

Ep #339: Ensuring Teachers Matter with Ryan Donlan and Shelly Wilfong



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, empowered principals. Welcome to episode 339.

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.

Angela: Hello, empowered principals. Welcome to the podcast. Welcome to this episode. I have a very special guest with me here today. You're going to love them. We've already had a coffee chat. I don't know, it's probably been over a month now, but we just hit it off. I felt like I have two new friends in the field of education, and I really love the work they're doing. So, Shelly and Ryan are here today. The book that you wrote, Shelly, was called what again? *Ensuring Teachers Matter*?

Shelly: Yes.

Angela: Yes.

Shelly: *Ensuring Teachers Matter: Where to Focus First So Students Matter Most*.

Angela: Yes. So, I want everybody to get on Amazon and buy this book. It's amazing. I was gifted a copy, so I feel very special, but the book is phenomenal. It really aligns with what I teach in school leadership, but I wanted Ryan and Shelly on the podcast to speak this language in their way and talk about their work they're doing with schools and with school leaders.

I really want to highlight this book because it is uplifting. It brings hope and inspiration to school leadership. School leadership does not have to be this big drag. It doesn't have to be overwhelming and exhausting and burnout. It can be fun and lighthearted and joyful. So, let's talk about that, Shelly. I know you just presented. You've been out presenting, I think, all school

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year. I know our schedules have been like we've been two ships crossing in the night. So, tell us all about the work you're doing. Talk about the book. Let's just dive in and have this amazing discussion.

Shelly: Thank you so much for having me and Dr. Donlan on the show. I really want to spread this information far and wide because I really do feel like it can really make a difference in education. I don't say that lightly either. We've been struggling as a profession in a lot of different areas as far as the importance of the teaching as a profession, people feeling like they can have a sustainable career in teaching, and then all of the leadership things that go along with it.

So, for me, this book is really from the heart, but it's also really backed in research, which is incredibly important for me as well. So, *Ensuring Teachers Matter* is a book about a concept called mattering. Really, Dr. Donlan was actually the one who first introduced this term mattering to me.

I had never really heard. I heard about yeah, you have to matter, but the actual word mattering. As I discovered, this concept has been around for about 50 years. It's been studied in a lot of different contexts, but never in the K-12 world.

Mattering is about a person feeling value and feeling like they add value. So when you have both of those things together, someone feels like they matter. So, in my research, I wanted to find out what had to be in place in order for a teacher to feel like they matter to other adults in the building. So, Ryan, do you have anything you'd like to add to that beginning part?

Ryan: Oh, I absolutely do, Dr. Wilfong. Shelly, thank you so much for bringing me alongside, and Angela for having me in this podcast. It's truly a pleasure and an honor. Particularly so because, Shelly, your research has made relevant and has ratified what I have been shouting from the rooftops for 25 to 30 years in that it has to be about the adults first in education if we're going to be about the kids most.

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So, thank you, Shelly, for putting that in your book title because it has to. To me, it's like as obvious as oxygen mask dropping on an airplane. Every plane ride I've taken, no matter at what age, I have heard the steward or stewardess or the guide up there in the front of the airplane say, is you in the event of cabin depressurization and a mask drops from the ceiling, please affix the mask to yourself first before putting it on the person whom you're providing caregiving to. Always.

But in schools, we haven't been doing this. Dr. Wilfong, Shelly, when you came to me and we had your dissertation conceived on a whiteboard in front of us in the Bayh College of Education, Indiana State University, your passion and purpose was coming together to help our profession. You were concerned about attrition, and you were concerned about keeping great teachers, helping out great kids.

That's when we started talking about mattering. Because there was little, if any, research in education, the conversation adults need to be having with themselves. Every once in a while, it has to be about the adults in the room. Shelly, not only did you show that during your dissertation with thousands of teachers through exploratory factor analysis, but you found me on sabbatical and talked me into a follow-up study with thousands and thousands more teachers.

Confirmatory, I mean, the science is what it is. It's mind-blowing that it's been hiding in plain sight until Dr. Shelly Wilfong came along. Now we have, with the support of an incredible publisher, Solution Tree, and your kind wisdom and guidance in getting us on here, Angela, and bringing out the story to your audience.

We've got something that's going to turn education upside down because finally the adults can go home with as much energy as they entered into the day because it's all about having a posse at work that takes care of one another. It really is about the kids most if we allow the adults to be their best selves from the gate.

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Angela: Yeah. Yes. This book and your research, Shelly, aligns with my work in the world, the company that I decided. The reason that I created this business was because I saw the gap. I was a school principal. When I was a teacher, I had a mentor. I had a buddy teacher. I had a master teacher. Then later on came instructional coaching. So I had some level of support, and I had my grade level.

