

Ep #362: Stress Free Walkthroughs



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 362.

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.

Well, hello, my empowered principals. Happy Tuesday and happy December. Look at us already in December. My goodness. Time is flying. We're in the magic of December and all of its festivities and celebrations. It's such a beautiful time of year. I hope you are enjoying yourself and really allowing yourself the pleasures of this month of December.

I want to talk with you about walkthroughs, teacher walkthroughs, classroom walkthroughs, district walkthroughs. Walkthroughs have been coming up this year. Teachers are highly stressed about walkthroughs. Principals highly stressed about walkthroughs. We're going to talk about how to create a stress-free walkthrough environment at your school. So let's talk about it.

Most teachers get very nervous of walkthroughs. Administrators get anxious about walkthroughs. We get anxious about district administrators coming to our campus. Teachers get very anxious about district administrators walking through their campus. So there's a lot of unsettledness that comes with walkthroughs. People are unhappy about them. They're frustrated. They're fearful. They're worried. They're stressing out. They're freaking out. They're unsettled.

When your teachers don't feel good, when they're stressed out, you're stressed out. You don't want them to feel this way because you know the impact it has on them, the impact it has on the classroom. So you're frustrated that they're frustrated, right? You're feeling uncertain. They're

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feeling uncertain. It creates an energy on campus of a lot of stress, a lot of pressure. People aren't happy about it. They might feel a little disgruntled about the whole thing.

We're going to break this down a little bit. So if you think about walkthroughs, let's talk about why they're stressful for you. Let's talk about why they're stressful for teachers. Then let's talk about how to create a more stress-free environment and help your teachers feel more confident regarding walkthroughs.

So we're going to break down the worry here. When you think about walkthroughs, what exactly are you worried about? Now, everybody's going to have a different response to that. Are you worried what they'll see, what they'll think, what they'll do, what they'll say, what they're going to tell you to fix, who they're going to tell you to fire? That's usually what happens for us.

We freak out because we're like oh my gosh, we're being vulnerable. We're being exposed. What are they going to see? What are they going to say? What are they going to do? What are they going to tell us that we have to do or tell teachers they have to do? So we anticipate a negative feedback experience.

We never really stop to think about oh, they're going to come in and they're going to be so enamored and so excited, and they're going to be so mind blown at how great teachers are. We're always like what isn't going to work? What's going to go wrong? What are they going to see? Just notice that.

The brain defaults to this. It's normal. Notice it in yourself. What are you thinking is going to happen? What are you anticipating is going to happen because of this walkthrough? How are you feeling about it? Are you worried you're going to get fired? Are you worried you're going to get demoted? What is it that you think is going to happen?

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Oftentimes, if you sit yourself down and you ask the question what am I freaking out about here? Or what am I worried about? If you're honest with yourself, you're like I don't feel like I'm going to get fired. I don't really feel like they're going to demote me.

It's more the fear of feedback. The feedback of something we did or said or decided, something we didn't do or didn't say or haven't decided, something wasn't right, something wasn't good enough, something needs to be changed. That's typically where we fall in the land of I'm worried, I'm stressed, I don't like this feeling.

What I find so interesting about feedback, and it's something I'm exploring at a deeper level because we are in the business of giving one another feedback. We're giving students feedback. We're giving and receiving feedback as a principal. We're giving and receiving feedback to our teachers. There's such a visceral reaction to feedback.

I think about this, where does this fear of feedback come from? We brace for feedback and we anticipate and expect the worst kind of feedback. Where is this coming from? I can see it. It comes from our childhood, from our parents, from other adults in our lives, mentors, it could be grandparents, aunties, uncles. It could be coaches we've had, but it also happens with our teachers.

It stems from our childhood when adults were constantly giving us feedback about what we did right, what we did wrong, what we should be doing, what we shouldn't be doing. We started interpreting that feedback and creating an identity around it.

