Ep #277: Thoughts About Data

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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 277.

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 principals. Happy Tuesday. So happy to be here with you today. We're going to talk about data, thoughts about data. Are you ready? I am. Let's go. Let's dive in. Okay. So many principals freak out about data, and I did too. I understand. So I'm going to talk about it.

There's two camps of principals. There are the data driven principals and the data avoidant principals. I was in the data avoidant camp. A lot of my clients are in the data driven camp. I love them because they fascinate me, and I see the value in it. So I have been really selling myself hard on the value of data, and I want to just tell you something.

If you're data avoidant like I am, I don't know why you are data avoidant. I can speculate, but I'm going to share with you why I was data avoidant. I really just think it comes down to the fear of how we will feel when we look at it. I think about data points in all areas of my life.

My financial data, when you look at your bank statements and you look at your bank accounts and you pay your bills, those are all data points, right, in terms of your finances. You look at your retirement funds and your savings and your spending, all of that. All of those data points, those are financial data points that you look at and you have thoughts and feelings about them.

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There are health data points looking at your weight, your blood pressure, your BMI. I don't know all the labels, but like your body mass index. I don't know what people measure, but there's a million different ways to measure your oxygen level, your heart rate, your blood pressure. Data points.

There are data points when it comes to work, right? Most of us focus very intently on the test scores and our benchmarks, our mid-year assessments, our state benchmarks, our state assessments, whatever you call them. All the testing that we do to these children all year long, we focus on that. But there's other types of data. Some of us look at all of that data and get consumed with data and love it. Others of us avoid it.

So for me, I know that data, for me, meant how I would treat myself and what I would think about myself when I looked at the data. I would be self-critical or self-judgmental or really harsh on myself, scold myself if the data didn't reflect the result that I was intending to create or that I wanted to create.

So if you're data avoidant, you're in the right place. If you're data driven, you're also in the right place because I really respect and admire you, and I've really sold myself on the value of data. So here we go. I'm going to tell you what I think the benefits of being data driven are. This is just what I've observed with my clients and just in my own personal and business growth.

I think that when you're data driven, your decisions and actions that you take as a school leader, they're grounded in math and not emotions. It neutralizes them. So when you're looking at the numbers and you're eager to see them and you're curious about them, you drop out of fear and you drop into curiosity.

It becomes much more of a neutral experience than when you're basing looking at data with high emotion. Like that fear of emotion, the fear of

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looking at it, the fear of opening up the state test results, or the fear of jumping on the scale, or the fear of opening your bank account, right? All of that. That is when you're letting emotions drive your actions.

So what I see people who are data driven doing is they're basing their decisions very neutrally and very factually just in the math. I definitely see the benefit of data in terms of it's easier to plan. Last week I talked about planning. It's much easier to plan than just guessing and playing whack a mole about where you're at with your data. It tells you where to focus. It tells you where you're at right now and where you're headed and the gap between the two.

It reminds you also not just of the gap, but the gain. It reminds you of the progress you have made when dot, dot, dot, you insist on looking at the growth as well as the room for improvements. So being data driven can be very uplifting if you're choosing to look at both sides of the data. Not just the bad things, the things that didn't go well, the gaps, the failures, the dips. All of that, very painful. But look at the growth.

So when you're data driven and you look at the growth. Data, data, I'm going to flip back and forth. I tend to say data, but everybody's data. I don't know, whatever. If somebody can school me on that, I guess it's both. Okay? Right? Anyway, looking at your data and identifying what's working just as much as you identify what's not.

I've also noticed with some of my beloved clients that data driven can actually also have a cost associated with it. It can take you down a serious rabbit hole. I'm thinking of one client in particular. He loves data. He's all about the data, but it consumes his time and his energy and his focus. All of a sudden, his other stuff's not done. If you're listening, you know who you are. Love you.

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But data can be detrimental to your brain because you can make it mean everything. You can get so consumed by it. What does this mean? What does that mean? Where did I fail? Where did I go wrong? What should I have done differently? You can make it mean things about the teachers or things about the students, right?

When data is the only priority and you go down the rabbit hole of data, you might actually be using it to buffer you from other types of work. Or you are interpreting that data in a way to prove yourself either good or bad, right or wrong, you did something or you didn't. You can use the data against you. You can use the data to collect evidence to prove your thought true. So if your thought is, we're doing it right. We're doing it well. Your brain's kind of scanning for that data.

