

Ep #392: The Purpose of Conflict



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, empowered principals. Welcome to episode 392.

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, happy July. And for those of you who live here in the United States, happy Independence Day up and coming. This is the summer of fun. I hope you're having a great time. We are certainly having a blast in the Summer of Fun Challenge. I hope you guys join the Facebook group, prizes, we're having so much fun. I hope you're having fun. We are having fun.

And I'm really excited because the Empowered Principal Alive, which is my very first inaugural in-person event, is coming up in a couple of weeks here in the middle of July. I'm so excited to be hosting this. I have dreamed of having an in-person event for so many years, and as I was building up clientele and building up the momentum, COVID happened. And then the pandemic shut us all down and we weren't allowed to be together. And then my life unfolded in ways I could have never imagined, but here I am hosting my first one. I have the capacity to do it. I'm keeping it small and intimate, but I am so excited.

It's really about the vibe. When you are in person, the experience of coaching and mentorship and planning and collaborating, it feels different. It lands different when you are in person in the energy of the collective group and in that collaborative energy, in the mastermind energy, and in the openness of expanding yourself, evolving your identity, growing and evolving your personal development and growing as a leader, but as a human. And so we're going to be doing that in these 3 days of Empowered Principal Alive. I'm so, so excited. And I can't believe this is happening. This has been a dream come true. I'm going into my 9th year of coaching school leaders. I can't believe I'm saying that it's almost been a decade. This is

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crazy. But I have wanted to do this for so long and I am really excited about it. So I'll keep you posted on that.

I have a short and sweet little podcast for you today. I just jumped off a coaching call with a one-on-one client of mine and she was describing this situation. It was a very familiar situation. Now, granted, this took place in an elementary school and this podcast may lean a little towards elementary because I was an elementary principal. This person is an elementary principal, but I do want you to know that what I'm about to say can be applied at any level. And I'm talking from the little babies up to the adults on campus because what I want to discuss with you is the purpose of conflict.

So in this scenario, just to set the context for you and to tell you the story, which I can imagine if any of you are school leaders out there listening to this podcast, which I'm pretty sure you are, you've had this experience. So, in this case, there were two different scenarios. There were two kindergarteners who were just not getting along. They were having a lot of conflict. There wasn't intentional malice, but the two they were gravitating to one another, but then they were having conflict and somebody was getting hurt or somebody's feelings were getting hurt. So there was a conflict between two 5-year-olds and the parents wanted the children to be separated. That's scenario one.

The other scenario was two 5th-grade students where there was a boy and a girl. The boy was harassing the girl. It was observed, witnessed, it was documented. There were consequences involved for the behavior, and the behavior continued, and one of the parents got extremely upset. Obviously, the parent of the child who was being harassed was upset and approached. She came to school to pick up her child because the child had texted mother and said she was unhappy, and the mother came to pick up the child, but when she went to pick up the child, she approached the other student and said some words to the other student and immediately realized she had overstepped, came to the office, apologized, acknowledged the overstep, but that created discomfort in the parents of the other child, right?

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I paint this because as much as parents think that conflict should not happen on a campus and shouldn't be happening particularly at the elementary level, but if you are a middle school or a high school and there are conflicts with students, parents still feel that conflict should not be happening. And they want you to eradicate conflict from happening, okay? So I say this to let you know that these to parents feel very emotionally charged, very important, very scary. The fight or flight, mama bear syndrome comes out, the need to protect the children. That emotional reaction will come out. Yet as educators, we deal with children and students all day long.

And I would give us the title of expert when it comes to developmentally appropriate behavior. And granted, there is a wide spectrum of behavior at an elementary school, a middle school, a high school depending on the child's background, the child's needs, neurological needs, psychological needs, cognitive abilities, all of that. So while there is a developmentally appropriate expectation for a 5-year-old, a 10-year-old, a 15-year-old, there is a wide variance that we are familiar with because we work with a variety of kids, but parents only have 1, 2, 3, maybe 4 kids at home to know what feels normal to them.

Okay? So the first thing I want to offer is that when it comes to student behavior, parents, they're calibrating based on their experience as parents. They only have the perspective of what feels normal and developmentally average or appropriate in their home. If they do not work with children, the only perspective they have is their children and probably their children's friends or their nieces and nephews. There is a circle of children that they engage with, perhaps, you know, boy scout, girl scout team or, you know, basketball team, soccer team, whatever.

