

Ep #377: Times of Uncertainty



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 377.

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.

Well, hello, my empowered principals. Happy Tuesday. Welcome to the podcast.

It's good to be here with you today. So I'm recording this podcast in February, and so the energy and the message of this podcast may be a month old for your ears, but it is just as relevant in this present moment. You can take the content of this podcast episode and apply it any time you feel like you are in a time of uncertainty. Because here's the deal guys, we are living in times of great uncertainty and with new leadership of any kind comes change.

Now some leaders ease into their new positions. So some leaders will approach a new leadership position by meeting people, initiating, building relationships, spending time, connecting through seeking to understand people, getting to know them, to listen to their stories and their experiences and their perspectives. That's one approach to leadership. And other leaders will come in with their ideas and their plans and their agendas, and they will begin implementing those ideas and plans and agendas pretty immediately. And we've seen this happen publicly.

And that style, that approach to leadership focuses more on accomplishing the goal and making that vision a reality as quickly as possible, more than the experience of the leadership position and the experience of those you are leading, and the change and impact on people around you. And while of course, I have my own personal opinions and belief systems. I'm not

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here to discuss politics, but I am here to discuss how empowered principals can navigate the impact of decisions and actions that are outside of our positional authority. Basically what I'm saying is we're not here to talk about politics. It doesn't matter politics. I'm observing leadership. I am a leadership coach and as I observe leadership styles, I'm studying and watching and observing the approaches that people take, the outcomes that they create, the impact it has on themselves, on others, short-term impacts, long-term impacts.

And as a leadership coach, I look at and read about and study and learn and try on many examples of leadership because it's my goal to not be a one-size-fits-all, to genuinely coach the human that's in front of me. That's why EPC is very detailed and personalized to the individuals who are in the group. So I have content, and then we coach on how to make that content customized to your approach, to your belief systems, to your values, to what you want to do, to what you don't want to do. We tweak it. That I learn other approaches, other perspectives from observing leaders in our communities, leaders in the public eye.

And while any person's values and opinions and approaches can work, you have to discern for yourself the approach that works best for you. And at the core of what I'm observing, I will share with you my personal truths, what I believe to be true, what I believe to be impactful, insightful, and hopefully for you helpful. Because I am coaching person after person after person, school leader after school leader after school leader, who are very distressed, very concerned, very worried, very angry, very upset. Lots of intense emotions around leadership and its impact on your school, your district, your community, your families, your students, your budgets, your staff, the supplies that you might have available to you, the resources available to you.

Because of leadership outside of our control, it impacts the leadership that is within our control. So here's what I know to be true. The world is always

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going to be, always has, always will be in a state of change. Humans are always in a state of change.

Every single day, every single hour we are growing older, our bodies are changing, our bodies are developing, children are developing, adults are developing. We're still developing. We're still in the trajectory of human development between birth and death. That never stops. We are always in a state of change.

The universe is in a state of change. The world is in a state of change. Everything, plants, nature, all of it is change. And yet humans will say to other humans, we don't like change. Change is scary. Change is hard. Change is difficult.

I don't want change. I want to go back to what I know, back to what felt good, back to what was comfortable. And I started thinking about change and what it means and why we are very uncomfortable with change, why we are uncomfortable with uncertainty, and during times of high levels of uncertainty, what's going on. And what I've noticed is that even though we intellectually understand that everything is changing and that everything has a beginning, middle, and end, we understand that at an intellectual level. The reason that we feel fear with change from what I'm observing is that we fear change when it comes quickly. When it is unexpected, when it's a spike.

So in our lives, when we're little, we don't fear old age. We don't think about wrinkly skin or, you know, like our muscles maybe not being as strong or not being as fast or agile. We're not worried about that when we're 10 because that change happens so slow over decades of time. So when change is happening and it's happening very slowly, incrementally, very teeny tiny changes over the course of a lifetime, we acclimate to the change.

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So when we know a change is coming, and we have some time to step into it, to think about it, to figure out how we're going to address it and solve for it or adapt with it and, and flow with it. We feel less afraid of it, but when major change spikes of change and a lot of change in a lot of different areas of our lives, or a lot of different changes happening at once.

Like I think about superintendents who might come in right off the wagon and they come into the district and they're, they're making all kinds of staffing changes, curriculum changes, programming changes, department changes, or shifting this around, shifting that around, getting rid of this, getting rid of that. That kind of change that happens rapidly, unexpectedly, it spikes, it's all over the place, it's unpredictable, it feels a little chaotic.

There's many changes happening at once and people aren't able to keep up and track kind of what's happening, why it's happening, what's expected of them, how they can adapt when all of that feels like it's happening at once, that is when we freak out. So it's the spikes of change when a lot of change happens at once, or it's unclear, it's not really articulated.

