

# Ep #337: From Chaos to Calm: Practical Tips for Overwhelmed School Leaders



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

## **Ep #337: From Chaos to Calm: Practical Tips for Overwhelmed School Leaders**

Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 337.

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. Welcome to the podcast. Welcome to June. Some of you are near the end, some of you are past the finish line, and some of you are still sprinting. My heart goes out to all of you. Whether you're done and you're in reflection mode, whether you are almost there and celebrating the growth and all of the excitement and the wins that you've accomplished and your team has accomplished this year, or if you're still sprinting towards that finish line.

I know, especially in the East Coast, I know New York goes a little bit later towards the end of June. So this podcast is exceptionally appropriate if you are still in the sprint, or if you're in planning mode and feeling overwhelmed.

So I had a client today who's normally pretty composed. She has worked with me for over a year. She's in her second year coaching with me one on one, and she applies the tools to her day, to her week, to her year, to her empowerment, to her profession, to her personal life. This is a coaching student who takes coaching seriously. She understands the value of it. She applies it. She leverages it and really does the work.

Still, and even so, she's a human on the planet and came to her call feeling really overwhelmed. Because here's the truth about school leadership. You can coach on this thought, and I know it's a thought that I'm offering you, but I like to say let's just call it true. Let's call it a fact of life.

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There is always too much to do and not enough time in school leadership. What I mean by that is there is always a task on the menu, on the to-do list. There's always a project, an event, a conversation, paperwork, emails, meetings, IEPs, hiring, firing, events on your campus. There's always instructional coaching, grades, testing. There's never a dull moment on a campus. There's always more that can be done than there is time and energy to do them.

So instead of trying to coach your brain into there's plenty of time. I don't have anything to do. Things are great. If you cannot get yourself into a place of ease and contentment with feeling sufficient with time, this podcast is for you. I'm going to talk about what to do when there's simply a lot of demands happening at once, a lot of deadlines all coming at you. People are in high need.

There's needy times of the year. This is one of them, the end of the year. People are worn thin. Kids' behaviors are maybe spiking a little bit. Teachers are worn out. Everybody's just a little bit on edge, a little bit tired, ready for the summer, but not quite yet there. They're coming to you to hold all of the emotional space for them, for you to solve the problems, for you to get things done ASAP. The district's asking you we need this plan and that plan and these observations and all of this stuff needs to be done all at this one time.

I'm going to tell you how I walked my client through this to show you the power of weekly coaching calls. That is why I've set this up this way. There is no human, to my knowledge, on the planet who at some point doesn't hit the wall of overwhelm and get sucked into the overwhelm cycle.

It's going to happen. Falling into a cycle of overwhelm is supposed to happen. It's a part of the experience. So when you fall into one, thinking that you shouldn't, first of all, creates a lot of pain and suffering. If you are in an overwhelm cycle and you're like I know I should be in control or on top of this, but I'm in an overwhelm cycle. I can see that I'm in overwhelm. I

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don't know how to get out. It just feels like too much. That's normal. Normalize that. Just say, oh, I'm in a chapter of imbalance. I'm in a chapter of overwhelm. This happens.

Here's how you get out of the overwhelm cycle. First of all, you acknowledge that you're in one. Don't fight it. Don't shame yourself for it. Don't judge yourself for having fallen into an overwhelm cycle. Don't think that it shouldn't be happening. All of those thoughts create more pain than necessary. Just acknowledge it. Allow yourself to be in the overwhelm cycle. It's a part of the school leadership experience. It's a part of the human experience on this planet, guys. That's just the way it goes.

If we allow it, it actually feels less intense than if we're mad that we're in it or resistant that we're in it or we're trying to rush out of it or we're judging ourselves for it or shaming ourselves for being in it. Okay. So the first step towards all of this is acknowledging, you know what? I'm just feeling overwhelmed. I'm going to acknowledge my feelings. I'm going to allow them to be here. No judgment. We're going to let it be present.

I've said in prior podcasts, all emotions are valid. All emotions have a purpose. All emotions are here for a reason. They don't just show up randomly. When overwhelm shows up in your body, in your job, in your life, and you're feeling overwhelmed, there is a message that's coming from your body, your compass, up to your brain.

