

**Ep #432: The Neuroscience of Behavior:
How to Create the Conditions for Real Transformation
with Dr. Lisa Riegel**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, empowered principals. Welcome to episode 432.

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.

All right, my empowered principals, you are in for an outstanding interview with Dr. Lisa Riegel. She studies brain neurology and its impact on teaching, learning, and leading. I was profoundly moved by this interview. She is exquisite. She's got some books that you can find in the show notes. There are links to those books in the show notes, and you are going to find this the most extraordinary interview. I loved it. I can't wait to collaborate with her further in the future. I hope and I know you will enjoy this show.

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Angela Kelly: It is such a pleasure to be here with you today. Happy Tuesday and welcome to the podcast. I have a special guest with us today, Dr. Lisa Riegel. She has some incredible information to share on neuroscience, the brain, how the brain works, how kids learn, how teachers teach, and we just had a really amazing meet and greet session, and I love her work. She has an eight, it's the eight C's, correct?

Lisa Riegel: Yes.

Angela Kelly: So she's got a lot of information to share with you today. You're going to find this so valuable, and I look forward to this conversation. So Lisa, thank you for being on the podcast.

Lisa Riegel: Yeah, thank you for having me.

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Angela Kelly: Absolutely. So I'm going to let her introduce herself and her work a little bit. And one thing I know about Lisa is that she's a former teacher, and as you guys know, I really work hard to encourage people who are relevant in the field of education, who have the background, who have done the job, who've been boots on the ground as much as possible, because I want educators to feel seen and heard. And Lisa is the real deal. She has done all of the work. She's been an educator prior to the work that she's doing now. And I really admire that and respect when we get educators in here who are working to help improve the quality of education in the sense of the experience for both students, staff members, and leaders. So Lisa, welcome. Thank you so much for being here.

Lisa Riegel: Yeah, well, thank you. I'm excited for our conversation.

Angela Kelly: Yeah. Tell us a little bit about your background and your teaching experience and how you kind of evolved into the work that you're doing right now.

Lisa Riegel: Sure. So I started out as an English teacher. I taught English and journalism at a high school near Columbus. And then I did that for nine years, and then I went into administration at a career center, which was super interesting because I kind of learned like how schools are situated from an economic development standpoint. And then I had the opportunity to go do my doctoral work at Ohio State, or the Ohio State, as I have to say. And I focused in, I focused on leadership, but I was really interested in the human system. And a lot of leadership training is really around policy, org theory, the structure piece, but I was interested in how do you move people? How do you engage people?

And so I have been working in schools since, gosh, like 2010, and I've been helping school leaders to frame up change and to create the conditions necessary for those transformations to stick and persist. And so I work in schools. I do a lot of work with trauma-informed care because I

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went into the brain science, because I started when I was in my doctoral work, I was studying the social sciences like engagement and motivation and those kinds of things. And then I started thinking, real change happens in the actual brain. So what's going on in there? So I started looking into the neuroscience of behavior, and it kind of opened my eyes to a whole different reality and a whole different reason why a lot of the change that I see principals hoping for just doesn't happen.

Angela Kelly: Yes, yeah. Tell us a little bit more about that because this is something I have been exploring as well. In my work as a coach for school leaders, mentoring them not just on the skill set of leadership, but on the mindset and embodying what empowerment looks like. And then I realized, well, empowerment is the goal of education, right? We as educators are here to empower students, empower our teachers to be the best versions of themselves, to explore their own life, and to have as many opportunities as possible. And I agree with you, I think that one of the reasons that site leaders, district leaders, you know, in even in county and state, you know, all the way up in terms of educational leadership, why we feel like we're maybe banging our head against the wall is because we aren't really focusing on the regulation system, the internal regulation systems that happen that need to occur.

And, you know, I feel like I've really kind of fine-tuned it down to safety. We need to feel safe, not just physically safe. I know that's a problem in our schools, of course, but we need to be able to regulate ourselves back to a sense of safety for baseline just to be able to be available for education. So I'm curious to hear more about the work you're doing, what you found out in your research, and what you have developed to support classrooms, students, teachers, and site leaders to maintain an openness to learning and a safe place for learning from an internal standpoint.

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Lisa Riegel: So I have a book called NeuroWell that really gets into like what kind of practices, routines, and culture do we need to have a healthy system. And then I have a book called Aspirations to Operations, which is really a leader's guide book to making those transformations stick. But in both cases, the foundation for a healthy system and for fulfillment and empowerment is a sense of belonging. So, you know, how do we actually create a sense of belonging in the schools? And I think teachers, you know, for leaders, it's difficult because teachers come in, they go in their classroom, and it's a solo sport. You know, they're alone a lot. So building some of that sense of a collective identity of like, when we're here, we're all part of this. And I think for students, it also makes a big difference because if I walk into a school every day and I don't really feel like I belong or I feel othered or I'm not really comfortable, I don't have that emotional safety, then I don't feel a sense of belonging and I close down and disengage.