If your thought is, where did we go wrong? What haven't we done? I have failed. I'm missing something. Your brain starts to scan for that data. Trust me, you can look at school data for a day, a week, a month, a year and find exactly what you're looking for no matter what you're looking for, right? There's always data to prove your thoughts true.

But what really concerns me and what I coach most principals on is what you make the data mean about yourself. You're making it personal about whether you have the capacity to lead, or whether you're cut out for school leadership, or whether you're good enough to be a school leader, or whether you're missing something, or whether there's even a point to your job.

Maybe your data has been flatlined for a while, and you're making it mean that you're not doing a job, and you're not having an impact. Okay. We also get caught up in the opinions that other people have about your school's data, what other people make it mean about you and your school and your teachers and your community. That can be very painful as well.

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Just notice. If you're a data driven person and you're consumed by data, how does it feel when you're looking at the data? What are you making it mean when you're looking at the data? How are you using the data? Are you using it for your benefit or against you? Are you grounding yourself in neutrality and curiosity and using that data to keep you focused and keep you on track and keep your vision front of mind? Or are you using it to cause harm to yourself, mentally and emotionally? Okay.

Now for my data avoidant principals. Let's talk. We know the cost of not looking at the data because we've been really good at not looking at data. But the cost of not looking at the data, it's the opposite of the data driven, right? It's making guesses and decisions from emotion instead of math. We do what we feel instead of what is on the paper, what is factual, what is neutral. So we make decisions based out of emotion instead of math, which leads to more emotions.

But also this. We just don't know where we're at. We don't know where we're at or where we're going. We can't celebrate the wins. If we don't map and track where we're at and where we're going, we don't know the progress we've made as well as we don't know really where to focus on creating more gains. We can't celebrate the wins and the growth that you've accomplished because we're living in fear of the numbers on the screen.

The other little thing I noticed is that when we don't take ownership and look at the data and make an interpretation for ourselves and value that opinion, what we do is we default, we dismiss it, and we let other people interpret the meaning of the data for us. Because if you're not looking at the data, someone else is. So are you looking at data, or are you letting other people look at it? Are you letting them tell you what the data means, or are you deciding what the data means? Because you can make it mean what you want. It's all nebulous. It's all an opinion anyway.

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But when you avoid the data altogether, there's no way to track those milestones or your progress. There's no way to know exactly what to fix or focus on. You can't speak to the decisions and actions that you take because they're not grounded in the data. You can't speak to the work you've done. When you have to go in front of the school board and they ask you why you decided this plan or this approach or you created this theory. If you don't have data to back it up, it's really hard. You're just like well, I felt like it. Not going to fly, right?

Here's the truth. Why don't we like to look at data? I'll tell you this. There are benefits to not looking at data. In my program, I teach my principals to not over consume data. Because when you over consume, you can get caught up and really create some stories around that data and what it means. When you look at it neutrally and get in and get out, you're not letting those numbers get inside your head and get the best of you. They don't have to mean everything. They don't have to mean anything, but they also don't have to mean everything.

So when you spend less time and you're not over consumed by data, you refuse to let the numbers be the only priority for yourself, your school, your staff. When you do not over consume data, it saves you so much time. I have so many clients who go down those rabbit holes and they spend hours and hours trying to interpret the data. What are they making it mean?

But what happens is time is similar to money. Where you focus on this means you're not focusing on that. You spend your money on this means you can't spend your money on that. Right? It's the same thing. So if you're over here consumed in data all day long and going down rabbit holes, it's going to provide you the opportunity to not work on other things which you might be buffering from. Okay.

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Avoiding data just saves you from the feeling of emotions that come with interpreting data. But here's the thing, data doesn't have to make you feel bad. Our interpretation of what we make the data mean is what feels bad. It's not the data itself. You've got to separate the data from your thoughts about it. So when we're avoiding it, it benefits us because it means we don't have to manage our mind around it. Makes things easier in the moment. Right?

But the net result is not positive if we don't look at data or we're afraid of it. So I want to offer a balanced approach. Decide ahead of time that the data does not define the individual. What I mean by that is your data does not define the student, the individual student, the individual teacher, the individual principal, or even the individual superintendent. The data is not here to define an individual human. It can't do that. There's no way. But yet we give it that kind of power.

