

Ep #327: Knowing Your Boundaries



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

Ep #327: Knowing Your Boundaries

Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 327.

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. Happy April. Can you believe it? You guys are flying through the school year. I'm so proud of you. I'm so happy for you. I know it's testing season. That's okay. We're just going to let it be testing season. I want you to trust in your heart you've done all you could. Your students are amazing. Your teachers are wonderful.

The test will be the test. It's one little moment in time. There have been so many amazing things going on at your school. So please focus on what is working, what has been accomplished, all the work you've done, celebrate that effort, celebrate the celebrations. Really look at this time of year as an accomplishment in and of itself. Because you're here in April. You've got two months to go. You are doing an incredible job.

So with that, I'm going to switch gears a little bit. I'm going to talk to you about knowing your boundaries. So early on in the podcast, very early on, I taught what a boundary was and how to know when it's been violated and what to do about it. I teach that in the Empowered Principal® Collaborative. I teach that with my one on one clients, but it came up again with a recent client.

One, I want to re invite you into the conversation about boundaries. But I really want to emphasize and add on to my prior work about knowing your boundaries and understanding them. Why sometimes it might feel like you don't even know your boundaries. It might feel cloudy or confusing, or you

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might feel very unsure of yourself. I'm going to talk about that. It came up with a client. This is a very valuable conversation.

So tune in, listen up, share this with a colleague because I think this is happening more than we realize. It came to my attention today. I jumped right on the podcast to record this in real time as I'm thinking about it, experiencing it, and I want to share it with you so that it can help anybody out there who feels like they're unsure or confused about their boundaries. Okay.

So let me just start with the definition, my definition of a boundary, right? I believe a boundary is something that you set for yourself. Nobody else can tell you your boundaries. Nobody else can tell you what your boundaries are or not are. When you are aligned, you know your boundaries, you understand them, you're clear about them, you can articulate them. When you know them, then you can identify when they have been crossed or violated, okay?

A boundary is not a way that we control other people's behavior. I know when I was younger like people would say I'm going to set a boundary with you. If you do this then I'm going to do this, or if you do that, I'm going to make you do this or you can't have this or you can't do that. It felt like they were trying to set a boundary.

Parents do this to their kids too, by the way. But what we do is we say if you behave in a certain way, a way that I don't like, then you can't do this or you can't do that or you can't have this. The boundary becomes projected onto the other person as a way of trying to get them to behave in the way we want them to behave.

Now, when you're parenting I understand that children have behaviors, and you have to set boundaries with them and for them because they're not able to do it themselves. They're not able to self-regulate and set

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boundaries for themselves. Right? But this is a boundary I'm talking about where you feel a personal violation or a personal line has been crossed for you.

Only you get to decide your boundaries. Nobody, and I mean nobody, not your partner, your spouse, your best friend, your boss, the person driving next to you, nobody gets to tell you your boundaries. I want to empower you and tell you directly that only you know your boundaries. I think of boundaries, in terms of my personal boundaries, I think of them like a home.

Your home is a boundary. It's a physical boundary, right? You have a property boundary. This is my home. This is the property line upon which my home sits. This space, there is a boundary around it where only people that I invite into my space are allowed. People who are not invited into my space, that is considered a boundary violation. You're trespassing. Right? With that comes consequences. Okay.

So just like your home has a property boundary, your body and your emotions and your mental state also have boundaries. Our personal boundaries feel a little more challenging to articulate because we don't always know them very clearly until they've been violated. We didn't realize it was a boundary until we're like hey, that is not okay. Right? Sometimes the violation has to occur before we get very clear and articulate about what we will and will not tolerate. Okay.

So another reason our personal boundaries are more challenging is because other people cannot see them. They don't know what our boundaries are until we establish them. We can't establish them and articulate them until we know them. Therefore, it's really important to know your own boundaries so that you can articulate them. I'm going to talk about how to know them in just a minute.

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But I want to talk about what a boundary is in my world, in the Empowered Principal® world, and how you can set boundaries for yourself. Then I'm going to talk about what happens when you don't feel you know them. So if you're a person who's very clear and articulate on what your boundaries are, I'm going to share with you what a boundary is, what a boundary isn't, what a violation is, isn't, and how to set boundaries, okay.

But for those of you who feel that you don't know your boundaries, I'm going to save that for last. Then you can go back. But what I want to offer is that a boundary includes a request that you make of someone. You invite them to change a certain behavior. But the consequence, and this is the key part, the consequence of what you will do to self-protect is in your hands if they violate the boundary again.

So, for example, here's one that's pretty benign. But many of us are working in our offices. We have deadlines to meet. We have teacher observations to write up or site plans or meetings. Our office is there for a reason. Oftentimes, we feel obligated to have an open door policy. So we leave our door open or we allow people to come in and interrupt us all of the time.