And then the other safety that I talk about is intellectual safety. If I go into a place and, and I think this applies to teachers and students as well, we've been talking about differentiation for 20 years, but when I go in schools, I don't see a whole lot of it. I still see a lot of teacher-led whole group instruction. So if you've got students in the classroom who are not accessing the curriculum or not feeling it's relevant, then they don't have intellectual safety. And from a biology standpoint, their body, it's the same thing. It's a stressor. And then from the teacher's side, one of the things I work with teams on is clarity. What do you want people to do? And I think we send teachers to trainings or we have somebody come in and do a training and then we say, well, they're trained. So we should be implementing. There's a whole lot that has to go on to support the human system side of change because change is scary.

So really the foundation is that sense of belonging. And there's a social scientist, actually, it's interesting, they started studying this out of the big diversity initiatives that we've had in this country. And they said, you know,

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we've kind of failed. Like people still hunker down with people who are just like they are. Like, we really don't have like the stock photo pictures of close friends from all different backgrounds. So they said, what went wrong? So they said, well, let's study a place that it isn't that way. And they went to the military and they said, how is it that soldiers form these really tight bonds with each other that last for decades and what's the difference? Because they're from wildly different backgrounds.

And what they said is that it's really this collective identity. When they are in that context, they are a soldier first. And then all the other differences are just what makes them unique. But they as a group identify together in that collective identity as a soldier. And, you know, then having time together over years and then, you know, all the other things that they do together, it creates these really strong ties. So when we think about that in schools, like coming from Ohio State, they have great collective identity. People want to be part of Buckeye Nation, even though, you know, they may be never attended there. So there's a very strong collective identity of what it means to be a Buckeye. And so that kind of collective identity breeds a sense of belonging. And yet, when you look at a lot of schools, the collective identity is negative. It's this stinks. I don't want to be here. This place is mean. This place is dangerous.

So I think, you know, we do a lot of culture work in schools, but that culture work is a lot of words. And culture's built through actions. And so how do we strategically build a culture that has a sense of collective identity and belonging, and then again, with the teachers as far as emotional safety, how are we building a place that now I come in, I feel like I belong, but I'm also safe intellectually and emotionally to engage.

Angela Kelly: Yes. I love what you said about the culture, and the military is a perfect example. And I was just thinking as you were speaking about that, like isn't sport, I feel like some sports teams are the same way where when

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you're on the team, regardless of what other team you came from when you think of professional sports, you are a member of that team. And colleges and universities are really good at creating a culture, which is just a feeling. When I was thinking about what is climate, what is culture, you know, we've been working on climate and culture in our schools for decades. It's really about how people feel about themselves, about each other, about the collective, about the community. It's how they feel regarding that climate and culture. And that is what perpetuates and creates that culture, right?

So when you're saying, one, we need to be physically safe, two, we need to be mentally and emotionally safe, but we also need to be academically safe and socially safe, which all of those are intertwined, right? Because if you're not feeling safe academically, you're definitely not feeling safe socially. And it's about creating safety on all of those levels. And that can be daunting for school leaders. So in your work, what were some elements that you found were accessible for school leaders, kind of tangible things where they could wrap their head around, first, creating their own safety to be able to go out and lead, but then to invite teachers and students into creating a collective culture of safety.

Lisa Riegel: So I think the easiest way to explain this is to think about what my eight C framework is. The first C is culture, and it's about creating this collective identity. But then there's three C's that are about planning for change or improvement. So the first one is clarity. What do you want me to do? The second is coherence. And I had a school that they spent thousands of dollars on training for personalized learning, and then they bought direct instruction curriculum. That's not coherent. And so now you've got teachers who are going to fail either way because so that doesn't breed that sense of safety.

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The third is cadence, and that's really how fast can change happen, because something we don't think about is that when teachers, you know, there's a certain sense of identity and self that we have when we're an expert or when we're the experienced person. If I start to ask people to change their behavior or change their job or how they do business, I'm threatening that expertise, and that makes us super uncomfortable. So as we think about change, how do we clearly lay out incremental steps to change that are first of all, not scary, that are within a zone of proximal development, and then how do we support that on the way through? Recognizing that if I'm a brand new teacher, I'm just trying to figure out how to get the kids to sit down and how do I organize my time, where if I'm a teacher in mid-career, I might be ready for change. Or if I'm a teacher who's a veteran who's been very, you know, seasoned and is respected among the staff, I might be pushing back against it, and I actually might take a longer time to change. So those first three C's are the clarity, coherence, and cadence.

Then there's two C's that are about engaging the people, and there's coaching and collaboration. We put a lot of people in rooms and do really unproductive things. So designing purposeful collaboration, it's a skill. And coaching as well. Like I see a lot of times in schools, we have teachers who are not doing what the principal wants them to do, but they're not adequately coaching them to make changes. So then it causes conflict and it causes this sense of these teachers don't want to do this or don't want to do that, when the reality is maybe you haven't led them to do that.