When I went into school leadership, it was like here's the key to your office. Yay, you got the job. Now go run a school. I was like oh, okay. First things first. You don't know what to prioritize. Your time management gets out of whack. Then because you're so depleted, you're not thinking about how your teachers are feeling because you're trying to keep your head above water, right? You're trying to look for the oxygen mask to put on before you can assist others, right? When you're scrambling like that, it's hard to think about what your teachers are going through.

So I feel like I'm here putting the mask on them so that they can go and assist put the mask on others, right? So this work aligned so beautifully. I was reviewing the book today before I got back on because I love the titles of the chapters. They just invite you in.

One of the first chapters is celebrate team, not just the score. I love that so much because it talks about building community. I think about principals are very isolated. You're usually alone, especially I was an elementary principal. You're a party of one. Maybe you have an AP, maybe. Then you have to like have a good relationship with that AP to not feel like you're isolated.

So community, if you don't have that foundational community, like if you're not getting along with your grade level or your department in the upper grades, that loneliness and that isolation can really take a teacher down or really take an admin down. Can you speak more to that? How you help teachers and administrators build community from authenticity?

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Shelly: Yeah. So community is one of my favorites of the eight elements because so often we look at community either as community. Oh, we want to all be friends and just be very congenial to one another. Or we look at community as in a professional learning community where we're very collegial with one another. The reality is we have to have that balance between the two. I always worry when I hear a new teacher or a principal coming in for the first time says well, I'm not here to make friends. I'm here to do my job, do what I'm supposed to do, and then leave.

We spend way too much time and energy in our buildings that we have to have some connections with one another. It doesn't mean that we have to go out and go to the movies together or go to Christmas parties together or shopping together. We have our other friend set, but we have to have workplace friendship.

We have to be able to balance that collegial part of a professional learning community with the congenial part of friendship and have work friends. If we don't, then it is incredibly difficult for us to enjoy our job. We have to enjoy who we work with. One of my great principals that I had while I was a teacher was talking to me about going into administration. He said, "Shelly, being a building principal is the loneliest job you'll ever have."

Angela: It's so true.

Shelly: He said, "You have got to build your network. You have to build your community. You can't just sit back and not have people around you to support you that knows what you're going through." You can have your support with your friends and everything, but if they're not principals or if they're not in, if you're a classroom teacher and they're not teachers, they don't know what you're going through.

So you have to have those work friends that you can commiserate with and brainstorm with and all of those things if you're going to have a long career that you're going to be satisfied with.

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Angela: And that feels fulfilling. You're doing this job for a purpose. There's a why behind you getting up every single morning and going in and doing this job for 8, 10, 12 hours a day. Yes. I remember being a principal at a building by myself going home, and you can tell the stories. You can't make up what happens in a school. So I always won the best story at dinnertime, right? But that's where it stops. My husband didn't understand, and my son could laugh about the stories. But at the end of the day, the struggles, the fatigue, the frustration, the conflicting priorities, the pressure to perform that kind of stuff, they couldn't relate nor should they have been able to.

Which is why I started my company, the Empowered Principal® Collaborative because people need a place to go. If you don't feel safe, and I think this is what happens with school leaders is that when you are a principal, you want to be connected with your peers, your fellow principals, but everybody's busy principaling, right? Like, so you might do a quick phone call, but it's rare to actually get together unless it's like this very contrived PLC type of a thing.

But you're so busy running your school, living your life that you don't really get those connections. sometimes it doesn't feel safe. Like there are times at work, and I think this is why people are like I'm just going to put my head to the grindstone, do my job, and get the heck out of here. But that isn't fulfillment, right? It doesn't make life fun at work. It's like it's something to check the box and do, put your hours in and get done, but it doesn't fill the soul, right?

Shelly: Yes. Yeah. Mattering is about feeling valued. Like if I'm gone, someone's going to miss me. Not because oh now I don't, as a principal, I don't have anybody to send this unruly kid to, or oh, I have to cover this teacher's class because they're gone and we don't have a sub. It's not missing them because of that. It's missing them because they miss the person. Like gosh, I wonder why she's not here today.

Angela: Yes.

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Shelly: I hope she's doing okay. Knowing that people miss you, and they see when you're gone, and there's a void when you're gone. Oftentimes in education, we just we go about our day and oh yeah, such and such is gone or such, but we have to really feel like we matter to one another.

Angela: Yes. You want to care when your teachers are out. You want to care about why they're out, understanding like are they ill? Or do they have a sick parent, a sick child? Not that you need to know all the details, but that you care that person's going through something, or your teammate is going through something, or simply like it's just a bummer when your bestie at work is out and you can't go and talk all the talk to, right? You just like you miss them.

