

Ep #399: One Thing at a Time: A Principal's Guide to Productivity



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, empowered principals. Welcome to episode 399.

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. 399 episodes. Next week, we will be celebrating 400 episodes. My mind is blown. I am so proud of this podcast. I cannot tell you. This is what showing up for over 7.5 years looks like, my friends.

I'm so happy to be here with you each and every week. I love hearing that you can't wait to hear the podcast. You're so excited it's Tuesday morning and the podcast has dropped and you're listening to it on your walks or your hikes or your commute into work for the day. It's so much fun to be here with you. If we aren't in person, we are together in soul, mind, spirit, and I am just delighted to be a part of your lives. So thank you. Thank you for inviting me in. I really appreciate that.

And if you are new to this podcast, welcome. We are so happy you are here. Congratulations on being a school leader or an aspiring school leader or a district school leader, county, state, fed school leaders. We're all here to feel empowered for the upcoming school year.

So, with that in mind, as you are preparing for the first day of school, I really want you to keep this front and center in your mind space. You are ever only doing one thing at a time. Now, I know your mind will play your to-do list on repeat. It's like a playlist on Spotify. It goes on repeat. It just plays over and over and over. And it can make it feel like there are 100 things on the playlist that need to get done today, right now, all urgent.

Ep #399: One Thing at a Time: A Principal's Guide to Productivity

Your mind is going to go down rabbit holes of all the potential obstacles and all the potential setbacks and all the potential problems, all the what ifs. And you can let it go there, worst-case scenario, play it out, create a plan, but it's going to want to distract you with those rabbit holes. What about this? What about that? What if this happens? What if they say this? What if they do that? What if this doesn't get done? What if the construction workers never come back?

Just notice. It will want you to delay, to distract, to talk you out of doing things that it worries are going to feel hard or painful or risky. Your brain is going to test your ability to stay focused and stay committed to the tasks that you have planned to do for the day. It's one thing to plan and calendar out the things you want to get done. It's another thing to honor it and to work through those distractions and delays and procrastination urges.

It's going to want interruptions to happen, and it will take on these little emergencies that feel very productive and very important because it gets you out of honoring the thing you said you would get done. It feels good to put workout, take a walk, ride my bike, go to the gym on the calendar. It feels really good to do that. I'm honoring my body. I'm going to move my body. It feels good. It's healthy, productive. I love putting it on my calendar.

It is another thing to wake up at 5 a.m., put on your yoga pants, put on your shoes to get in the cold car, grab your mat, grab your water, and to get over to that yoga class. There is a difference. Your brain doesn't want to do the thing. It likes to think about the thing. It's going to tease you with all the fun things you can do in the building. Like, oh, I need to walk around and say hi and welcome people and build relationships. I need to get organized. I need to plan. I need to research. I need to figure out what other people are doing for their PD.

It loves to do these simple little tasks. Things like, "Oh, let me take this off your plate. Let me run that errand for you." It wants to feel productive, feel good, create those connections, but when you're doing them in the name of

Ep #399: One Thing at a Time: A Principal's Guide to Productivity

distraction, delay, procrastination, it is not serving you or your school. So be very mindful of these little mental smoke and mirrors that your brain offers you, these little distractions, these little chases of dopamine hits, these little mini wins, the checking the box of the things that are easy and fast.

Just be mindful of the games that your brain will offer you. It's a test. It's a conditioning exercise to see if you can stay focused, stay disciplined, to stay in alignment with your goals and your dreams and your desires and what you actually want to get done.

And your brain is going to tell you, particularly at the beginning of the year as we're kicking off the 2025-2026 school year, your brain is going to tell you that you have so much to do and there's not enough time. I cannot tell you. I cannot count. I cannot fill the oceans with the number of times I've heard, "I'm just so busy. There's just so much to do. Oh my gosh, I am, I am overwhelmed."

The solution is in the specifics. You're going to feel the urge in response to that to-do list to kick into very high gear, to go into power mode. But what you do in order to stay in power mode is you disconnect from your physical self and your emotional needs. You're going to feel exhaustion, frustration, exasperation, discontent. You're going to feel restless. You're going to feel really tired, fatigue, mental fatigue, emotional fatigue, physical fatigue, psychological fatigue, when you don't check in with your body, your mind, your emotional state.

And you're going to feel really frustrated and very unfulfilled when you don't actually complete the things that you wanted to complete. You planned to complete and then you did not complete them.

So the beginning of the school year is a beautiful opportunity to use it as a window into how you think, how you make decisions, how you problem solve, how you manage your emotions, how you manage your physical energy, how you navigate leadership. It's a window in how we plan,

Ep #399: One Thing at a Time: A Principal's Guide to Productivity

prioritize, constrain, how we say no to things, how we delegate tasks, and how we honor that plan, how we follow through with those priorities, how we say no to things outside of our priorities, and how well we trust in ourselves and in others.