Then the last C's are about sustainability, and they are communication and celebration. And those are the big ones. So back to your original question about culture, it starts by having strategic ways that we are doing action. Culture is a feeling, but how you get that feeling is through action, not through words and posters. And so how do we build much like a sports team? You know, do we have routines? Do we have taglines or sayings?

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Do we have things that say this is how we do things here and build that sense of collective identity?

But the second thing that we miss is celebrations. And I see a lot of, you know, principals that will think of culture and be like, well, we're doing an appreciation lunch or we're doing this. And it's like, that's nice. People appreciate that. A free meal is great. But real, authentic celebration that ends up actually reinforcing your culture is when you see someone doing the actions that build the culture you want, and you are celebrating them for doing those actions. It has to be tied to what you want to see and hear, which goes back to that clarity piece. If you don't have clarity of what it looks like, you're never going to get there.

Angela Kelly: Right. Yes. And that is where the work that I do is helping principals and district leaders learn how to coach. Like you were saying, part of helping the staff to help students is the capacity to coach and mentor. And they are different. Coaching and mentoring are two different things, and we have to break those down. But no one taught school leaders the skill of mentorship and coaching and the difference between the two, how it looks and feels for the person who's mentoring and the person who's being mentored. And that's a skill that we can add to enhance our leadership capacity. So I appreciate you bringing that up.

Every C, it's so interesting, every C that you mentioned is something I have experienced as a school leader and as a teacher, the presence of it and the lack of it. And to see the gap between the two, I have felt them, you know, and experienced them both as a leader and as a teacher and a district leader, because the further I went up, and maybe this is the same for you, the further I went up, it was almost like the bigger the gap actually grew in terms of culture, in terms of my connection with kids and families and communities, and then the communication gap, it just seemed like all the C's got a little bit stretched out as you go up into the leadership realms. And

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so bringing us all together as a district, bringing us all together as a school, and then teachers learning the skill of mentor and coaching with their children, with the students in their class, so they can bring the students together to be members of a classroom team or a grade level team or a department team, depending on what area of, you know, you're teaching. So I find this so fascinating.

And the question that comes up for most people, at least that I work with, boots on the ground is, but how? Everyone wants to know the how. And I try to teach them the who in order to do the how. So what are your tips and strategies for getting to the how through the work that you do?

Lisa Riegel: The main thing to know, well, there's the neuroscience, the real change starts in the brain, right? So understanding the brain science can make people much more effective at leading, coaching, mentoring, teaching, whatever it is. And so any behavior we have, whether it's adult or kids, work behavior, social behaviors, academic behaviors, is really the intersection of our biology and our context. And so if we understand the biology of how perceptions are made and how the stress system works and what triggers that stress system and what happens to our ability to think and socialize during that, if we understand that, then we reframe the way we look at problem behaviors in staff and students.

The second is the context. We ultimately control that context. And so if we create a safe, supportive, proactive context, then we reduce the stressors in the brain, and our context actually can shape the biology of our brain. So if it would be helpful, I can explain to you how a perception's formed.

Angela Kelly: Yeah, please do.

Lisa Riegel: Our brain is like a giant department, and 80% of the departments in our brain are below our nose and unconscious. So 80% of the thinking that we are doing that impacts how we behave, we don't know

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we're thinking it. And so part of what I teach people is to be more self-aware. If you're self-aware and you're self-regulating, then you have self-control. And when you have self-control, you make better decisions.

So your brain has all these departments. Perceptions are formed in the limbic system, and the limbic system does not know time and can't tell a story. And you have a little component in your limbic system called the thalamus. And I actually name him. He's the data manager. I call him Harold. So Harold is in the thalamus. So Harold's job is to take information from the vagus nerve, and the vagus nerve tells us, you know, is your heart pounding okay, is your stomach empty and like it's our systems manager, monitoring systems, monitoring where our body is in space so that we're not going to fall off a cliff. So the vagus nerve, if it's agitated, and like prolonged stress causes stomach issues and heart palpitations. So the vagus nerve sends information to Harold and says, hey, body's running okay or body's not running okay.

Then Harold also takes in all the sensory data from the environment, what we see, taste, hear, smell, everything. And he goes into an amygdala, which is in our limbic brain, and it's where our sensory memories are stored. And he says, what I'm seeing, hearing, tasting, touching reminds me of this. And he makes sensory associations. And it's important to note they're not story associations, not, I remember a time that it was just like this. It's just sensory associations. So at that point then, he decides whether or not we need to be alarmed and then sends information to our security monitor on what to do.

But the perceptions, those associations are formed by the way that our brain puts two things together. So for example, when I was a kid growing up, my parents were divorced. My dad was always late picking me up. I spent a good chunk of my youth sitting on the front stoop waiting for my dad. My little eight-year-old brain put time and love and worth together. It's

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a faulty association, but my brain put that there, right? Even through my 20s, like if I was, if my friends were late or my husband was late, like I would get angry or I would get anxious, and sometimes to the point where it was like, I was just annoyed and I couldn't come down off of it, and it would ruin my evening. Once I understood that association, now the CEO part of my brain, which is me and my personality, is able to tell Harold, hey, Harold, don't put those two things together.