There's like speculation of change, or there's little dribs and drabs of information where you're getting a piece here and a piece there, but the dots don't connect. So your brain, out of trying to create a sense of certainty, it will fill in the gaps. It will fill in the missing blanks. So it's like a mad lib. You get a little bit here and a little bit there, and you're like, wait, what does that even mean?

And then your brain fills in the adjective, and it fills in the noun, and it fills in the time, and it fills in the when, and it fills in the who, and all of a sudden the story is like, oh my goodness, education is being canceled. The Department of Education is being canceled. We're being canceled. I'm gonna lose out a job. What is gonna happen to kids? What about these families? It feels very scary. It's very uncertain. And hey, I am not going to diminish or dismiss how painful it has been to coach principals who are

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losing children, who are losing families to immigration changes, to the culture changes in our nation's administration, and the pain that school leaders, site and district leaders, I coached several district leaders, and the pain, they don't even feel in control.

So site leaders just know district leaders feel a sense of uncertainty too. And this isn't a political conversation, you guys, this is a, how do we navigate change when it's uncertain, when it's unpredictable, when it's spiked, when it feels a lot, when it feels like we can't keep up, when fear has taken over and when the voice of fear slips into the driver's seat. When they scoot you out, they scoot out the voice of truth and they scoot in the voice of fear and that's in the driver's seat. Fear will go pedal to the metal. We try to keep up with the change. This is our reaction.

We try to keep up. We try to understand it. We try to make sense of the confusion, but we try to manipulate the unpredictability. We try to force predictability. We try to understand something we can't understand.

We try to manage the chaos that we didn't create. And we focus on all of the things outside of our control. We start reading the news or talking to people and what's going down and where our brain is trying to collect information to create a sense of safety and security. Or it's trying to create a plan to protect and defend your existence, your career, your school, your staff members, your students. We're in fight or flight right now.

We have intense amounts of unpredictability and uncertainty. So what do we do in these times? Focusing on the fear. Consuming fear. Consuming what worries you.

Dwelling on it. Thinking about it. Perseverating on it. It's only expanding the fear and what it does it expands your fear, which expands your doubt, which expands your disempowerment. You feel helpless, out of control, no sense of understanding, a lack of purpose, a lack of vision, mission.

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It feels like when fear is in the driver's seat, it drives you right into a bank of fog. And you have no control because you're not in the driver's seat. You can't slow down. You can't pull over. You can't redirect the car.

You're just driving through the fog, not knowing if there's an obstacle in the way, if the road's going to turn, other traffic is coming.

It feels so helpless. And people are desperate for certainty in their lives. So if you are out there feeling an extreme sense of uncertainty, first I want you to know you're not alone. There are hundreds, if not thousands, if not tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of educators, if not millions, who feel similarly.

So on days when it doesn't feel like you can make sense of the world or understand your place in it or know what to do about it, or feel like you're not doing enough, slowing your body down will slow down your nervous system, your breathing. The urge when you are in fear is to go hyper speed, to do more, to be more, to figure out more, to learn more, to hear more, to understand more, to talk more, to clean up more, more, more, more. We want to outrun the uncertainty.

It feels like we're trying to outpace it so we can get back to certainty. But that begets more uncertainty, more fear. And now we're fueling our lives, our careers, our experience, our days with fear. And I want you to think about that. Do you choose to be a school leader, a district leader, who comes in every day to the office and makes decisions and takes actions out of fear, out of hopelessness, out of uncertainty? Do you lead people that way? Is that your preferred method? Does it feel good to you to be in that zone of leadership? Or would it feel better to believe that you have the ability to create certainty during uncertain times?

We know the world is uncertain, but right now there has been a spike in uncertainty. And when there's a spike, we go into fight or flight. And so

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we're in the amygdala brain, trying to figure out and trying to rationalize, but that's not where rationalization happens. The response to uncertainty is to slow down.

Slow down your physical body. Stop moving. Stop trying so hard. Slow down your body. Slow down your breath. Slow down your nervous system. Slowing down your body and your breathing will slow down your mind. Slowing it out of fight or flight and moving it back up into your prefrontal cortex. And then slowing down your mind will start to slow down your worries. And I look at my worries and I say, what am I actually worried about in this moment? And you'll find that in that moment, you're worried about a future fear, an anticipated fear. But what about this? But what if that? But what if this?

And that's where doubt will start to calm because you'll say, wait a minute, if this happens, then what? I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. But if you slow down the doubt, wait a minute, but if I did know, slowing down the doubt slows the confusion, and slowing down your confusion will speed up your clarity.

It feels very counterintuitive when you need to go a million miles an hour, so your brain tells you, to say stop, take 5 minute time out, and sit, and literally slow down your physical body, your breathing, let your nervous system catch up, and let your mind slow down, and let your worries come to the surface, but see them as separate. You'll see the worries and you'll feel the doubt of how you're going to handle it. And then the doubt will be quieted when you say, wait a minute, I'm not confused.

