future or for your goals, for your desires, and the experience you want to have. I just wanted to point that out.

So some decisions, your brain just kind of wants it, and you can redirect easily. Some decisions your brain is really set on making, and it feels like you're making decisions against your will because it can be so convincing in that moment that the decision you're making is a very good decision, and that no other decision matters right now when it really wants something.

So the exercise I'm asking you to do, it's not about changing your mind or changing the process. This first step is simply about creating awareness in your own decision making process just to give you some idea of how your brain makes decisions, and why it's making business decisions, and the thoughts and the emotions behind those decisions.

So back to the almonds, right? That immediate gratification that would come with being able to give myself permission to eat the almonds, or even just eating them subconsciously, putting them in your mouth right then and there, the brain gets that little bit of sweet, that little bit of treat, that reward that gives the brain the dopamine hit that it's looking for. When you make the decision, number one, you create awareness around that decision.

You can intentionally pause just for a moment to ask yourself hey, sweet girl, sweet boy, what is driving this decision right now? What emotion am I feeling? What am I thinking? What you'll find is that some of your decisions are not what you would make if you were making them with intention, if you were making them from your future self, your most empowered self. You might make a different decision with greater awareness.

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I just want to point this out because you're going along all day. You're chugging along, making tons of decisions. Some of them are created with awareness and intention, and some of them are not. We're not trying to change every decision you make. We're not even asking your brain to give up some of its pleasures or to have no immediate gratification. That's not a problem. It's okay to give yourself permission.

What we're doing here is awareness. The decision audit is just an awareness exercise so that we can decide with awareness if we want to let a decision go or we want to change a decision or we just are going to let ourselves have permission to make that decision anyway. This is why it's so critical to do decision audits. How does your brain make decisions? You need to know this, and you want to know this. Because those decisions determine your actions or inactions, and those actions or inactions are what create desired results and undesired results.

So you want to notice the sentences in your mind that your brain is selling you on whatever decision you're making. I want to highlight that we're not talking about reviewing past decisions and placing judgment on your past self on whether they were good decisions or bad decisions. Hey, your past self had no idea the outcomes that those decisions were going to make because it lacked awareness perhaps. Or you can make decisions with the best of intention and still not get the desired result.

So we're not talking about going to your past and beating yourself up and judging yourself, and then coming to the conclusion that I don't know how to make good decisions. I don't have a good decision making protocol. I can't trust my decisions. No, we don't want to do that to ourselves. That is not helpful. The purpose of the decision audit is to be present with what we are making a decision right now?

Like right now, my decision was to record this podcast, even though I had planned a different topic for this particular date and time, but this decision

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to tell you about this felt more important than that content in the moment. I love the decision. I'm aligned to it. I jumped on today as I was going through my own decision audit because I thought to myself this is extremely valuable for school leaders to know they are making decisions all day long.

If I can give them a tool right now here today that will improve the quality of their life as a school leader and increase their awareness to help them make decisions they want to make and to adjust decisions that maybe they weren't aware they were making. If this helps you right here, right now, I have served my purpose as a coach for school leaders. I have contributed value into the world of school leadership. That's why I made this decision. I love that reason. Okay.

So as it relates to school leadership, I want you to think about the actions that you either take or do not take on a regular basis, your actions and inactions. Ask yourself, as you are in the action, in the moment of being in that action, ask yourself why did I decide to do this right now? What thoughts and emotions? What am I feeling? How am I thinking? What's driving these decisions? Where is my attention flowing?

I noticed myself in the middle of writing this podcast, there was some activity outside of my kitchen window down on the street. I live in the middle of a downtown metropolitan area, and I saw some activity happening down there. Without realizing it, I had jumped up, and I was snooping to see what was going on. Again, a decision audit came up and I was like oh, I just decided to jump out of my chair and go snoop on what was going on outside. What made that decision?

Truly, it was just curiosity. What's happening? Is everything okay? Because it looked like there was a tree down, and there were people out there. We've had a lot of downed trees. Was that going to impact power? Like, I was very genuinely curious. So, okay. My body reacted out of curiosity. It

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jumped up like a little kid, looking out the window. As soon as I gained awareness, I was like oh okay. My brain looked outside. It was oh tree is down. People are fixing it. It's been handled. I'm safe. Everything's okay. I can go back to focusing.

So where does your attention flow? What distracts you? You might ask yourself wait a minute, how did I just end up on social media when I said I was gonna finish writing up teacher observations? What just happened here? It might be you know what? I don't like doing teacher observation write ups. So, of course, my brain made a decision to jump on social media because that's way more fun. It's way more engaging. It's way less work.

So you're not going to judge yourself harshly. You're just going to notice and create awareness. Why am I sitting in my office right now? Why am I not in classrooms? Or why am I in classrooms, not in my office? We're not trying to judge right or wrong here. The process is really just to create awareness.