And so in the setting of like a principal, you know, a lot of times we're coaching about the what, what happened. What we need to be coaching about is the why. Why is this dysregulating you? You know, for example, I might be like, you know, Angela is always needling me, she's always criticizing me, she's always, and you think you're helping me. And in my brain, feedback is dangerous, right? And who knows why, but it is. So I am already dysregulated. Harold and my security monitor, who I call Bob. So, you know, Harold and Bob have hijacked my brain and said you're in danger, and now they're running the show and I'm not running the show, which is why later when I calm down, I can be like, why did I even say that? I don't even believe that. Why did I even act that way? Because Harold and Bob were in protective mode.

So our perceptions, it's like a banana, think of a banana as reality, and then a whole bunch of different filters or screens. If you take a banana and shove it through those screens, on the other side, it's still a banana, but it doesn't look like one. So understanding how those perceptions are formed can give us a little bit of empathy when we see someone struggling, and it can help us to keep our professional hat on because it probably has nothing to do with us. It has to do with how that brain is taking something in the context and associating it with something negative from the past.

Angela Kelly: This is so good. I love the way you articulate this because when I became a school principal and I started sitting in IEP meetings, I

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had an excellent IEP team, and they were so good at navigating the IEP conversations around the why. So, you know, that the ABC, there's an antecedent, the behavior, and then I don't remember what the C was.

Lisa Riegel: Yep, the consequence.

Angela Kelly: Yes, the consequence. And so, you know, everyone wants to focus on the B and the C, but they didn't want to focus on the A. And so I learned from them, there's always a reason behind a behavior. And then I got certified in coaching and I was like, oh, we have thoughts and we have connections, we have perceptions, and we're looking through certain lenses and certain facets, and that's triggering parts of our body and our brain that we're not, you know, in the driver's seat even.

So once I learned that, it was such an eye-opener that every behavior, whether a small person or an adult person, every behavior, there is something driving that. To them, to their body, there's a reason. We might not understand it, but that's what our goal is to seek to understand at least to have empathy or compassion for and to know it's actually another, like you said, department of the brain that's taking the driver, I always call it the driver's seat, right, that's kind of driving the train here. And if we can simply have the awareness, and just that can be the hook, there's always a reason behind the behavior and to separate, you said also like, you know, 99.9% of the time, and I would say almost 100, like it's not really about us, it's about a past association or something that they have connected. And I love how you use the example of the sitting there, the time, the worth, like that I'm sure there's so many people who just could really feel that emotion as your eight-year-old self. I think about smells, like how your body associates certain smells. And every time you smell that, like you have a physical reaction, right?

Lisa Riegel: Yep. Yep. And it can be good or bad.

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Angela Kelly: Yeah, like it can be yes, it can be loving, it can be your the smell of your baby's head or it can be like, you know, I think of nursing home smell, like I just like that to me like brings sadness and pain, but there are just certain senses of our body.

Lisa Riegel: You see that in schools a lot too. You know, when I'm in classrooms with teachers, especially if they work in areas where a lot of the kids are coming from poverty or have a lot of trauma in their life, are you raising your voice? Like the tone of voice can be a trigger. And there's actually a story I write about in my book that's incredible. This kid had, he had been removed from his home because he'd been sexually molested by his father. And so he was in kind of a boarding school, orphanage-type school. And he was doing great. And then all of a sudden, he moved up to another grade and the wheels came off the bus, and he was a mess.

And they couldn't figure out what was going on. And this is the other thing I think that we do is we attribute so much behavior to your character. And the reality, you can only attribute behavior to character if the person who's holding the character, if the CEO of your brain is making those decisions. If Harold and Bob are doing it, that's not where character lives in your brain. So anyways, this kid, there was a psychiatrist there the one day and he went in to meet with his father. And his father smelled like Old Spice. And the psychiatrist was thinking there, thinking about his dad and thinking about like fishing trips and, you know, he said he could almost smell the cigar that his dad used to smoke when they would go fishing and stuff.

And then he looked at the kid and the kid was not having that same reaction. So he went to the teacher and he said, what kind of deodorant do you wear? And he said, Old Spice. He said, would you be willing to switch to like an unscented deodorant? And they had a kind of restorative conversation with the kid that said, this is why you're so angry all the time in here. So if we take this out of the context and get rid of that association,

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and the kid and this teacher started developing a relationship and it turned around.

So context impacts our behavior, and so we have control over that. And I see so many classrooms that are about control and compliance. They're not about building relationships and building student agency and voice. It's I have to get through the curriculum. I'm too busy to deal with your problem right now. I'm going to throw you out. And then I send you to another context, and maybe the principal deescalates the kid and they have a great relationship, but I'm walking right back into the dangerous context and I dysregulate again, and then the teacher's like, this kid just won't stop. And it's like, you have to change the context that you're operating in to make it safe, supportive, and proactive for that kid.