So the beginning of the year is really a window into our level of focus, our level of determination, and the discipline we have to honor ourselves, to honor our plan, to honor the goals that we have for this year. There will be many shiny objects. It's very easy to get lured into chasing them. I know because I'm the queen of it. I used to identify as, I'm ADHD. My son would say, "Mom, do you know there's medication for this that can help you focus? You do know that you don't have to look at every squirrel, at every bird, at every shiny object that comes your way. Focus."

This is my own son speaking to me. I used to identify as a person who was easily distractible, and I took on that identity. I wore it and I lived it. And I have decided this year in 2025 at the age of 54 that I'm no longer going to identify as a person who's super distractible and unfocused and undisciplined and cannot follow through with her own calendar. And look, I teach this to school leaders. I teach planning mastery, organizational mastery, balance mastery, time mastery, planning mastery, all of it.

And as a teacher, I was very disciplined in my time and planning. I was a master at it. My colleagues were astounded at how well I planned, how efficiently I planned, how efficiently I could produce results, how I could get in, get busy, get done, get out, and still live a life. I was a single mom. I got very tight, so I know how to master my calendar and honor it.

And as circumstances are, as things ebb and flow in our life, I found myself with such an abundance of time, I was actually much less efficient with my time, much less productive with my time. Oh, I can do that later. Oh, I can, I'll do that tomorrow. Today I need to heal. Today I need to rest. Today I need to have fun and just plan and figure life out tomorrow. And that kept happening. I noticed myself and it didn't feel in alignment with who I was.

Ep #399: One Thing at a Time: A Principal's Guide to Productivity

So you can sway from one end to the other where you're hyper vigilant and focused and overworking to the point you're not checking in with your mind, your body, and what it needs to rest and play and recover, to the other extreme where you can get apathetic and just feel like, "Well, I'll just do it tomorrow and I don't need to plan and I'll just flow and go." That's an all-or-none mentality, and I caught myself in it this summer.

A lot of my one-on-one clients took breaks over the summer. EPC is paused during June and July for people to experience a summer of fun. And I was out having so much fun that I was failing to schedule and plan because it just felt like there's just tomorrow. And now here it is. We're in August, ready to go. And I've had to remind myself, reconnect with my alignment, and be in integrity and to mind my calendar and mind my energy and to manage it.

So this time of year is beautiful. It's perfect. It's an invitation into our level of awareness and alignment. How tuned in we are to our physical, our mental, and our emotional needs. How aligned we are to our values, what we value, the vision we have for our school, for our lives, for ourselves, our careers, our marriages, our relationships, our friendships, our children.

How aligned we are to the goals we want, the desires we have, the experiences we want to create for ourselves. So this beginning of school year is a brand-new start. It's a fresh start. It's an excellent time to observe ourselves, to be witness to our minds, our thoughts, our emotional states, our actions, our inactions, to be aware of what we perceive as obstacles and limitations to the things that we want.

Not so much to fix all of them, not to get back into the hustle and grind of fixing all the problems all at once, not to add pressure to change onto our to-do list. You know, it's like, "Oh, I got to get better at this. I need to be better at this. I need to change this, fix this. I need to..." Not all of that, but just to create awareness, to use it as a guide. More of this, a little less of that. Turn up the volume here, turn down the volume here. Get a little more

Ep #399: One Thing at a Time: A Principal's Guide to Productivity

food and rest over here, drink a little more water over there. Just little tweaks. A little extra sip here, put a bottle of water in the car there, put it on your desk versus in the refrigerator so it's a visual reminder to drink it. Little things. You don't need to be perfect. We're not changing the world. We're not going all or none.

It's just a moment to see ourselves, to question, to explore, to invite, to lean into who we are a little bit more, to create our identity, little by little, day by day, step by step, and to create the awareness that at any given moment of your day, whether you are at home, in the car, at the office, at the district level, wherever your body is on the planet that day, you are always only doing one thing at a time.

Even when you think you're multitasking, you're really doing one thing. Even when you're driving and listening to the podcast, you are physically engaged in the act of driving. The outcome you're going to create when you drive is that you're going to go from A to B. Now, you can autopilot your actions while your brain is thinking about the podcast, the content of this podcast. So you're thinking about what I'm saying as you're doing the action of driving.

And this podcast, you can check off the box and say you've listened to the podcast, but you haven't taken action on the podcast, unless the action is an internal mindset shift that's occurring. But even so, that mindset hasn't created a different result yet in the external version of your life.

So even when you think you're multitasking, and I've really explored this because I used to preach multitasking. I used to be the poster woman of multitasking. I thought it was the right thing to do. I thought it was the efficient, effective thing to do, most productive thing to do. But I noticed when I'm actually in a meeting, but I'm also checking my phone for emails, I'm either engaged in answering an email or I'm engaged in the meeting. I'm not actually both. I might physically be present at the meeting, but if I'm

Ep #399: One Thing at a Time: A Principal's Guide to Productivity

engaged in my computer or on my phone, I'm not engaged in the meeting. There's one thing that I'm doing at a time.