I know as a principal, I found this balance of, it took me a while to figure it out because first I was told like do not mingle with your staff, right? Like you were an administrator. I was like it just didn't land with me. It didn't feel right. So I started like okay, I'm going to mingle with all of them. It felt like an all or none. Like I had to do all or none. But what ended up happening was just we actually just got to know each other and care about one another. I started having barbecues at my house to celebrate staff. We had holiday parties and whatnot.

That made my job desirable to me. It made it more fun. I cared about people. I knew about their lives. Not the details. No, I didn't go to the teacher's happy hours. But I would have them over so that everybody felt welcomed. It was just it made my job. It just added a layer of delight and joy that I don't think I would have experienced had I not been courageous enough to be authentic and vulnerable with them and have them do the same with me.

Take the time to go and check in on them. What's going on? How's it going? Anything I can do to support you? How is your day? Just simple little check-ins that really, I think for teachers, they felt like they had a principal who cared.

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Ryan: Angela, you were doing something there that empowering principals do better than anyone else is you were investing self-fully in your own energy, in your own self. You were filling your tank so that you had the capability to fill others.

While Shelly's research, it's research on teachers, but it's something that we all can learn from because we don't have to stop teaching because principalizing begins, right? I mean, we are forever teachers. I've now been a teacher for 40 something years, right? Because I didn't stop teaching when assistant principalizing or superintending or professoring, right?

Angela: Yeah.

Ryan: So what is just amazing about Shelly's discovery is that okay, so we're investing in ourselves as empowered principals. We're doing so by allowing teachers and encouraging teachers and leveraging teachers investing in other teachers the same way self-fully and almost selflessly at the same time.

But when we see things like Shelly's eight foundational elements, we know as principals that okay, we got a dog in this hunt. We've got to do something here to facilitate these eight foundational elements of mattering so that we take care of our people. But then on our drive home, we could go wait a second, I'll bet because I haven't stopped teaching either then I need to intentionally find ways to get these eight foundational elements of mattering at work for me too.

You did it through the barbecues, through hanging out with everybody. I mean, those connections just began for you like they do with your listening audience because of this stuff. So Shelly, could potentially one of your future research endeavors be doing this with principals?

Shelly: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Ryan: Before the end of this podcast that we can just run with today.

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Shelly: Yeah, I think the next step in this is to take a look at how building leaders fit in with mattering. I think there is a balance that a building leader has to have with their staff because they are supervising their staff. They are, there is a power differential there. So how do you balance being that friendship and that congenial aspect of it and still have like this is the decision we're making.

So I think that some people do this immaculately and others really struggle with it. So, like you said, they just put their head to the ground. They just do their job, and it really isolates them even further from the staff.

Angela: Yeah.

Shelly: So yeah. I mean, there's definitely an element of teacher, or excuse me, of principals that are missing this element of mattering as well for certain.

Angela: Yeah, I know this book is about teachers, but I couldn't help as I was reading through it like people are people. So regardless of your seat on the bus, like you want to matter. You want to feel like you matter, and you want to feel like your contributions matter, your existence matters, your energy matters. I had a question pop up as you were speaking.

First of all, I really hope you do that research on principals. I cannot wait. You're coming back on. That book, I'm going to like give out as free gifts. But they can read this book. This is what I want to say to all of you listeners right now. Here's what I want you to hear from me. I'm not saying go and read this book and then now you have eight more foundations to consider and check more to do and more to do and more to do.

I want you to read it and think about yourself, how you feel in the community, authenticity, flow, purpose, assimilation, compensation, stability, job crafting, and then putting it all together in the last chapter. Those components, I want you to think about where you fit in on a scale of one to 10, where you're feeling maybe like some of this is an eight

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or a nine and other maybe it's a two or a three. Check in with yourself first and then think about where your teachers might be.

So my question to you, Shelly, is as you're going into districts and you're teaching this from the perspective of the teacher, what would you say is the percentage of where am I taking ownership for my part in these versus I'm expecting my district admin or my district staff or my site principal or other people around me to connect with me and help me feel the certain way. Do you know what I'm saying?

Shelly: Yes, absolutely. The answer to that is it depends on which element you're talking about. So some of them are very, very personal. They can only be done by that individual. Like, for example, assimilation is this idea that you take something, a task or something that you have to do, a duty that you don't really like, and you have to change your mindset that okay, the purpose for me doing this thing I don't like is going to ultimately help the school goal or my goal to get here. So that's really something that is internal.

Now, principals can help teachers by helping the teachers connect the dots. I know you don't like this job, this task, this duty, this responsibility, but here's why it is so important for us in our school building to do this particular thing. Here's how it connects to our mission. This is how it connects to helping students. Sometimes we have to be very explicit with teachers and explicit with ourselves and making sure that what we are doing is purposeful and student-centered.