What the data defines is the simple current situation or the process we've used or the approach. The data is showing us where we're at now. It talks to the process that we use to get there that created this data, these results, or the approach that we took. Okay, it's not personal. Your brain is going to want to argue this, but I want you to think of it this way. Test scores do not define who you are as a person, as a leader. They do not define your value or your worth as a human or a leader.

Letting your brain make it mean that you're a terrible leader takes your focus away from getting to a solution by going down some rabbit hole of shame and self-judgment. Letting your brain make it mean something about the teachers or students. So you're either going to blame yourself and you're going to go down the blame and shame game for yourself, or you're going to focus on blaming your teachers or your students or your districts.

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But when you do that, it takes you away from problem solving, and you end up going down the rabbit hole of blame and criticism. Making it mean something about your boss or your district takes away the power you have to make the adjustments you need and takes you down the rabbit hole of disempowerment and lack of agency.

So here's what you can do. Decide to focus on one aspect of the data. Try to constrain your data intake because it can be very overwhelming, and you can get by trying to interpret every piece of data you receive. So decide before you even open it up. Prioritize one aspect. What are you going to look at for that day? Just stay in that lane. Prioritize and constrain.

As you're interpreting that data, start with what's working. I know it sounds cliche. Celebrate first, right? Start with what's working. But if you only focus on what's not working and what needs fixing, you are never going to feel accomplished. You're not going to celebrate, and you will not inspire other people into achieving at higher levels.

Because here's why. When you only focus on what's not working versus what did work, nobody wants to work for a person who's only looking at what didn't work. Who wants to work hard and put in tons of effort only to have their accomplishments be dismissed? Think about that. Don't dismiss the wins.

Focus on the accomplishments and celebrate them. That is what inspires people to want to work harder and go to higher levels. Nobody wants to put in tons of effort and tons of time and grit and blood, sweat and tears only to have those accomplishments dismissed, not acknowledged, and not celebrated.

I also want to offer this. There is always progress, always, even in the failures. Because the progress that occurs when you fail is called learning.

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That is what we are in the business of. We're here to learn. Learning requires failure. There's no data that's not a win because the data either shows what we've learned or what we're in the process of learning. There are no other options. We've either learned it or we're learning it.

For data that slips or regresses because I know people are like well, what about the data that goes backwards? That's a failure. That's not learning. It is learning. When something slips, that's curious. I wonder why. Let's learn. Let's figure out why we slipped or why we saw regression. Do you know developmentally that is normal?

I have a friend with a baby, and she's talking about sleep regression. Even developmental regressions, like kids do things and then they don't do them, and then they do them. Then they get so good at it, they do it. But there's this back and forth. Learning is like that. There are regressions that happen. It's a normal developmental part of the process.

So if we can acknowledge that slips and regressions are normal, we're not going to make them mean something has gone terribly wrong. So just to let you know, data means what you make it mean. That's its only value. It's numbers on a screen. It's just math. Its interpretation is subjective, and it's all relative.

I was thinking about this the other day. If I had 80% proficiency at my school, I would have been so amazed and so happy and so proud and felt so accomplished because we were hovering around, I think at the top of our game, we did get into the 70s. But if you were in the went up to the 80s, you're amazed at your data, you feel thrilled about it. But 80% proficient will feel terrible if you were at 90%, right?

So at the end of the day, it's all relative. 80% proficient, 90% proficient, 50% proficient, all relative. If you're at 50% proficient at your school and you're

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feeling terrible about it and you're down on yourself, think about a school who's at 20%. You have half of your kids performing. That's amazing. Celebrate the miracle of that. If you're at 60, 70%, celebrate that. That's amazing. But don't give data more power than it deserves. You decide what you make it mean. You look for the miracles, you look for the value, you look for the highlights, the celebrations.

The last thing I want to offer is that when you are going to look at data, this is more tactical, look at your calendar, put it on the calendar, but create a time limit. So for my data driven people who love to consume data, you have to constrain yourself. You only are allowed to look at it for so long. You look at it, you acknowledge the success, you acknowledge what you've learned, you create a theory for next steps, and then you let it go and you move on. That's it.

So whether you're data driven or data avoidant isn't a problem. You want to acknowledge what end of the spectrum you tend to fall on with data, and then you want to notice your thoughts around it and coach yourself on the thoughts. You want to try and get to neutral. Data is neutral. It's not everything and it's not nothing. It's simply numbers on a screen to help you make decisions and take action that you believe are the next best step for you, your students, and your staff. Have an amazing week. Love you guys. Talk to you soon. Take good care. Bye.

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