We didn't discern for ourselves if the feedback was accurate or true for us or aligned. We were just kids. We were just taking it for face value, believing it and creating an identity around who we were as a student, as an athlete, as a musician, as a test taker, as a child of a parent, as a

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sibling, as a cousin. Like all of these people giving us feedback in our life, we're bringing it in and it's molding and it's evolving our identity because we're taking it on at face value.

So we would interpret that feedback and decide what we made it mean about us, about our character, about our intentions, our integrity, whether we are a good kid, a bad kid, whether we are a good student, a bad student, whether we were a good athlete, a not so good athlete, all of that. We make these decisions based on this feedback, okay?

That happens in childhood because we don't have the awareness or the tools or the discernment to say hmm, I'm wondering if this feedback is accurate or what else this feedback might mean because when we're kids, we're very worried about the consequences of this feedback. That we're going to be in trouble. There's going to be a physical consequence. There's going to be a grounding and something's going to be taken away from us. We're going to be deprived of our friends or our phone or TV or our favorite things, maybe a mental consequence, how we think and perceive ourselves.

We anticipate some kind of consequence from parents, from teachers, from adults that have authority over us in our childhood, and feedback can become very scary. So for the adults who experienced as children feedbacks and consequences that were painful or scary, feedback as an adult can be absolutely terrifying.

Because we're an adult and we have a little more authority over our lives and a little more agency over there, we're just going to do anything we can to try and avoid it. As an adult, you get to decide what the feedback means. You get to discern for yourself if the feedback lands for you, if it's accurate, if it feels true, if it feels aligned for you.

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Feedback at its simplest form is simply an opinion. So your boss gives you feedback, that's their opinion. When your spouse or partner gives you feedback, opinion. Kids give you feedback, your teachers, your boss, anybody. When anybody gives you feedback, it is their opinion of the situation, their opinion of how something was handled, their opinion of how you handled it or your actions, your words, your decisions, that kind of a thing.

But it's really an opinion. It doesn't make it the law. It doesn't make it a rule. It doesn't make it right. It doesn't mean it's true about you. It doesn't mean anything outside of you other than what you make it mean. I will say this. It's much easier said than done to separate that out. Because we're wired for connection and for inclusion. We want to be liked. We want to be a part of the community. We want to feel that people respect us, admire us, and value our contributions.

But if we do acknowledge that any kind of feedback we receive is an opinion, we can separate it a little bit from ourselves. We don't have to take it as absolute truth. We can take a moment for ourselves to discern the feedback we're receiving.

So I've talked about receiving and giving feedback on a different podcast episode. I believe the episode is 255. So listen to that one, and you can dive in on how to give and receive feedback. I think the title of that one is called Coachability, but it's really on receiving feedback, giving feedback, and how to interpret that feedback and discern for yourself what lands for you, what feels true for you, and other types of feedback that doesn't.

So allowing your opinion of the feedback to be taken into consideration as much as you consider their opinion, that's what I talk about on episode 255. So check that out for more feedback discernment. But what I want to contemplate today is why you don't like the walkthroughs and how to make them more stress-free for you and then why teachers might not like them.

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So you are going to have thoughts and opinions about the walkthroughs. The district announces, we're going to do walkthroughs this year, and we're going to come through and spend five minutes per classroom, and then we're going to take notes, and then we're going to debrief with you and debrief with the leadership team, and then you're going to have to take it back. They're going to tell you what their process is for the walkthrough.

You're going to be like oh, this doesn't sound fun at all. This makes me nervous. I'm worried what they'll see, what they're going to say. They're going to tell me I'm going to have more work on my plate. They're going to tell me I have to go fix my people. My people are good. What are my teachers going to think? How are they going to feel? This is going to just cause disruption in the classroom. What a big mess, right? You're going to have a reaction.