Sometimes it could be that, well, we've done this thing, this duty, we've always done it, and we have a hard time connecting it to the purpose and the mission, and it maybe isn't student-centered. So then the question becomes why are we doing it? So there is some of that.

Then there are other pieces that school administrators can have a huge amount of help with, help teachers with. Like, for example, job

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crafting, where they're able to take a task, modify it, change it to fit their needs. For example, agendas. Some principals love having the same agenda format for all of the teacher groups, for PLC teams, or grade level teams. They want that for consistency to make sure that everything's checked off.

But the reality is some teacher groups may like to do an agenda a little differently. So instead of saying okay, everybody has to do the agenda in this particular format, instead say these are the things that I need you to make sure that you tell me about. You need to make sure that these are on your agenda.

Now, how you keep your agenda and the format you put it in, as long as I can understand where all the required pieces are that I want, do it the way you want to do it. I'm not going to pigeonhole you into one particular format. So those are the types of things where sometimes the principal has a heavy lift, but oftentimes it's a real balance between the two.

Angela: Yeah, I agree with you. I see it as you want to take ownership, definitely of your part. Like your feelings are yours. So you have to take ownership of how you're feeling emotionally and then how you're responding to those emotions, right? How you're reacting to them. But it's also valuable to consider how we communicate with one another, our needs, our boundaries, our standards, our expectations so that we can feel connected with somebody and so that we can mutually meet each other's expectations in a way that supports one another.

But again, I'm thinking about, it's funny when you were talking about the yard duty. We talk about this a lot in EPC. Duties, nobody wants to go do extra duty. Nobody really loves them. But you've got, I always say, you've got to sell yourself, your brain. You've got to sell your brain on why it's easier. I always say like how is this making life better, easier, or faster for you in the long run?

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When your colleague goes out and does recess duty in the morning and you do recess duty in the afternoon, one, students are getting supervised. We know that's the why, but we need to know what's in it for us. At the end of the day, to get our brain on board and our brain's like a little toddler. Like what's in it for me?

Okay, what is in it for you? Well, if colleagues going to take over in the morning, you're going to take over for them in the afternoon. Luckily, you're not doing all the duties because you're doing teamwork and tag team here. So you get a prep, they get a prep, that kind of a thing. Getting them on board.

But it's true. Like there's just things you got to do in the job that nobody wants to do, but we've got to get on board. But this idea of like where is my ownership here? Then I'm thinking about that poor teacher whose head is down to the grindstone doing the work, kind of self-isolating. Because as a principal, my very first thought that comes up is what's coming up for them that doesn't feel safe. Because if you're not connecting, there's a reason behind that behavior, right?

So what would you say, either Ryan or Shelly, what would you say to somebody who's concerned about a colleague, but the colleague has created a barrier around themselves? What are some ways that we might be able to communicate with them and approach them in a way that invites them into like creating a safe environment to connect and speak? Even if it's, you don't have to be best friends and go to the movies, like you said, but how can we develop that connection with people who are struggling?

Ryan: Well, I think Angela, you ask an apt question there because while we are sometimes considering ourselves armchair philosophers as principals, it gets a little bit dicier when we consider ourselves armchair psychologists, right? Because we don't have the clinical wherewithal to be able to do it safely and carefully in situations where there are

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unknowns. But there are things that we can do in leadership, and Shelly's book can help.

Like for instance, you hung out with all your teachers, okay? All the teachers had some sort of a positive relationship with you. We have a good friend. In fact, he was our guru in factor analysis, Dr. Steve Gruenert, who teaches how to build a school improvement team by way of network analysis.

What Dr. Gruenert will share is that okay, you have folks on staff, some who are more isolated, some who are more deeply connected, but you have some with many loose ties to other people who are both respected and connected. Those more informal relationships, those ties, those folks who if this person were to walk into a teacher's lounge, the conversation wouldn't stop. It would keep going. Well, those opportunities are there for connections and for even interventions because people have trust.

So quite possibly a principal's, one of the better approaches might be to know their staff and faculty to know who's respected and connected and to know who might be able to innocuously connect with that person who's sheltering in place, so to speak.

Angela: Yeah.

Ryan: To get the real story about what's going on so that you know is this a matter of are they worried about job stability? Are they worried about an impending layoff, downsizing? Are they struggling working two to three jobs with compensation so that they're just buried when they're here? Do they not feel that they can job craft like Shelly discovered is really necessary? Are they in trouble because the principal hasn't connected the dots or offered them that with assimilation?