So I think understanding the brain science, it just gives us for me, it gives me a little bit of humility that like while I think I'm in a lot of control of things, I'm only in control once I'm self-aware and self-regulating. And so that's become a really important part of my life just personally is to spend time to really take care of my brain and to get to know my brain in a way so that the part of my brain that is me is the one that's most of the time driving the bus.

Angela Kelly: Yes. This is 100% this is what I do with the school leader, the district leaders, and what is so critical is that you did this example around the principal being able to regulate. So many times teachers will be so upset because the student cannot regulate with them in their environment in their classroom and they can't see why they, you know, they have their blinders on to it. Then the student comes out, gets regulated, and then the teacher is almost offended that you sent the student back only for them to dysregulate once again. And, you know, that cycle is very common in schools.

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And this is where our teachers, like school and district leaders can support in learning this work for themselves. So reading your book, you know, and whatever work that you do with schools and being in weekly coaching programs like my own, this kind of work that we do internally as leaders is how we learn to regulate ourselves in order to help our teachers learn the process. Like this, it's not something that we're taught in our teacher programs, in our administrative, you know, prep programs. It's just it hasn't really been discussed. We're starting to explore it as you said, like there's been a lot of brain research because people are so wanting to regulate students. And when you said you see a lot of classrooms with a lot of control, and that's because they've got pacing guides and they're expected to be on this page on this day, that's happening because teachers are dysregulated, because they're so afraid to be authentic, to take time to build relationships, to stop the lesson and do a co-regulation exercise with their class when there's been a classroom event or somebody's been really upset and maybe had to step out to regulate themselves.

You know, we don't think about the other 29 students who saw that dysregulation are now also afraid or dysregulated themselves. And bringing this to the surface and normalizing conversations around what regulation looks like, what self-awareness looks like, and being able to as a group, which is another form of that collective community and culture, we as a culture stop, self-aware, self-reflect, and get back to self-regulation.

Lisa Riegel: Well, and I think that, you know, this is a leadership challenge because we measure what matters and what we measure matters. And right now, we have the tail wagging the dog. We've moved away from teaching kids to teaching content. And you know, it used to be if you had a kid who struggled to learn or maybe was a little bit of a stinker at times, they were more of just a challenge, and you'd work really hard to get a relationship with them. Now they're an obstacle because I got to move through and I got to get you to testing.

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And so principals, if they agree with what we're saying here, and most of the time they do, they're like, yeah, these teachers, they won't develop relationships. And I'm like, that's because you're not rewarding it. You're not clarifying it, you're not celebrating it, you're not measuring it. You're not looking at...

Angela Kelly: You're not giving permission.

Lisa Riegel: You know, and so teachers are very dysregulated. And so I've done a lot of work in schools even on how we can work as teacher teams to become more self-aware and self-regulated and how we can set up collaborative practices that will be calming versus, you know, like so many times I go into teacher-based team meetings and there is so much either underlying rage or just flat out like complaining and Yes. The point is you can't reason with a kid when they're not regulated. You can't reason with a teacher either. So I think that principals understanding the biology behind it, it removes the judgment. It's like this is this person's brain, and so let's give them a little grace and space. Let's put a supportive context in place to help them fulfill, you know, their potential and to feel fulfilled in their work.

Angela Kelly: Yes. And principals, there's two things I want to say right now. Number one, your staff is your classroom. So thinking about your staff, not as children, but as members of a collective where you want to understand what makes them tick, and you have to differentiate. And for some people, they fly on their own and they're very able to self-regulate. Other teachers are brand new and they need that mentorship, you know, with an instructional coach support. And then you've got teachers who have limitless potential, but because they don't have the skill set, they don't have the skill set of awareness or, you know, self-coaching, self-regulation, that you might find them a challenge and an obstacle. And the way that we see teachers is the way that teachers see students. So if we cannot see them as an obstacle, but more of a curiosity and like seeking to understand, like

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how can I work with this person to help them feel their best? Because when teachers feel better, they teach better. So it's really full circle.

And the other thing I really want to offer principals is I know Lisa and I are having this conversation and it feels like, wow, that's a lot to take on my plate. And maybe I don't have the authority or I'm not in the position to make these changes. And I now I have to try and sell the district on this or I have to wait till the district gets on board with this conversation. I would invite you to consider that you don't have to wait for the entire district to have some big initiative to get on board. Now there's a self-regulation initiative. It's not that. It's you learning how to do it by your, read her book, take her courses, join EPC, whatever it is that works for you, but do something that helps you learn how to do it yourself first. And just in that, then you can start to model it, you can start to be it, and the energy, I always talk about the energetics of leadership.

The energy that you are in, when that starts to shift, like Lisa and I both do this personally on a daily basis, I'm assuming, right? This is not, it's not a one and done. You don't learn it once and then you're done. It's like going to the gym, it's like taking a shower. It's something you do on a regular basis. And when you start to do that, as your energy changes, you start to interact with teachers in a different way, they're going to feel that change and eventually that conversation can kind of spread out into your school, but you don't have to wait for the district to give you permission to learn how to self-regulate. Would you say that's true, Lisa?