Here's what you might notice. I want to create a little awareness here. What might happen when you do this decision audit is that it might be a little triggering for you. Because what's going to come up is that you don't always love your reason for the decision as to why you're doing what you're doing, or the reason as to why you're not doing something that you told yourself you wanted to do.

So your brain is going to judge you. It might be harsh on you for making a decision that isn't what you want, or it's not creating a result you desire. Or you're doing something that you don't want to be doing, or you're not doing something you want to be doing. You're going to notice all kinds of misalignment. Not a problem, just creating awareness.

You're also going to notice why of course you're doing what you're doing. It makes total sense that you're avoiding work you don't like and why you're

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spending time doing things you do like instead of something that you don't want to do, even though you know it's going to create a result that you desire. It's just an observation. This is not an exercise of self-deprecation.

It's purely an exercise in self-awareness and being fully open with yourself. It helps you to see that you are in control of your experiences and for creating the results you want. It really empowers you. It's almost scary to see how much power you do have over your decisions and your actions and your results.

That might be off putting at first because it feels like so much responsibility and so much ownership. You'll want to blame yourself anytime your brain makes a decision for immediate pleasure, or if it decides to avoid something that it feels like it's going to be hard or difficult or challenging. Okay?

Notice, though, that in most cases, your decisions are the actual obstacles of what's in the way of being your most empowered version of yourself. Your decisions are really a direct reflection of your thinking. Your thinking is what determines your self-concept as a leader. So try this on for one day. You don't have to do it forever. Try it for a day or two. Ask yourself to audit the decisions you make.

When you do this, as soon as you notice a decision you've made, pause, ask the question, and then just continue on. You don't have to change your decision right away if you don't want to. You can still eat the chocolate almonds. You can make decisions purely out of pleasure and delight. That's okay. You don't have to change anything. You can still decide to not do the write ups. You don't have to do anything differently unless you want to. This is very important. You need to create safety with yourself in order to be able to do the audit in the first place.

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At first you might not be able to assess why you're deciding to do something. There's things that I'm like why am I doing this? I am kind of like I don't know, or I'm not really sure, or this doesn't really even make sense. Or maybe I can only access the emotion of it. That's okay. Play with this. This is just the practice of learning how to pause and ask yourself, and this practice is going to build up the habit of creating decision awareness.

This is going to serve you well. It's going to serve your future so well because there will be decisions you want to be aware of what you're deciding and why you're deciding them because you want to ultimately love the reason behind your decisions and have that decision be in alignment with your goals, with your school vision, with your professional goals, with your personal aspirations. You want to make decisions for your future self so you can enjoy the outcomes of those decisions.

This process will also help you really learn to trust your decisions. I want you to imagine trusting the decisions that you make because you're so in tune with them and you're aware of why you're making the decision you are. This decision audit is going to change the way you approach your life personally and professionally. So please, please give it a try.

Let me know. Let me know how it goes for you. If you're in the Facebook group or you're on Facebook, jump in the Facebook group. Let us know. That Facebook group was built so that you can come in and talk about these things and get support and get cheerleading and to get coaching and to get the camaraderie that you need in order to make decisions that you want and to create awareness around why you're making them. Okay.

You can email me directly. If you're not a Facebook person, that's okay. Just email me directly. Let me know what came up for you. I'd love to know how it goes. I'd love to hear what's working? What's not? What are the obstacles? What decisions are easy? What decisions are hard? What decisions do you want to make, and why are you afraid to make them, or

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why can't you make them? What's stopping you from honoring decisions that you want to make? That kind of a thing.

Look, you're not here on the planet to make perfect decisions. You're here on the planet to be a human, to have a human experience. You're here to learn and to grow and to delight in the gift of life and to evolve yourself. You're not here to get it right all of the time. You're here to love and have fun and learn and grow and make mistakes and fail. All of it, right?

So be kind, be gentle, be forgiving, be loving to yourself. Notice that many of the decisions you make are in an attempt to avoid the self-scolding that we do to ourselves. We try to outrun our own judgment with actions by overworking and people pleasing and exhausting ourselves. You guys know this. You know how it ends. It's not sustainable, and it doesn't work in the long term, and it doesn't help you reach your goals.

I'm going to be talking about this more in the future, but I really want to offer that doing a decision audit is going to create a level of connection and self-understanding and personal development and an intimacy with yourself and your brain. Building a relationship with your mind and how it makes decisions so that you can work in collaboration together so it doesn't feel like you're working against yourself.

It feels like you're working hand in hand together with the same goals on the same team striving for the same success and the same achievements and accomplishment and desired outcomes. I hope this has been helpful. I can't wait to work with you guys. I will talk with you all next week. Take good care. Bye, bye.

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