So it's almost like get the connection, do the indirect thing, find out what's probably going on here, and then tap into one of Shelly's eight to see if that's going to make a difference. Because the small investment in your

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eight, Shelly, it's not going to do any harm. But in a sense, a leader, an empowered leader can then stay in their lane and leverage your great book to help that person. I don't know, Shelly, what do you think?

Shelly: Yeah, I agree. I think that it's really important to have someone make those connections, whether that be the principal or another teacher. First of all, as far as mattering is concerned, it's not something that is highly understood or talked about in the school setting. So even talking about these different things, as Ryan says, these eight elements, it's really important to figure out where a person is really struggling.

One of the elements is purpose, finding your purpose. Some people, and as principals, we have to understand that some people get into education thinking that teaching is something that it's not. They get into this job and they realize this isn't what I thought teaching was going to be. So it may not be their purpose. So one of the eight elements is that purpose.

So you may have someone, as Ryan says, sheltering in place, but because they went to school all of these years, they did their student teaching, now they have a job. They see everybody else doing their job. It's like oh, gosh now I'm stuck. So sometimes it's you're just not in the right place. It could be as easy as changing a grade level, changing from elementary to secondary. Sometimes I've seen some of those changes.

Sometimes it's, you know what? Teaching wasn't what I thought it was going to be. Or maybe they taught for 20 years, and their purpose in life has changed. So now it's, again, like I don't have that purpose that I had 20 years ago. So having those kinds of conversations and awareness of that is really important as well.

Angela: I love that you guys shared this because one of the things that I teach my principals to do is to connect with your teachers from the beginning. I feel like at the core of this, all of it comes down to how we feel. Like how the principal feels, how teachers feel impacts how kids feel, the

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experience they end up having at school, right? It really comes down to emotion.

So what we have to be courageous leaders in doing is asking people about how they feel. So in the beginning of the year, however you're connecting. Like some of my teachers, like my fifth grade team, I always went out on the playground because that was, for some reason, that is how they would share.

Like I had one teacher, and he didn't talk to me at all. Then I just kept going out during fifth grade recess, hanging out, just hanging with the kids. Eventually he came up and put his arm around me one day, and he said I'm really glad you're here. I was like I'm in.

But then from that point, I was able to tap into his genius. We ended up departmentalizing fourth and fifth grade because of him. Like we just like we exploded our fourth and fifth grade up in a really good way because I was willing to go to him and be in his element then he started talking, right? So we started kind of chatting at fifth grade recess.

But in the beginning, like however you can make those connections, whether it's indirectly or directly, eventually directly. But when you're sitting down to have pre-observation meetings or your goal setting, all that stuff you got to do, ask people how they're feeling about their job. Like how do you feel about teaching fifth grade? How do you feel about whatever?

Like maybe they have a student with an IEP, and they're trying to figure out how to implement that. How are you feeling? Don't be afraid to ask the question about emotions because that's the drive. It's the fuel that drive all of our actions. It impacts our decisions, our actions, how we engage with one another, how we engage with students. We, as the leaders, need to ask people how they're feeling.

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The most loving thing you can do, I think, as a principal is ask somebody how they feel about their job. What about it's working for them? What about it's not working? If they could wave a magic wand, what would be better? What would make it easier, better, faster? What would delight them?

And sometimes what might come up is I think I need to try another seat on the bus, or I need to get on another bus. Or like I need to retire. I need to get off the bus. Or I need to do something else, something. But if we don't ask, how do we expect them to know? How can we lead? How can we guide when we don't know how people are feeling? We have to ask the question.

Ryan: Angela, that is powerful. I mean, I live life navigating mixed metaphors, right? Sometimes they make sense, and sometimes they don't. But you're helping me with my next one here because I'm thinking of a piggy bank. You talked about those pre-evaluation conference sessions and things like that. All this feeling stuff, this emotional stuff.

Well, it's almost like you have a piggy bank, and every penny drop is an emotional investment. Then when you pull the stopper and you get some coin out of there, that's almost like an intellectual or an occupational withdrawal. So in order to ask anybody for an intellectual or occupational withdrawal, you have to make a hundred emotional investments to even build the reservoir so they have the capability to do that. That just popped into my head. So thank you for my next metaphor.

Angela: There you go. I love it. Yeah, I'm always like for some reason, I'm always on a bus. I'm on a train or a bus.

Ryan: A bus and a train.

Angela: Because I just remember thinking, like you can, it doesn't matter what seat you're on. We're all in the same bus, right? Sometimes we're changing seats, but the driver needs you in your seat on the bus to get to

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drive. That driver is just as important, if not the most important person driving, as everybody else on the bus. I'll tell you the principal does not drive the bus. Secretaries, custodians, and bus drivers run our schools, okay, everybody?

Ryan: There you go.