But when you do that, you might feel irritated or agitated that you're not getting your things done. Or you're flustered, and you feel negative emotion about it, but you keep doing it because you feel the obligation. But the net result is that you don't get your work done during the work day. Now you have to do it in the night or do it over the weekend or get up early. You're frustrated by that.

So what you can do to set a boundary is you're going to first identify that the boundary request, first of all, the violation happens first. You don't tell everybody this is my boundary. What you do is you can say to people, right, I'm going to have office hours where I'm working on the things I need to complete. If my door is closed, you'll know that I'm working on something

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where I cannot be interrupted. If my door is open and I'm in my office, that is the indication upon which you are free to come on in and invite a conversation.

You can tell people that ahead of time, but you don't have to. What you can do is when your door is open and they're working, they're interrupting you, and you're irritated and you're like what is going on? It's like oh, my job is to establish my boundary for myself with myself. I am going to feel the discomfort of closing my door when I need distraction free focus and attention on a project.

So you start closing your door. You're typing away and somebody knocks. They open the door say, "Hey, you got a minute?" That is the moment upon which it's your responsibility to say hey, I actually don't have a minute. When my door is closed, that means I'm working on a project, and I can't be interrupted. If this is an emergency, set an appointment with the secretary. If it's 911, yes, I'm available. But if a conversation can wait, I need it to wait because I have a deadline to meet. Okay.

Healthy boundaries are what you will do, what action you will take, like closing the door, in response to an interruption. Or a healthy boundary is saying I don't actually have a minute right now, but let's schedule another time, schedule with the secretary a time to meet with me. I'll be happy to be fully attentive and listen to what you need to talk with me about, okay. That is when you set a boundary. It's what you're going to do.

Another example of a boundary would be if you continue to knock on my door while I'm working, I am not going to answer it I'm going to leave the door unanswered because I need to focus. That would be another example. You might say to somebody like hey, when my door is closed, that means it's go time for me. If it's a true emergency, you tell the secretary. She's going to phone it in. I'm going to come out in a heartbeat. But if it's this I need to tell you something quickly.

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If it's an interruption that can be put off, then I'm going to ask you to hold tight. If you knock on my door, I'm going to know that the knock means somebody's trying to talk to me but it's not an emergency. So I'm not going to answer the door. So that would be another way you might handle that. Okay, you get to decide what your boundary looks like, feels like.

I'll tell you this it does not feel comfortable to set boundaries. It feels very uncomfortable. It just does. Why? Because we've been conditioned to not turn people away. We've been conditioned to not set boundaries, particularly as women. We have been conditioned to be open door and to be nice to everybody and to take care of everybody else first. It's going to feel off when you set a boundary. I just want to warn you ahead of time.

But healthy boundaries are all about promoting self-responsibility and empowerment, to step into your personal power. When you do this, it doesn't distract or take away from your relationships at work. It enhances them. Because your teachers want to know your boundaries so that they can respect them. Most people do.

But it's easier to respect the boundary when you know what the boundary is, and they know what the boundary is. Now you've articulated it and communicated it and established it. So people just know. She doesn't answer her door when the door is closed, or she doesn't check email after 5:00 p.m. Or I can expect an email response until 24 hours.

Whatever boundaries you want to create that establish a healthy and empowered version of your school leadership experience is going to feel uncomfortable at first, but it actually is a win-win. People want to know what to expect from you. They don't want to violate your boundaries, most of them. They really want to honor that. But most of the time, they just don't know. So the reason that it's a problem is we don't know our boundaries. We don't get clear with ourselves about what feels like a boundary and what doesn't. Then we're not able to articulate them. Okay.

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So if your boundaries are unknown and unarticulateable, that's a word. If your boundaries are weak, they're not established. They're going to promote, potentially, emotional, childlike behaviors in others. People are going to tantrum when your door is closed. Why is her door closed? She never comes out. What is she doing? Like, must be nice to be able to close your door and just get some work done, right? They're going to have tantrums.

They might retaliate or hold grudges, and it's just going to distance us from people. So when the boundaries are weak, they can feel like a codependent situation going on where you don't want to be available 24/7 but you feel you have to. They want you to be available 24/7, and they will take clear advantage of it not with intent to harm you or to make you feel frustrated. They just want you when they want you.

That's emotional immaturity when people don't respect your boundaries, but it's also emotional immaturity on our part when we aren't taking a moment to go inward and articulate and acknowledge and identify our boundaries so that we can communicate them to the people that we're leading. Okay.

So when you're setting a boundary, you first must be clear yourself on the personal boundaries. A really easy one, I hope all of you have this boundary. If not, you might want to adopt it. I do not allow other people to physically hurt me. That's a very clear boundary. If somebody comes at you, especially an adult. If an adult comes at you physically, that's called an assault. It's against the law. So it's a very clear boundary. We know it's backed up by the law.