Lisa Riegel: Yeah. And I think that schools have a tendency to make initiatives, right? And so it always feels like one more thing. But what we're talking about, like my eight C framework is a framework. It's a framework, it's lens, it's glasses. You put these glasses on and it's a lens through which you see your work. And so like even with the eight C framework, it's what you're already doing, it's just do it better. If you understand the science of

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behavior and you understand the obstacles that you're going to face, you can be more proactive about how you're designing and supporting change. So it's not one more thing. It's a pair of glasses that are going to clarify the whole process and help you understand where things are falling down. And I would argue that when you are self-aware and you're self-regulating and you feel a sense of self-control, you're happier, you're healthier, you're more successful. So it's actually also a way to become a better leader and become a better person as a leader for people.

You know, when I used to teach at Ohio State, you know, they'd ask them, write your leadership platform. And I always thought that was kind of a dumb assignment because I was like, it should be one sentence. I lead in a way that others follow. That's it, because it doesn't matter what, you know, in the same way, I don't care if you had a bad day, teacher, you've got these kids in front of you, you got to teach them. When you're leading, it doesn't matter what you prefer in a leader. It's what your staff needs in a leader, and it's being nimble and flexible enough to be able to be the leader they need you to be.

And so I think sometimes we get into these conversations about, you know, I'm going to be a transformative leader, transformational or aspirational or servant leader or all of these things. All of those, you know, I always used to say, I was a great teacher for a certain set of kids. There is no such thing as a great teacher, period. You're a great teacher for certain kids. Some teachers are amazing at AP, some teachers are amazing working with at-risk kids. So it's the same kind of thing with the leader is that a great leader is not a great leader in every context because the people in the context should be driving the type of leadership that the leader is using.

Angela Kelly: Yes. That I love using the eight C's as a lens. I always talk about the lens through which changes the perspective, just like when you go to the optometrist. So you look, let's look at this situation. So any

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obstacle, challenge, you know, that you're facing, look through the lens of culture, look through the lens of communication, like and then see like, is this a culture thing? Is this a connection thing? Is this a communication thing? Is this, you know, a collaboration thing? And looking through to see, it helps you, and this is the when people ask me the how, this is the how. The how is slowing down and not making one decision based on one set of rules or one set of expectations. It's looking at a school through its complexity, through all the facets. It's like a diamond and it has all these, you know, many facets. And if you are willing to like explore and allow something to take time and seek to understand it, not from just a, let's just like check the box, we got this solved, but from a more in-depth analysis of it, from a human analysis, from the humanity of education, I think that we can start to see and understand, which helps us expand our capacity to lead. That is how you become a better leader.

Lisa Riegel: Right. And I think one of the things that I always ask a lot of questions when I first start working with a leader and, you know, listening for the problem under the complaint. So like if a leader is like, oh, my staff hates meetings, I'm like, okay, so you don't organize productive, useful meetings, right? Because people don't hate meetings. People hate dumb meetings. So it's like if you are structuring really strong collaboration that's meaningful and purposeful, people will want to engage in it. And so, you know, I hear that sometimes or I hear, you know, this staff just they are traditional, they won't bend their practices. And I'm like, okay, that's a cadence problem, because you gave them training that is so far different than what's going on right now that they're scared to take the first step because it's too risky.

So how do we start to stairstep some stepping stones to get them from where they are to where you want them to be? Or it can be my staff never reads my email. They don't read stuff and I can't get them to do the actions I want. And I think, okay, that's a communication problem and or a meeting

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problem. You know, if I go to a staff meeting and you read everything you already sent me, you've just disincentivized me to do the reading on my own because you're going to sit through it. So you have to set some norms about professionalism that like when we come to a meeting, like one of the things I always suggest is put a five-minute timer and say, you guys got the directives and announcements that, you know, of what we're doing. We have five minutes. Who has questions? And if you go past five minutes, you say, submit them in writing and I'll submit them back to you. So you train your staff that they are expected to read that ahead of time because you have other things that are more purposeful that you're going to do when you think about how expensive meetings are. When you put every single person in that meeting, and you're spending that time reading announcements, like it's such a waste of money and resources and opportunity.

So I think like, you know, the Aspirations to Operations, I mean, I'm going to say this, but I think it should be required reading for all leaders because it really does help them position like the brain science of behavior and motivation, engagement, all of that, it positions that, but it truly gives them a lens when they start to say, okay, what are your five biggest gripes on your staff or that are happening in your building that are so frustrating? You can almost always point directly to one or two of the C's. I may be great at the planning C's and really stink at the engagement C's. And so then I want to really focus in on those two to improve my coaching and the collaborative teams and all of that, or maybe sustainability isn't happening because I'm not sustaining it. I'm not celebrating it. I'm not doing those things. So I think it's a framework that can help fix the holes in the ship, and it can also, if there's a lot of holes in the ship, it can help you build a new one.