Angela: Shout out to them. We love them. Our paras, our support staff, our office staff, they're really running the dailies of this organization. We want to love on them. But we want to remember are teachers are working their tails off in their own individual way and finding a way to acknowledge the strength, no matter what. My fifth grade teacher, he was really brilliant at accelerating kids.

So when we got this idea of departmentalizing some of our instruction, he was taking these kids. Their math, there were kids in the fifth grade doing 10th, 11th, 12th grade level math. I was blown away that the team was able to do that. Then we also had kids struggling. So we had kids coming up to grade level, kids on grade level, kids above grade level. Because I was willing to seek out and ask those questions, plant those seeds, and tell him, I think you're brilliant.

Then it came up that some former leaders hadn't felt that way or hadn't tried or had maybe like had a different opinion about this person's work. I thought to myself, if you're here on this campus, you have something to offer. There's something brilliant that you know how to do. If I don't see it, I'm going to find it. But I had to look for it in some of those people.

Shelly: I think what you're really talking about is psychological safety. You know, teachers have to feel psychologically safe and to be able to say something to a leader, say something like hey, how about if we would do this or that? Like are they going to get reprimanded, or are they going to be looked down on? So I think all of this is really talking about making sure that you have an environment where you have that psychological safety for

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your teachers so they can express that information and express their ideas.

Angela: Yes. I'm wondering, how do you teach that? You called it job crafting. I love this because I teach principals to do that in their own jobs, but I hadn't thought about bringing it up to open the door for teachers to come to them with the same concept. So I love this. So how do you teach teachers to get creative and to approach their administrators?

Shelly: Yeah. So that's the difficult part because every teacher has a different context that they're coming from. If I'm in a room with 20 different teachers and they come from 20 different buildings, they have 20 different principals. Not all of those environments are psychologically safe.

So, to me, the whole idea of mattering, when we wrote this book, we were trying to decide do we write this for principals? Do we write this for teachers? What lens are we focusing on? Or even district leaders for that matter. Who needs to know about this? The reality is everybody does because you have to understand the importance of job crafting.

That if I go to my principal, I'm a teacher. I go to my principal. I'm not trying to be annoying. I'm not trying to be a pain in the butt. I'm trying to do my job as effectively and efficiently as possible and still get the same outcome. So there's a purpose for it other than I just want to complain about something.

So the more people can understand these concepts, they can understand like okay, I have this idea for job crafting the way we do our agendas. Now that's not saying hey, I think the way we do our agendas is a waste of time and it's not helpful for us at all.

Angela: Right.

Shelly: You know you go and say if we can job craft this a little bit, I think we can make it more valuable for our team and to make it faster and more efficient and stay just as effective as before. So can you let us try it?

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Angela: Yeah.

Shelly: So administrators have to be open to that, and they need to tell their teachers. If you're a building principal and you say yeah, I don't care. Teachers need to know that you don't care about trying something different. Now I said, just ask me first. Ask me because I can't come up with all of the different ways of doing something. I do something the way I think it makes sense to me, which to other people can be tremendously different.

I have a secondary background. So I have that kind of mindset. So sometimes when I come up with something for elementary teachers, kindergarten, first grade teachers, I think it's a great idea. Then when I tell them about it, it's like what on earth are you doing?

Angela: That's funny.

Shelly: Then we talk. It took them a while to understand like no, that's not really going to be the best thing for us. How about if we do this? We get to the same place just we take a little bit different path, and it works for them. So that's what I tell people.

Ryan: Can I extend on that a little bit?

Angela: Yes, please.

Ryan: Shelly and I just love our publisher because one of the many gifts that they give us is an opportunity to be relevant. So I still remember hearing for the first time for every why and what, we want three hows because that's what Solution Tree is. They want to give people tools, give folks tools.

Well, Shelly's eight elements here each have at least one or two tools that you can find in the book that says okay, if you're going to try to leverage

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this. An idea, and Shelly I've had discussions since the book. So let me just give you one that we've been percolating on with job crafting.

So I talked to you about those folks who are respected and connected in those sorts of things. Well, we don't know if there's psychological safety in every school. In fact, we figure that there's probably not psychological safety in every school, right?

Angela: Right.

Ryan: There is probably something that I'm going to mention next that is in just about every school. That is a teacher leader who is respected and connected, not only with the teaching ranks, but also with the administration in place.

Angela: Yep.

Ryan: No matter how dysfunctional everybody is there's probably somebody who can walk into both rooms and the conversation will keep going. Probably one archetype across the nation, no matter the context. So that person is the job crafting gatekeeper. That's your interpreter between teachers who are hesitant on going to the principal and the principal who is really uncomfortable about how much autonomy teachers get.