They have a limited perspective of the variance of behaviors and the variety of what developmentally appropriate looks like... number one. Number two, we have a much greater perspective because we work with all of the children coming from all of the backgrounds, having all different kinds

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of experiences, challenges, strengths, talents, brilliances, all of that. So there is a difference in perspective between educators and parents based on what they have been exposed to. We're exposed to many, many children year after year after year. They are exposed to a limited scope of children based on whatever their personal circle is and interacting with children.

Now, number two, when there is a conflict, we know as educators that inevitably conflict is going to happen. We know because we see it year after year. We are in the business of developing humans, whether you're working at a preschool or a high school or college. There is going to be conflict. That is the reality of the human experience. Whether you're 3 or 5 or 10 or 15 or 25 or 55, the human experience involves conflict.

So there can be a gap between expectation and reality. I know as parents, and I did this as a parent too, our expectation for our children is that we wish for them to never have pain, to never go through heartbreak, to never be rejected, to never get teased, to never get bullied, to never have somebody harass them, to never feel left out, to never be embarrassed. We don't want them to feel uncomfortable because we love them so much and they are an extension of us. So when we want to bubble wrap our children and we want to protect them fiercely, like a mama bear, papa bear, what we're doing is we're protecting them because of how we think and feel.

So just putting on your parent hat for a minute here. If you are a parent or you have niece or, if you have any child that you love fiercely enough that you want to protect them from pain, protect them from harm, any kind of physical pain, mental pain, emotional pain, particularly that emotional pain, when we want to bubble wrap them, protect them, and coddle them and hold them from the reality of the human experience, we're doing so because we love them so much and because it hurts us to see them in pain.

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As a parent, I did not ever want to see Alex suffer. I didn't want to see him sad or hurt or in grief or discouraged or defeated or in pain or rejected. I didn't want to see him go through his first heartbreak. And guess what? It's a part of the human experience. To bubble wrap him and protect him would be denying him the human experience and the duality of life and the 50/50 of life that is the highs and the lows and the contrast of the human experience. It doesn't feel good to fall in love with the one if you only know the one. You've never had the heartbreaks. You've never kissed the toads. You've never had dates that went totally sideways or you thought you were in a serious relationship with the one and they ended up not being the one and you were so crushed, but then you meet the one, you're like, oh, I didn't even know what I needed and wanted until this came along, but I had to have that experience to know what I did and didn't want.

Okay? So as a parent, we want to understand that parents coming in are wanting to protect their children. One, they have a limited scope of understanding and experience with what is considered average, normal, developmental and a part of the human experience when it comes to conflict. Number two, it is so sensitive for parents because they don't want to see their kids in pain because when they see them in pain, they're in pain. It hurts us as parents so much to see our kids in pain. And so parents are coming in protecting children to actually protect their own hearts. Okay?

So keeping that in perspective as you're working with parents, and when you are working with what is inevitable, which is conflict, in order to shift culture, to shift mindset, to turn and steer the conversation to something more productive, when parents come to you and want... when their goal is to eliminate conflict, to extinguish it, to try and oppress it from happening or avoid it from happening or deter it from happening, this is where we can come in with insight, with wisdom to help them understand that there is a purpose to conflict. There's a reason that humans experience conflict. There's a reason that young children have conflict. And it's not a problem to have conflict. So number one takeaway is conflict isn't a problem. It's not. It's there for a reason. It has a purpose. There is a purpose to the conflict.

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Why do we have conflict? You can have these conversations with parents. If humans were not supposed to have conflict, why is it that there is conflict? In the world there's conflict, adults have conflict. Conflict isn't the problem, our interpretation of what we make it mean. What does conflict mean to people? For many people, it's very scary. It means physical pain or it means psychological pain or it means mental anguish or it means something's going to be taken away. There's going to be a loss, there's going to be grief or there's going to be an altercation of some kind. But there's something very scary about it, which is why we try to bubble wrap our kids from it. But the truth is that we can shift these conversations around conflict to give purpose to conflict, to give meaning to conflict, to see the value in conflict.

So what is the purpose of conflict? Why do we have it? Why is it there? Exploring those questions. What is the benefit of conflict? Why is it better for kids to have and experience conflict at younger ages? We don't want to expose kids to conflict and to pain that they're not developmentally prepared or ready to handle, but we do want to notice there is a benefit to conflict because it's the reality. We want to equip kids with conflict management strategies, emotional regulation strategies.

The reason we avoid conflict, it's not because the conflict's a problem. Conflict allows us to know what we like, what we don't, what we value, what we believe in, what we don't, the duality and the differences and the diversities in the world that everybody's allowed to have different belief systems, different values, different perspectives, different approaches, different walks of life, beat to different drums. That's the beauty of life. Conflict is a part of the experience. But we don't have to make it mean that it is a negative experience or that it's a problem. Conflict is normal. It's supposed to happen. There's a reason for it.