But children can do it too. When they're unregulated, kids can hit you. You can say to them I don't allow people to hurt me. You are not allowed to hurt me. That's a clear boundary. That's probably a boundary most of you can connect with and relate to and grab on to. It's a very clear boundary.

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You might also have a boundary as a school leader, I don't allow parents to scream in my face. When they're getting emotional and you're in a meeting and they start screaming or they get irrational, or they're behaving in a way that doesn't feel mentally, emotionally, physically safe in that room. I'm not going to allow that kind of behavior in a meeting.

If it should occur, it happens because we're humans, and sometimes we lose ourselves emotionally. We're going to pause the meeting and resume it when everyone is calm and ready to articulate themselves in a mature, respectful manner. That is a boundary.

So you have to get clear on those boundaries. I get it. There's some times you just don't even know you have to have a boundary until it's been violated. Now we're like, okay, clearly that was a problem. I need to establish a boundary on this. Okay.

The other thing I want to talk about when setting boundaries is you only need to communicate the boundaries when someone has violated the boundary. You don't have to send out a list of these are my boundaries as a school leader. Like you don't walk up to a teacher and say hey, if you hit me, I don't allow that. I'm going to walk away from you if you hit me. Unless you need to say that. But for most of the time, you don't have to send out a list of boundaries. But as soon as a boundary has been violated, you articulate it and establish your personal safety immediately. Okay.

So there's two steps to setting a boundary. There's the request and then there's the consequence. Step one is the request. You ask somebody to stop doing something that is infringing on your property, whether that's physical property or physical space, your emotional space, your mental space.

When you have a boundary and you can feel it coming, you feel like it's too much, it's crossed a line, you request that they stop doing it. I need you to

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stop yelling. Please sit down. Let's have a discussion. Let's take a minute. Everybody take a deep breath. Let's take a one minute recess and come back to this conversation.

You give yourself the opportunity to articulate the boundary and allow them the grace to honor it. We have to give them the opportunity to honor our boundary request. So we give the boundary hey, our voices are getting a little loud. I feel like emotions are getting a little heated. We want to sit down. We want to have a meaningful and respectful conversation. So I'm going to ask everybody to take a deep breath, maybe take a five minute break, get a glass of water, and let's resume this meeting respectfully.

If we can't do that, if we're too emotionally attached right now or too emotionally invested, that's okay. What we'll do is we'll simply pause the meeting, and we'll reschedule for a time when we're ready to come back and have the conversation. So the first one's the request. The step two is the consequence. It's going to tell the person what you will do if he or she does not comply with the request.

Now, here's why I feel it can be challenging to know your boundaries. This is for when you feel like I don't know what my boundaries are. I feel like it kind of lost my boundaries. Like I'm not even really sure if you're in that gray zone. I'm noticing this with principals more and more and more, which is why I'm bringing it to the podcast.

It can feel challenging to know and articulate your boundaries when they have been violated and when you have been conditioned to disregard your boundaries by other people, especially when this occurs over time as a pattern. There is a pattern of somebody saying dismissing a boundary you have or dismissing an emotion you're feeling or dismissing a question you have or a conversation you want to hold or a thought that you want to share, an idea you want to express.

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When a pattern of behavior is occurring over the course of time where you're dismissed or your feelings aren't validated or honored or acknowledged or a question is like thrown back in your face or it's seen as a threat. When that type of behavior is happening, you can start to feel unsure about what constitutes a boundary.

Now, sometimes we just feel confused about a boundary, and we're not sure what our boundaries are. Sometimes that confusion is coming from within. But what I am noticing, and I want you to pay special attention to this, there are times where people in positions of authority ask you repeatedly to just take care of business. You were hired to do a job. Don't question, just do. Be a good soldier, be a good student, be a good person, do the right thing, do what you're being asked to do. No questions asked.

You feel off. Something feels off or it doesn't feel aligned and you can't put your finger on it. But because it's been happening over and over and over again, you actually start to question yourself. Am I crazy? Is this really happening? Am I just off? Is it me? Am I doing this wrong? Am I asking the wrong things? Am I speaking up too much? Am I being aggressive? Am I overcomplicating things? When you start to doubt and question yourself, it may be an indication that you have been dismissed multiple times over a series of times. Okay.

So here's what I'm going to offer. This is the simplest way to self-identify and get back in tune with what your boundaries are. Remember, at the beginning, I said the only person who knows your boundaries is you. If you don't know them, that's going to create confusion for you, and those you lead. So here is the simplest way to know your boundaries and to reconnect with them and tune back in. It's very simple.