Shelly, I don't know how you feel about autonomy. Actually, I do. Maybe you can mention that next. But how about a job crafting interpreter who can put a foot in both worlds and negotiate how much latitude is comfortable on both sides? Could help with the job crafting issue. Wouldn't you think, Shelly?

Shelly: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, Ryan's always teasing me about the word autonomy because I hate the word autonomy. Autonomy, to me, means like it's a free for all, right? Everybody can do whatever they want. So I always like to talk about guardrails. Like you're going down a road, and you have guardrails.

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So I like that image of looking at you're going down a highway. There are multiple lanes. It doesn't matter which lane you're in as long as you stay within those guardrails of, and when we talk about instruction, it's the guardrails of best practice instruction. So I want you to stay within those guardrails.

How you do the instruction is up to you because the way you teach is going to be different from another person. The way they teach is going to be different from another person that teaches. But you're all staying in the same direction. You're going the same route. You're just, you might be in different lanes within that guardrail.

So that's the way I always like to look at it because autonomy doesn't mean I'm going, I was a former social studies teacher. So way back when I first started teaching, we would show the entire series of Gettysburg, Ken Burns Gettysburg during Civil War. So, oh we have a week of showing videos. That's what we're going to do. That's not really best practice instruction, right? So creating those guardrails.

When we talk about job crafting, it's this is the purpose behind why we do what we're doing. Those agendas, for example. Here are the guardrails. Here's what I need in those agendas. How you do that is completely up to you, but you've got to stay within the guardrail. Then have at it. Some teachers struggle with that. They really do because they well, how do you want me to do it? I don't care.

Angela: Just tell me what to do, they'll say. Just tell me what you want. Just tell me what to do.

Shelly: Just like the high school students. They say just no, no. I want you to do it with how you want to do it. So that, it seems like a very simple concept, but it can be very difficult to actually pull off.

Angela: It is difficult. So principals listening, here's how I help school leaders do this. Focus more on the outcome. Here is the outcome. This is

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the result that I want. So like I'm thinking about those agendas. As a principal, I just need your questions.

Like if there's a to do for me, put that in a box or on the top, make it highlight. So that's what I need. The only outcome I need for your PLC is like yes, cover these things. But like I need to know what you need for me, or I can't do my job for you. So focus on the outcome, not the how, not the approach.

You're not controlling the how. You're setting the standard for the outcome or the result that you desire to create. That is how I ask principals to set, instead of setting goals. These are the results we're creating. These are the outcomes that we need, want, desire. Then you get to like yeah, here's your lane. Dance around however you wish. But we're going in this direction, right? Yeah.

Ryan: That's beautiful.

Shelly: I didn't realize we were going to talk about agendas so much. But the other, I think, really important piece to that is that principals need to explain to teachers why is having an agenda so important? Why is having these elements in the agenda important versus just getting together for your morning meeting to talk?

So knowing the purpose behind the reason why we have agendas and how that can help you as a group perform better and more efficiently is incredibly important. Just like establishing norms. Okay, you have to establish norms. You don't just say hey, you guys need to establish norm. What is the rules of your group? You talk about why that's important and what happens if you don't have them. So you have to continually revisit that.

Then to your point about focusing on the outcome. It's like some principals, they might be a little nervous giving up some of that control. Well, well, well, what if it's not as effective? All right well, then it's the outcome. Is this

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group, is this grade level team being as effective as what they could be? Is it because they have unorganized meetings? So maybe you need to talk to that group about shoring up the agenda a little bit more or shoring up something. But if the grade level over here is doing a fantastic job with the way they're doing it, let them do it.

So if you focus on the outcome and the outcome isn't what you want, then you can take a step back and say hey, guys, this isn't quite where we need to be. How about if we do this or this? Just keep adding things back into that so that they get to where they need to be.

Angela: Yeah. I mean, it's personalized leadership at that point where you're not just sending out a blanket email. Everybody get this to me by this time, or you're like scolding one person, but it goes out a blast to the entire staff. That is where, again, we have to tap into our courage as leaders. It's our responsibility to customize and personalize our leadership. It's just like teaching. It's like your staff is your classroom. Some people are on IEPs. Some people they have their what is it called? The growth plan or whatever. Other people are they can do their own thing.

You have to personalize your leadership just like you would personalize instruction in a classroom. But everybody needs to know the why. Everybody needs to understand. Some people are big picture people. Some people need the details. You can give it to them. Like I'm a big picture person. If I just know like what's the end here? I go. I don't need the details. I will weed those out. So you can give them to me. I will take what I need and run with it. Other people need the details. Just give it to them. Who cares?

But at the end of the day, it sounds like what you're saying is let's have conversations with the people who need we need to be having the conversation with, right. Again, that's just about getting focused and understanding what is the outcome? What's the theory as to why the desired outcome's not being met.