I want you to notice why. Think about this deeply. When you're nervous about district administrators coming to your campus, there's a vulnerability there. There are insecurities that you have as a school leader. Thoughts about you, thoughts about your identity as a leader, thoughts about your school, your thoughts about what's working, what's not, and what you make that mean about you as a leader. Your identity is feeling challenged. It's being questioned.

Because think about principals who are like, bring it on. I love walkthroughs. This is great. I want the feedback. I'm looking forward to this. I'm looking forward to show off my school. I'm confident. I feel good about this. There are people that have stress-free walkthroughs all the time.

If you're stressed out about walkthroughs, it's an indication that you have some internal work to do, some identity work to do as a principal around your thoughts about yourself, your thoughts about your work. You're probably really hyper-focused on what isn't working versus what is, and you're probably leaning towards the wanting to be perfect,

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wanting everything to look smooth and perfect and problem-free in your classrooms, problem-free on your campus, right? So, notice this.

Then I want you to shift gears and look at your teachers. When you see teachers freaking out, it's the same thing. You're upset because they're upset. You want to protect them. You don't want them to feel bad. Number one, you can't control their emotions.

But two, if you think about why teachers would be freaking out about walkthroughs, yes, it might be new to them, and new is hard and different. It feels uncomfortable. That's one part of it. But if it's a standard practice and people just don't like it, the reason they don't like it is because they're afraid to be vulnerable. They're afraid their insecurities will come to the surface or something will go wrong. It's their identity, their self-efficacy that they're grappling with. Because there are confident teachers. Anybody can come into the room and they don't mind at all.

So, we want to identify what's the difference between principals and teachers who are confident with walkthroughs, who have no stress about them, and teachers and principals who are stressed out about walkthroughs. So, you might not like it for different reasons than your teacher or similar reasons, but typically it comes down to feeling insecure, being afraid, anticipating a negative outcome.

So, lots of times when we go through the walkthrough experience, we try to dog and pony show, right? We say we don't want to do that with our teachers and we create safe spaces for them to be authentic, but then district comes in and now that's not authentic. Okay, what's going on?

It's the same process. Am I going to be judged? Will it be a safe experience? Will I be emotionally safe? Will I be professionally safe? Will I be publicly safe? Am I going to be publicly embarrassed? Are they going to talk about me at the district level, or are they going to move me? Are they

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going to come in and sick the coach on me and make the coach now work with me for some incompetency that I have? There's a lot of stress that can be involved there.

But what's really happening at the end of the day for these teachers, it's not about the walkthrough. As funny as that sounds, it feels like it's the walkthrough, but it's their thoughts about the walkthrough. They're trying to catch me doing something wrong. I don't feel safe. I don't feel like they have value to offer.

What's in it for me? Why are we doing this? I don't understand the purpose. I don't see the value. What's in it for us? What's in it for kids? What's in it for teachers? Are they just walking around trying to be seen? Is it a political move, right? There are so many thoughts that teachers have. Are they picking on me? Are they trying to come after me? There's a lot of scarcity and fear.

So what can you do to calm and bring down the stress level? Teachers are worried about themselves at the end of the day. They're not good enough. They're not doing enough. They're not doing it right. They could get it wrong. District leaders are going to come in and tell me I'm not doing it the way they want me to. I don't know what they want from me. I don't trust them. All of those thoughts.

They're making it mean their opinion defines me as a teacher. They define my career. Their opinion is going to determine my experience. These people have power and control over me. They have power and control over my career.

Do you see where there is no authority, no agency? They feel completely disempowered because they believe that that opinion matters more. That they have control over their career. They have control over the experience.

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Their opinion determines how I feel and think about myself as a teacher. They're trying to catch me do something wrong.

What you can do as a principal is to address this, what the walkthroughs mean for the teacher. When somebody walks through your classroom, it doesn't mean anything about you. If they're looking for perfection, that's not the school. You can create safety with your teachers to say look, we don't have to be nervous about this. Here's all the things going right. Here's how you're amazing. Tap into your confidence.