Because the brain is trying to run the show with the to-do list and the task mastering and the scheduling and the bossing, all of that stuff when we're trying to be in energy boss mode, we're trying to be productive. Getting those to-do lists, getting the three month plan underway, feeling productive, being on schedule, all of that stuff, that's boss energy.

Then there's times where the body comes up and says I just want to feel. I need to feel the overwhelm. I need you to know I can only sustain this amount of productivity and this amount of speed in work and the tasking

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that you're asking me to do for so long. Acknowledge the feelings, let them be there.

When you take a moment to take a breath and sit down with the overwhelm, you and overwhelm are going to have a little conversation.

You're going to talk to the overwhelm. What's coming up? Why are you feeling this way? Is there anything I need to know? Any wisdom, any insight, any information?

Usually, if you give it enough time and space, it will have insight for you. There will be some wisdom it shares. There will be a reason you're feeling overwhelmed. Not that you can change the reason, we're just acknowledging and validating the reason.

So in this case, my client just had a ton of deadlines that were kind of piling up on one another, a lot of meetings that were pulling her away from time that she could be spending getting her work done, tasks that were on top of the above and beyond normal day, week of the school year. Behaviors are ramping up a little bit. It's spring and spring fever hits. Full moons are around. This week that I'm recording this is the pink moon. The pink full moon is out. So you never know what's getting the kids riled up, but we want to keep all of that in mind.

We want to notice that we're just a human on the planet doing the best job we can. We're feeling a little overwhelmed because there are a lot of deadlines. There are a lot of behaviors. There's so many angry parents. There's conversations to be had with staffing for this year into next year. There's a lot. It's a lot. We're not going to say that there isn't, okay? We're not going to fight the brain on arguing that there's not a lot going on. We're just going to acknowledge it and be in the overwhelm.

Once we acknowledge it, then we can get ourselves into a space of permission, into allowing ourselves to experience the overwhelm, to acknowledge the overwhelm, and to ask ourselves why. Because the detail

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of the overwhelm comes down into why am I so overwhelmed? What's all that I need?

Once we realize why we're stressed, and I'm going to share specifically why this client was stressed because there's a message in it for her, for you, for all. This client has in particular been working on setting work boundaries and having a set of standards around the amount of hours that she works during the week, as all of you should. When you join EPC, I teach you how.

Now, I teach you a process for creating boundaries around your work hours so that you have energy and a life outside of work because you're a human that deserves that. When you're feeling super overwhelmed, and there's a lot of deadlines that are stacking on top of one another, perhaps the most loving thing you can do for yourself is to give yourself permission to stretch your boundaries around your work hours.

It might feel better to say I'm going to work late, or I'm going to work in the evening this week, or I'm going to come in early and just get a few hours knocked out on Saturday morning, bright and early, and then have the rest of the weekend to myself because that's what feels best for me right now.

Your boundaries that you create for yourself, the standards upon which you live your life, they're yours, which means you can create flexibility. I consider boundaries that we create, especially for ourselves, like work boundaries, time around how much time we're going to work.

It's like a rubber band. We can flex them when we need to. When it feels best to flex your hours and to say you know what? I'm going to give myself permission to work in the evenings or to work on the weekend because it feels better to me to hammer this stuff out and just knock it out and get it done than to think about and try to cram it into my eight to five day. It might not work that well. Or your seven to five day, however long you're working.

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Now, if it doesn't feel better, if it feels worse for you to work nights or weekends, then you can work with yourself on combining, batching, delegating, being more efficient within the eight to ten hours you're at work.

But for this client, it was about giving herself permission to expand and stretch those work boundaries for a limited amount of time. Just for this little round, we're not always giving permission and where work takes over the schedule. We're saying what feels best for me, what feels like self-love for me this week is to stretch those boundaries, okay? Those boundaries can always go back, but you may find that you need to stretch them.

So, once you've given yourself permission like ah, this is why I'm so overwhelmed. Here are all the reasons, here are all the thoughts, here's how I'm feeling, I'm acknowledging it, I'm allowing it, I'm validating it. The overwhelms coming in. She gets to have a voice, or he gets to have a voice, or they get to have a voice about what's going on here and what they think is best, okay?