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Because it might not have anything to do with the agenda or the notes that come in. There might be a conflict between two people, or maybe something's going on in that grade level. We don't know. We're testing a theory. But let's go in and talk with them about it. What's working? What's not? Why? They'll tell you if there's psychological safety, as you said, right?

Okay, I feel like I could pick your brain for the next five hours, but I have to keep in my lanes here. I got to reign this in. So I want to ask each of you like if there's one thing you could share with school leaders out there, I know this is going to drop in the summer. So this is a juicy time for them because they have some space and some energy in their brain to start planning for the upcoming school year.

What would you like to share with these? There's a lot of aspiring leaders, new principals, veteran principals out there and district leaders listening to this podcast. So what is it that you'd like to share with them as they're entering into a new school year?

Shelly: For me, it's making sure that people are aware and understand the concept of mattering and what that means. I think that it is long overdue in our profession to take a look at this. Research shows that people with a stronger sense of mattering have less symptoms of depression. They show less signs of stress or they handle stress better. They have higher career longevity and higher career satisfaction. These are all things that we struggle with right now in education.

While we can look at school culture, we can look at collective efficacy, we can look at organizational health, these are big mountains for a leadership to climb. Changing a culture takes years. Growing teachers' collective efficacy takes a lot of time and a lot of heavy lifting. In mattering, there are little things that you can do to help open the door to those much bigger topics.

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Angela: Yes. I think that the little things that you do actually expedite the big picture progress. You actually get there faster when you're focusing on the what you can do, the easy to do, the everyday little things that matter. Again, I think as a leader, you have to tune in with you. Where am I? Do I feel like I matter? Am I feeling like I'm making an impact, a difference?

Because people who hire me as their coach often come and say I got into leadership thinking I was going to create a bigger impact, I feel less empowered, less impactful than I ever did in a classroom. That's because they made this big leap, and that ripple effect takes a little bit longer, right? So we have to grow into our new self-identity, right, and to the impact we're looking to make.

But the little impacts, you get to feel those today, right now. You go out on your campus, and you apply these eight foundations, you can feel that today, right now. Then you're going to plant that seed so somebody else, a teacher, a support staff, a substitute teacher, don't forget your subs, your office staff, all of them, everybody. You can plant these little seeds, and then they get to feel it today. That's what starts to generate mattering, feeling good today.

You don't have to wait till tomorrow or next year. You can do it now. That's what I love about this book and the strategies that you're teaching. They're very tangible. They're just, it's a way of being. You can do that with any level of experience at any school, at any time. Love it.

Ryan: I've got a couple of things here real quick.

Angela: Let's go, Ryan.

Ryan: Dr. Wilfong, you had mentioned things like collective efficacy and school culture and change and things like that. But that was your follow-up research. Through thousands and thousands of teachers, you found eye-popping relationships with those things. So mattering really is the

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doorway to the big stuff that meta-analyses are showing makes an impact on student learning. That's number one.

But the three I'd like to wrap up with is they're pretty straightforward. I mean, number one, through people, all things are accomplished in schools. That's number one, period, paragraph. Number two, as we remember from network TV or television years and years ago, we all want to be where everybody knows our name. That has to do with mattering too.

Number three, as I travel the nation working with leaders and groups and educators and boards of ed and superintendents and building principals, we have a gift in education, in the profession of education. That is the gift that every year at certain intervals, we have an opportunity to start undefeated.

Principals across the nation, empowered principals, can start undefeated for the next school year by getting in touch with mattering, looking at it scientifically. Shelly, by accessing your website, that's matteringk12.com, isn't it? Something real close to that.

Shelly: Yeah.

Angela: We'll put it in the show notes for people. We'll make sure we drop all the links in the show notes.

Ryan: That's beautiful. So, again, Angela, Shelly, thanks so much for having me on board. Again, to our publisher Solution Tree and more importantly, or as importantly, the entire Empowered Principal® audience because these are some great folks making huge differences on kids. We can continue doing that by putting the teachers first so that we can be about the students most.

Angela: Absolutely. It has been such a pleasure to meet you both and to get to know you and your work. I adore you. I can't wait to learn more, hear

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more. I hope to someday write for Solution Tree and meet you guys in person. Yeah, catch up and have a coffee.

Shelly: Yeah.

Ryan: Sounds great.

Angela: Yes. But thank you for your time. I know this is a big chunk of time. I appreciate it. The audience will really be profoundly changed by this. We'll put in the links to the book and any other resources you want me to share with the audience. We'll drop those in the show notes for y'all, okay? I hope you've enjoyed this show, you guys. Thank you so much. Have a wonderful week. We'll talk to you guys all next week. Take good care. Bye.

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