Be you. Let them see the reality of the job. If they see it, they see it. Do the best job you can be the best version of you. But worrying is going to make you more nervous, which is going to make you question and doubt yourself, which is going to come across in your teaching when they're in the room.

This is a five minute walkthrough. Be yourself those five minutes. Be the confident, brilliant, expert teacher that you are. New teachers listen up. They know you're brand new. You don't need to fake it. Be energetic, be happy, be enthusiastic. They're just looking for will over skill. You can create a mindset with your teachers that takes down the stress that makes it less stressful for the walkthroughs.

You can take your teachers through this. Imagine what it's like for a teacher who has no fear of anybody coming into their classroom. They're confident in who they are and what they're doing. Even though they have bad days, even though they've got a kid who's going off the rails, they're confident in themselves. They trust themselves, even on bad days.

At the end of the day, when you're doing your best and you're feeling confident about who you are as a teacher, no one's firing you. No one's moving you. They're coming in to see, and they're getting a snapshot.

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You can create less stress in the walkthroughs by number one, bringing down your stress level by building your confidence, tapping into your empowerment, and then reassuring your teachers. They're okay. They're safe. Be themselves. It's okay to have people walk through. It isn't a problem.

Ask the teachers. If it weren't a big deal for walkthroughs, then what would you be thinking about yourself? How would you feel? What would you be doing? You'd still be doing your thing. You'd be doing your thing whether people are in there or not. Just do your thing.

Now, if what you're doing in your classroom makes you nervous because you don't feel like you're honestly living up to your highest standard, it's an invitation to live to your highest standard. But most teachers aren't doing that. Most teachers are trying their hardest, and they're worried it's not going to be good enough. They're worried that people are looking for perfection.

Let's be honest, there are districts who walk through and they do look for gotchas, and they want to talk behind your back and complain about everything that's not working. That's on them. You focus on what is at your sight. Here's what's working. Here's why we're great. Set the stage. If the district people want to look for the gotchas, they can look for the gotchas. It doesn't have to mean that it's true about you.

They want to nitpick at something? Okay. Let them. Let them be wrong. Let them have their little moment in the sun, and you carry on. If you know you're doing a good job, it doesn't matter. If your teachers know they're doing a good job, the walkthroughs don't matter. If someone gives you feedback, discern for yourself. Does this land for me?

A lot of times when you get feedback and it kind of hurts, there's some truth in it. It's like yeah, I really didn't plan that lesson very well. I was on my B

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game today or I haven't really been differentiating like I know I can, or I know that's possible, or I haven't been tapping into my coach. There are some truths that come out in feedback and they're painful, but we have the opportunity to build up our identity as a teacher and as a school leader.

We can take that feedback and say like, you know what? I want to feel better about this. This doesn't feel good and I want to make it feel better. So I'm going to lean into this. I'm going to learn how to do this. That's all it is. If something doesn't feel good, what would make it feel better? Lean into that. Like we talked about on the episode about pleasure being irresponsible. Lean into the feel-good goal. Let it feel good.

So what do teachers want to feel when administrators walk through? They want to feel confident. They want to feel assured. They want to feel trusting. They want to feel safe. They want to feel aligned. You can help them with that. So what thoughts would your teachers be thinking about themselves, about their teaching capacity, and about feedback?

What would they be thinking if they weren't afraid of walkthroughs? What would they be thinking about themselves, about the district leadership, about the experience of walkthroughs in general, about the outcomes, about the feedback? What would they be thinking about it? Walk them through the process from being afraid, feeling insecure, into feeling secure. Give them the support they need. Tell them to create safety for them, but walk them through the process of what it would look like to be afraid of the walkthroughs versus confident, or at least certain.

Try that. Let us know how it goes. Would love to see you in EPC. Doors are going to be opening in 2025. Happy December. Enjoy this month, and I will talk with you all next week. Take good care. Bye.

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