So it feels like you're multitasking because your body's in one space and your mind is in another space, but you're really only doing one or the other. You're physically creating a result or you're mentally preparing to create a result, but you're not doing both. You can never be physically producing more than one result at a time.

Your body is always in one space. Have you noticed in your house, you might have a 5,000 square foot house, but your body is only enjoying one space at a time. You're either in your bathroom getting ready for the day or you're in your bed, or you're relaxing reading a book, or you're sitting by your fireplace, or you're out in your garage tinkering, or you're in your kitchen creating some delicious delectable to eat. But you're only in one space. You're in your office or you're in your bedroom or you're in your living room or you're in your kitchen. You're either inside or you're outside. You're in one space.

So I started playing with this. It's like, "Oh, I'm actually only really ever doing one thing at a time. So let me just be really honest with myself about that and stop this nonsense that I'm doing multiple things at once." Now, do I love to drive up to the lake and call all of my friends and touch base and have great conversations or listen to a podcast or re-listen to one of my coach's sessions that we have been working on? Absolutely. But I don't consider it multitasking. I consider it the way I'm enjoying the drive. It's how I am present.

Sometimes I'm present in silence. Other times I'm present in connection with my friends on the phone while I'm driving. And other times I am relearning or learning, listening, engaging my mind while my body's physically driving me up to the lake. So it's not a problem to have your body producing one result and your mind thinking about a different one. The

Ep #399: One Thing at a Time: A Principal's Guide to Productivity

brain has upwards of 60 to 80,000 thoughts per day. It's going to go faster than your body can keep up. It's normal.

Where we create stress for ourselves is when we think that we should act on every thought we have at the time we have it. We want our body to keep up and to produce results at the rate in which we are thinking. That's like saying we want to be able to travel at the speed of light. We want to be able to produce results at the speed of light. Let's accept the reality that our mind operates much faster than our body can produce an external result and give our body some time and space to do one thing at a time.

The mind's going to go, "Oh, I should do this. Oh wait, over here. Oh wait, this too. Oh, that. Oh, and over this here, this one too." And that's where we start to feel overwhelmed or we feel discouraged, or we feel exhausted or we're upset with ourselves for being so distractible. Then you berate yourself. That's what I was doing. Like, "Why can't you focus? Why can't you sit down and just do this thing? What's coming up for you? Why are we staring out the window or and half an hour on Instagram or answering people's funny memes?"

You know what I'm talking about. There's a million bazillion distractions that humans have created for ourselves to entertain ourselves, but it is with the intention to distract. If you're on Instagram, you're on Facebook, you're on TikTok, whatever your social media means is, if you're on that, you're not producing other things. You're consuming, not creating.

So chasing the to-do list instead of managing it is where we feel frustrated that we have too much to do and not enough time. We're chasing our thoughts at the speed of light, trying to create by doing one more thing at a time and one more thing and one more thing, and we think we're doing more than one thing, but we never are.

So let's use the tools available to us to manage our time, manage our mind, manage our calendar, manage our goals, manage our priorities. And in

Ep #399: One Thing at a Time: A Principal's Guide to Productivity

EPC this year, we've already started, so join us before the doors close. We're going to take relentless responsibility for ourselves this year. Responsibility for our time, our energy, our planning, our relationships, the outcomes that we're producing.

I'm going to be talking about relentless responsibility in the next podcast, but for now, this is your takeaway for this podcast. When you focus on the one thing in front of you, it doesn't feel as hard as it does when you are in the act of doing it versus when you're sitting thinking about doing it. Thinking about it feels hard. Doing it, it's like, "Oh, I'm actually just sitting down at my desk. Oh, I'm actually just typing. I'm actually just reading. I'm actually just editing." The physical actions that we take typically aren't hard for us. We know how to sit. We know how to type. We know how to read. We know how to plan, write things down on a calendar or on a whiteboard. Those things aren't hard.

What feels hard is not what we do. What feels hard is how we feel when we're doing it. Thinking can feel hard. Deciding can feel hard. Talking to someone can feel hard. Creating new solutions, new ideas, creating documents can feel hard. Problem solving can feel hard. Putting yourself out in public can feel hard. Not because we're not physically capable of the work, but because we are expanding our capacity for the emotions that come with the work.

So this year, as you're launching your new school year, it is a fresh start and you can remind yourself that you're only ever doing one thing at a time. So practice, exercise this, build your skills, expand your capacity to plan, prepare, focus, honor your calendar, do what you say you're going to do, enjoy that delight of discipline and discernment between real emergencies and distractions.

Have a beautiful week. Keep it simple. I love you all. Happy Tuesday and I'll talk to you next week. Take good care. Bye.

Ep #399: One Thing at a Time: A Principal's Guide to Productivity

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.