Angela Kelly: Yes, absolutely. What I love so much about this conversation is that I feel like as educators on the outside of education, studying the problem with a different lens, because when you're, sometimes when

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you're in it, you can't really see it. So, you know, I've been out for about 10 years and you've been doing this for a while now. When we look inward, we all are coming to these almost like universal understandings. And it really comes down to the humanity, the human part of education, which is what's going on internally? And the institution of education, not there's no one person to blame or, but the institution itself has evolved in such a way that it has externalized teaching and learning. It's externalized the experience, and that leaves people feeling vulnerable, unsafe, unseen, unheard, uncared for.

I had an interview, maybe about a year ago, a couple of professors wrote a book, like something about it, teachers need to know they matter. And I think that's that sense of belonging. We have to know at an individual level as a student, as a teacher, as a support staff member, and every human on your campus, whether they're the custodian or the bus driver or the food service, hair professionals, that they matter, that without them, the system does not function as efficiently.

Lisa Riegel: And I hear a lot of leaders give lip service to that. You know, they'll at the convocation, you guys are wonderful, you all this, we have the greatest staff in the world. But words don't make culture, action makes culture. And so when teachers don't feel, and that's one of the number one things I hear from teachers is like, we need more support. I don't have support. But yet they can't even define what support they need. And then the principal is like, well, I gave them all this stuff. They've had this training, they've done all these things. And I'm like, there is a missing piece in here because you have given them a lot of things, but yet for whatever reason, whether it's that you made it too scary to change or you haven't celebrated.

And you know, there's one of the things I talk about in the book is seven conditions have to exist for us to create a new habit. And so the first is that the easiest way to do this is with a metaphor. So say you and I decide

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we're going to get healthy and start eating healthier. Then the first thing is we have to know where to go instead. So say that you and I go down to the Mexican restaurant and, you know, slug down a couple of margaritas and a bag of chips every week a couple of times. We have to know that instead of doing that, we should go to a vegetable restaurant. If I said to you, let's go to the Golden Corral instead, that's not a better choice. We assume people know the right choice and are deciding not to do it. But a lot of times people don't know where to go instead.

Second is that they have to have self-awareness to drive past the exit because it's a habit. And you and I on Tuesdays and Thursdays when we go out, Tuesday, I'm going to pull my car out and head right to the Mexican restaurant. I have to have the self-awareness to stop and say, I wanted to do something different. I'm going to go to this other place. The third is that we have to be willing to be uncomfortable. Like we're going to have to put stuff in our mouth we've never eaten, vegetables we've never heard of, right? Same thing with teachers and I think teachers are under such a microscope and so much pressure that being uncomfortable is not worth it. And so they dig their heels in and refuse to do new things, even when they're simple things that they can change in their classrooms.

So we have to have that will to be uncomfortable. We have to have the energy to persist. Eventually you and I are going to be like, you know what? I've had a bad day, I have no energy. I don't care to go. Let's just go back there, right? We're going to fall off the wagon. And this is when most Americans give up on their goals because then you and I sit and we'd say, well, we were never meant to be healthy. So I'll see you here again, right? Versus, okay, we've been really good and we had one day that was really bad and we're going to get right back on the bus. And then we have to have the persistence over time because it takes a long time for a neural connection to become automatic in our brain. And we have to have the support.

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And so when I look at whether it's professional development for teachers, it's the implementation of an initiative, it's new instructional practices, it's behavior planning with kids, any of those things when I look at it through that lens, you're asking for a change in behavior, and I oftentimes don't see even half of the supportive elements that any human, the smartest person on earth needs these things in order to successfully create a new habit. So I think it's really about being wiser and more strategic about what you want to see. And I think that understanding, you know, humans and the human system side of education is critical for doing that.

Angela Kelly: Yes. Oh, so, so, so good. Because it really does come down to that example was so relevant and so tangible. And I think about the emotions behind each step. And that's where we have to understand, we're going to feel, when we just make that decision to not go to the Mexican restaurant, we're going to feel deprivation. We need to acknowledge that deprivation, validate it, and allow it to exist without giving into that, without like trying to get rid of the feeling of deprivation. You're going to feel deprivation. And then, you know, there are emotions that come with this awareness and these decisions.

And, you know, that is the thing I think we just haven't been taught is like, how do I allow myself to feel deprived and still take the action I want to take? That's that moment of like being aware of the emotion, allowing it, knowing you can handle that emotion, that's your empowerment expanding is like, I can handle this. This emotion is just temporary. And what do I want to feel on the other side of not eating the Mexican is like feeling really good in my body, physically, feeling good mentally, emotionally, knowing that I did this. And then the thing about the teachers I was thinking too is, I think one of the hardest things as a human is to take ownership, is to take ownership of our empowerment, to take ownership that we have the power to go and be self-aware and to make different decisions and take different actions. It's hard to own, like it's very hard to own a mistake. It feels awful to see the

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mistake, to take ownership, to see that you're like as a principal, people are like, yeah, you're right. I don't really do effective meetings. That feels terrible to own that, but then from there, you start to like, okay, what's one thing I can do? But that ownership piece is so challenging emotionally. All of your work goes back to this is like being able to regulate those feelings that come up.