The way you do this is based on how you feel. Your body has a very intricate guiding system, an intricate GPS system, that tells you this feels good. It's an alignment. Or this does not feel good. This is out of alignment.

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When somebody, anybody, says or does something or fails to say or do something, or they request something of you, or they behave in a certain way, you will know if it violates a boundary for you by the way you feel when it happens. Your emotions are the guide to your boundaries.

Some are very clear, right? Don't go down that dark alley. That is a boundary. That feels unsafe, physically, mentally, of all of it, mentally, emotionally. That does not feel safe. I'm honoring that boundary. My body, my intuition, my gut is telling me no. Honor that, right?

But there are other things at work where we get this same feeling. Like this doesn't feel right or this doesn't seem right or this doesn't sound right. Somebody's telling you yes, it is. Go ahead and do it. I told you to do it. Don't question. Just ask, go. These are your marching orders.

But when you feel that pit of your stomach or something feels off, tightness chest, there's a lot of ways that shows up in your body. If it doesn't feel right, you might want to check in with yourself as to why. Something might feel like slightly off like you can't put your finger on it. It's just a little bit not right. Or it might be a more intense response in the body. It might be very eye catching. It might be very consuming. You might not be able to avoid the emotion because it's so intense. It's so big. It's like whoa. It feels like a big woom. That does not feel good. Okay.

That is the simplest way to know when a boundary has been violated. It's really the only way to know. When somebody does something and you have that visceral reaction, that emotional reaction, or if it even just like something doesn't feel off, and it's like little drips of this doesn't feel right. That doesn't feel right. This keeps happening over and over again. Is it me? Is it them? What's going on? That is an indication that it's time to turn inward and ask yourself what am I feeling right now? And why?

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What I told my client was this. I want you to spend this week reconnecting with yourself. We are getting lost as school principals. We are forgetting to be in tune and be connected with who we are as humans. We're letting go and dismissing that and disconnecting from our emotional guidance system, our boundary system, and we're letting other people tell us what to think, how to feel, how to act, what to believe, what not to believe, what to do, what not to do. It's astounding to me how easily it is to fall into that.

I believe there's a lot more going on here. Like this is probably a societal conditioning system that's occurring, like the relationship between boss and employee, the relationship between men and women, the relationship between those in power and those not in power. There's a lot going on here.

But for the purpose of this podcast, I invite you to spend this coming week reconnecting with yourself. Ask yourself these questions. How do I feel? How am I feeling right now, and why? Let yourself tell the truth. Your brain might not want to be honest with you because you've been told not to be honest with you. You've been told not to ask the questions.

You've been told not to criticize or question or contemplate or kind of poke holes or investigate. You've been told to just take on somebody else's thoughts, feelings, opinions, actions, goals, and just put them on as your own without question.

I invite you to question how are you feeling, and why? Let yourself be honest. Let it flow out of you. Your body is dying to tell you. Here's how I feel. Here's why I feel this way. Don't dismiss it for another day. Please honor it, validate it, acknowledge it, respect it. How do you want to feel?

Question number two. So question number one is, how am I currently feeling, and why? Question number two, how do you want to feel? How do you want to feel? We're so used to feeling the way we don't want to feel

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that we forget to ask ourselves how I want to feel. Emotions are everything. It's your boundary compass. You need to be able to understand your emotions, where they're coming from, and why they're coming up so that you can know your boundaries.

What feels good for you? What are the things that feel good? Those are when you know you're in alignment with your values. What do you want to experience? What do you want to create in this lifetime? What matters to you, and why? Then what doesn't feel good? What experiences do you not want to have? Then what do you know for certain is a no for you?

Let yourself have the floor. You are the only person who can articulate, identify, and know your boundaries. But if you don't ask yourself what they are, you're never going to know. That is going to end up in a lifetime of being a doormat or letting other people make the shots for you and the calls for you. You won't be the creator of your life. You will not be writing the script of your experience professionally and personally.

Other people will attach to you and expect you to behave the way they want you to. Do not lose yourself in this job. That is not the goal of being in this position. That's not why you signed up. You did not sign up to lose your boundaries, to lose yourself, and to let other people be the creator of your life experience. Okay.

I hope this has been helpful. If you want more of this, please consider joining EPC for the upcoming fall season. We start in September. We go through the entire year. You can get on a waitlist. In the meantime, if you want support, you can always reach out. We can coach one on one until we get you into the next EPC group. So have an amazing week. Take excellent care of yourself. Please do this exercise. If you want more support, more information, do not hesitate to reach out. I love you all so much, and here's to knowing your boundaries.

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Thanks for listening to this episode of *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*. If you enjoyed this episode and want to learn more, please visit angelakellycoaching.com where you can sign up for weekly updates and learn more about the tools that will help you become an emotionally fit school leader.