Now, emotionally, energetically, you're calmer. Then what you can do is go into a brain drain. Now, we get into the tactical part where we write everything down. Your brain has your to-do list on loop. It's one list that repeats itself on repeat over and over and over. So, when it stays in the brain, or in the mind, in the body. It feels like it's ten miles long because it's looping. The same tasks are looping over and over and over, creating the overwhelm, building up steam, creating that negative intensity, that negative energy that's inside of you that feels like it's going to burst because you're so overwhelmed.

Once you acknowledge it and just say yes, I'm overwhelmed, I'm going to give myself permission to feel it, but I'm also going to give myself permission to tackle it. Now we do a brain drain, and you write down. You just go back to the three-month plan, you write it all down, you batch it, you put it into buckets.

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So, in this case, we had some teacher observations to complete. We had some staffing conversations to be had. We had some investigations to wrap up and communicate with students, staff, and parents. We had some makeup testing to-do, behavior management, and then summer school. Once we batched it, I think we got it down to five buckets.

Then we broke it up and we said okay, what are things that have to be done within the school day? You know conversations when you're interacting with people, things that can't be done outside of the school day. Write all those down. Then we wrote down what are all the things to do that can be done outside of school? Emails, paperwork, right, calendaring, planning, scheduling. There's a lot you can do outside of the work hours that don't require you to be in a meeting or in a conversation or directly on your campus to complete, okay?

Then, once we have that figured all out then you can start to break it down and prioritize what absolutely needs to be done today, what absolutely needs to be done by tomorrow, what needs to be done by the end of the week, and what needs to be prepared for next week. You break it down, and you prioritize it. You triage it. Then once it's triaged, it just goes on the calendar.

Now that big overwhelming to-do list doesn't feel so overwhelming. It's gone outside of the brain and the body onto paper and then eventually onto your calendar. When each task has an assigned date, time, and duration, your brain can go to ease. It doesn't have to hold on to that to-do list anymore because it's been given an assignment. There has been time and energy allocated to that task. So your brain's like oh, I know exactly what I'm doing when I'm doing it.

This process sounds very simple, but it is what helps you shift from feeling overwhelmed to the point of not being able to function, not being able to get yourself to slow down and schedule into acknowledging the feelings, letting



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it be there, asking it what it needs to share with you, why are you overwhelmed? Of course you're overwhelmed. We validate it.

Then that gives us enough space to then go tactical and get into, let's do a brain drain, let's get it all out, let's prioritize it, let's batch it, separate it into buckets, decide what can be done here, what can be done outside of the day, give ourselves permission to do that work outside of the day, and look at the benefit of this planning.

Because how you're going to feel at the end of the week when you've knocked this stuff out, your weekend is going to feel so much better, even if you have to sneak in. Once in a while, I would go in from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. Not much was happening at the house. Everybody was lounging or having fun on Saturday mornings. I usually got up and worked out or tried to get my home tasks done so that I can enjoy my afternoon and all of Sunday.

But sometimes it felt better to go knock that work out at work and that I felt so free, so light, so delighted, so accomplished, so proud of myself that I didn't have to make it mean I wasn't good enough or that I didn't uphold my standards or boundaries around my time.

We don't need to hold ourselves hostage when we have work boundaries and the time in which we work. I don't work nights. I don't work weekends. That's a beautiful boundary and standard to create for yourself, and it's also okay to allow it to be flexible when it serves you, when it feels good, when it feels like the best decision or the best use of your time.

So there are times and chapters and seasons throughout the school year where it feels like too much to do within the school day, and that's because it's true. There is too much to do within the school day. You don't have to make that mean anything has gone wrong or that anything is wrong with you. It's just the job.

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Now we get to decide how we want to handle that and how much time we're willing to allot and allocate outside of those boundaries for a limited time, for a specific week or a specific month even, knowing that you will also be cognizant about when it's time to honor those boundaries. When you need to work and you choose to work and you decide to work with intention versus when you feel like you're out of control working all of the time, there's no boundaries around work. You can't seem to get a handle on overworking, overscheduling, over-exerting, over-delivering, right?

I mean over-delivering in a negative way where you're just doing what everybody else needs you to do without taking into consideration what you need from yourself to sustain yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally, okay?

I hope this has been helpful. Apply this immediately anytime the emotion of overwhelm consumes you. When it takes over, and it goes into the driver's seat, that's not a problem. We're going to work with it instead of resisting it or working against it. All right, my friends, have a beautiful week, and I will talk to you all next week. Take good care of yourselves. Bye.

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