And when you allow yourself to not be confused, What will I actually do? Let me answer the question. I don't want to stay in confusion. I don't want to stay in doubt.

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The quickest way to cut through confusion and doubt is to say, but if I did know, what would I actually do? Not spin out like, I don't know what I would do. Chicken with your head cut off running around. The sky is falling. What would I actually do?

And just like that, you will snap back into alignment, back into awareness, back into alignment because you're able to go back into thinking rationally, like, okay, now that I'm slow, now that I'm back in my mind, I've slowed my mind from chasing away and racing away, my worries, they're still there, but they're not pushing the pedal down to the floor. They're just sitting there. With the truth of who you are, with the faith in what you value, with the trust of where you are headed no matter what, with the certainty of how you want to show up for you, and with the confidence that you are capable and that you can do this, even in the chaos of uncertainty. Because what's true at the bottom line, your truth, your ultimate truth, is that you will do what you need to do.

And it will feel like the right thing to do. You will have clarity. You will drop confusion. You will drop doubt. You will drop worry.

When you know for certain that at the end of the day, you're going to have your own back, you're going to take care of the people you love, you're going to lead the school with the best of your intentions and with the most integrity you can, and you're going to lead during uncertain times no matter what.

I get it. It's very easy to get caught up in the overwhelm. The world is full of overwhelm and it can snatch our attention with all of its unpredictability and chaos. And there's a little part of our brains that like that because it's exciting and it's curious and it's adventurous and it gives us this big rush of adrenaline and all this, whoa, dopamine being in the loop.

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Be mindful of that. It's an addiction. And if it serves you well to be informed, that's different than getting caught up in having to know and being in a loop of being addicted to the adrenaline, the dopamine, all of the drama.

So what's happening outside of you is out of your control. And we try so hard to control it. There's so much out of our control. Actually it's astounding how much is out of our control. Everything but one. And the thing that will always be within our power, from birth through death, is how we choose to lead ourselves.

We will always have a power within us in how we lead ourselves, how we determine who we are and how we show up in the world, how we choose to experience our lives both personally and professionally, how we decide to respond to circumstances that are not of our own doing, and how we respond to circumstances that are because of our own doing, taking ownership and taking ownership of how we respond to things that are outside of our ownership. Not by jumping over into the other lane and trying to control, but by staying in our lane and doing our part with what feels aligned to who we are, to your identity, to your values, to what you believe in.

Trust, safety, calm, peace, certainty. All of the things you want to feel are within your reach. So what do you have control over? You. Your thoughts, your beliefs, what you value, how you feel about things, what you do in reaction to those things, the level of emotional regulation you have, the level of mental regulation that you have, where you prioritize your time, your attention, where you put your love into the world, where you put your light into the world, and you also have control over what brings you peace, calm, certainty, safety.

Because the things that you want in a time of uncertainty is to feel safe, is to feel certain, is to feel some calm, feel some peace, feel some balance. These are emotions that you want during times of uncertainty. We want to

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feel this way. No matter what's going on around us, we can still feel that way.

So when you want to feel grounded, aligned, safe, certain, redirect your attention back to thoughts that generate these emotions. Thoughts you actually believe. What you do know to be true, where you can say a thought out loud and say, yeah, I see the truth in that. I see where that's true. Thoughts that you probably aren't thinking on a regular basis, but when you say them or you write them down or you read them, you're like, oh yeah, that brings two for me. I do know what I would do in an emergency.

I do know what I'm going to do if X happens or if Y happens. And I know at the end of the day, what I value most are my relationships with my loved ones, my staff, students, and community. I'll take the action. I'll do what I can. But half of my work, half of my work is not in the doing of school leadership.

It's in the being. It's in the identity of it. It's in the identity of I'm a calm, aligned leader who gets up and works from a place of integrity, a place of alignment, a place of truth, and a place of certainty.

Even when the world is uncertain, there's some chaos out there, don't dismiss how you feel, acknowledge it. If you're angry, be angry. If you're sad, be sad. If you're frustrated, be frustrated.

But if you're overwhelmed, be curious. You know, I'm not really sure how to end this podcast because I sense that the uncertainty of education will continue. I don't know that it's the worst thing that could happen. I think the institution of education has been riding on a very consistent train, maybe a little too consistent for a very, very long time. And it has been wonderful to have such predictability as an educator. And we're equally frustrated by the

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consistency. The consistency of inequalities. The consistency is equally infuriating.

The consistency in our test scores, the consistency in who's in intervention and who's not, the consistency of behavior struggles, the consistency of teacher burnout, the consistency of turnover.

There's a lot of consistency in education that we don't want. And so I invite you to do this work because we are in an era of inconsistency. And that change is going to bring about a wild ride. Some of it good, some of it difficult, but we're here for it. We've got you in EPC. Come on in. Join the movement. Change is inevitable, but we are riding the wave. Have a good week and take care of yourself. Talk soon.

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.