It's for us to learn how to navigate it. And when children have conflict, we can work with parents and with kids to help them understand conflict's normal. It's okay. Nothing's gone terribly wrong. This is a normal natural

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part of being a human. There's going to be some feelings involved with conflict. We can normalize the feelings that come with conflict. It's okay to be frustrated right now. It's okay to have a different perspective and view. It's okay to be sad or to feel that your idea was rejected by your friend.

It's okay that they want to play foursquare when you want to play soccer. That's okay. You might feel sad. It's okay to be sad. It's okay. Normalizing conflict, normalizing behavior, not because we're promoting conflict, but we're leveraging it to teach, to develop skill sets, mindsets, emotional bandwidth, mental bandwidth, help them navigate conflict, so that when conflict occurs, children recognize it, they understand it, they're not afraid of it, they don't feel they need to be swooped away from it, protected from it, or, you know, saved by somebody else from it. They learn tools and they learn to normalize it so that they can feel empowered in it. We're having a conflict. They can name it. I'm feeling this way. How are you feeling? It's okay that we both feel differently right now. It's okay to have different perspectives. What's your perspective? Teaching kids how to have discourse and conversation versus running away from conflict.

The 5th-grade example I gave you where one student is harassing another student, there is a reason for that child's behavior. There's a reason that child is exhibiting harassing behaviors. And there's a reason that the other child is interpreting them as harassing behaviors. Interesting to notice the identities of each victim or maybe it is real, and what's going on for the student who's harassing, what's going on for the student who's being harassed? What are their STEAR Cycles? What are the skill sets we need to teach both students in the harassment, the person who's harassing, why are you doing it? Creating awareness. What's an alternate way to get what you need? There's a need that has to be filled there.

The child's harassing the other child for a reason. What is it they're seeking to obtain? How are they looking to feel? What are they wanting to achieve? Is it connection? Is it attention? Is it validation? Do they actually like this person, but the person's not, you know, giving them the time of day, and so

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they're looking for that attention, so they're doing undue attention seeking? What's going on for them? And helping them see like, oh, when I'm behaving this way and it's not being received well or it's not appropriate, what is it that's going on for me and how can I achieve what I want to feel in a way that's more appropriate?

And when somebody is harassing me, what are the skills that I need to have in order to get it to stop? As a 5th grader, being able to say no, stop, I don't like that, and then reporting it, having those skill sets, and then being able to have a conversation and expressing this is what this feels like for me, I don't like it, this is how it feels, this is how I would like us to interact. This is not welcomed behavior, being able to communicate that and speak up, and then bringing the adults in and having that same conversation because if you look around, adults struggle with conflict.

We think it's a problem. And it can be a problem. It can be a problem when nobody in the room has the tools, and when the conflict escalates and escalates and the emotional intensity increases and gets to a point where it blows, and then something is done or something is said and somebody gets physically hurt or emotionally hurt or mentally hurt, psychologically hurt and there has been a crossover into the conflict rising so much so that we've created now an actual problem. The conflict's not a problem. Our problem is in our fear of it and our inability to handle it emotionally.

So these are questions you can be exploring this year with your staff and your students. The purpose of conflict, the benefit of conflict. What's the value of it? How do we become stronger because of it? If conflict's not a problem, then what? Who are we when we are humans having conflict? What does it look like when you're 5? What does it look like when you're 15? What does it look like when you're 50? How can we have conversations around differences of opinion, differences and what's appropriate in action and behavior and words, and holding these conversations and having the capacity, the mental, physical, and emotional

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space to even sit down and have those what feels uncomfortable when we're talking about conversations of conflict.

So these are just ideas, questions to ponder, to contemplate, and to invite into conversation with your staff, your students, and your parent community around conflict being normal, conflict being a part of the human experience for children and adults, and exploring what it means, what we're making it mean, and how we can leverage it to teach skill set and to expand children's ability to normalize conflict, to normalize the emotions that come with it, and to be able to have the skill set, the tools to resolve it.

And with that, I wish you the most beautiful day. Happy July, happy Independence Day. Sign up for EPC. We are starting the 1st of August. I hope you all decide to join us. It will be magnificent. I'm really upping the intensity and the level and the quality of EPC every year. I just evolve it into something even more. It's going to be an incredible hybrid of teaching, professional development, personal development, exploring, masterminding, collaborating. It's the place for school leaders to be. Come on into EPC. I can't wait to meet you and I will see you all on the podcast next week. Take good care of yourselves. Bye.

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