Lisa Riegel: And you can only regulate them if you know they're there. And you know one thing too, and it doesn't always have to be so serious. Like my husband and I do pity pride. And so like, you know, sometimes I like, I'll just be like, I need some pity. Like because, you know, like I'll say, I'm on the diet, I really want that cake and I can't have it and I'm feeling sad and I need pity. And then, you know, he'll come over and be like, I pity you. And sometimes that's all I need is just recognition that I feel this way and I'm sad. And then the on the other side, that's pride, but I'm proud of you that you are making the choice, you know? So we do pity pride.

Angela Kelly: That is so fun.

Lisa Riegel: It's simple and it basically gets it out and it states it out there, so it doesn't fester and it removes because I think the other thing that people don't realize or think about is that all when Harold and Bob are running the show, they generate a tremendous amount of shame and guilt. And so when we think about how do we release shame and guilt, part of it is to recognize that those decisions were not made really by us. They were made by that limbic part of our brain. And so really the solution to that is be a better leader in your brain. If you're a good leader, kind of like my late example, I can tell Harold, don't couple those two things together. I have more control over how I respond in situations because I've gone through sort of the introspection and learning that it took for me to understand what was going on in there. And I advocate that we should be teaching kids about their brain from day one. From the first day they come, we should be

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teaching them about their brain. We should be putting routines in place that are good for the brain. And not just, you know, I see, I see pieces of it like, you know, the wiggle break or whatever for younger kids. And it's like, okay, but what I see in a classroom is oftentimes the wiggle break is used as a tool for compliance and control.

Angela Kelly: Now sit back down because you've had five minutes to wiggle, yes.

Lisa Riegel: It's not used as a tool that is to practice skills. I think we do pieces and parts in schools that are great, but if we just put those glasses on and looked through it with a little bit of a different lens, like a NeuroWell lens, that's safe, supportive, and proactive. If we just look at it through that, through the brain science of it, all of a sudden we'll be like, oh, well, that's why that works so well. Well, yeah, because it's aligned with how our brain needs it to work, right? And then other things that you're like, we're doing, you know, I see this with like positive behavior intervention supports all the time. It is such a time-consuming, expensive waste of time in most schools because the way it's implemented is not aligned with the brain science on changing behaviors.

And so that's one of the things I teach about in the NeuroWell book is how to transition your PBIS system. You don't throw it out and do a new initiative. You look at what you're doing and you say, okay, these were good ideas. For some reason they're not landing. How do we start to make tweaks to it that are aligned? And you'd be amazed how some of the easiest little things make all the difference in the world to make that a really powerful behavior change system.

Angela Kelly: That is a beautiful way to end this. There are simple ways to change the internal systems. We don't have to break down the whole paradigm, the whole institution and build a whole new one in order to make change. Simplicity actually is key.

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Lisa Riegel: Right. The problems are overwhelming, but the solutions are really quite simple. They're not easy. They're simple.

Angela Kelly: And they're not comfortable.

Lisa Riegel: Right. They're simple solutions, but you have to be intentional, strategic, and make it a habit in order for them to become second nature. So the problems are bigger than the solution.

Angela Kelly: Yes, that's just take that with you today, school leaders, as you're listening to this, that the problem you see in front of you is much bigger than the solution. So you don't have to match problem solution in size. You just have to be able to match it in your bandwidth, your internal bandwidth, your capacity to feel, your capacity to explore, your capacity to stay curious and to lead yourself and others with a lot of compassion, grace, and space as you're navigating the emotional experience of learning and teaching and leading.

So Lisa, thank you for your expertise. It is such a delight to meet you. I can't wait. I'm getting both books. I want to read them, share them with the world, and I look forward to continued conversations with you because I do think that this work coupled with mentorship, coaching, and just that permission to explore brain research, how the brain is working in our students and our staff members and ourselves, and to just keep that front of mind as we're leading, as we're teaching, and as we're learning, I really do think that we can create significant impact and empower people throughout our school systems worldwide.

Lisa Riegel: Yeah. I'm happy to come back anytime. Even if we want to do little segments on each C and go into the tools and go into how you do it.

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Angela Kelly: That'd be great. That would be wonderful. So we're going to drop the links to her resources in the show notes for you guys and any other information she has. Lisa, any final words?

Lisa Riegel: No, this is my mission and passion because I feel like when people take the information that are in the book or that if I do keynotes or workshops or whatever, when they come back from that, they feel that sense of empowerment and agency because we get to choose. We can choose to be happy and fulfilled. It's not easy. We have to understand it has to be intentional and strategic, but at the end of the day, people are really struggling right now and they don't have to be. There's a way out.

Angela Kelly: There is. Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional, right?

Lisa Riegel: Yeah, there you go.

Angela Kelly: Let's support you all. Thank you again for your expertise. Wonderful information, wonderful book. And I invite you to look through these lenses. I do think it can very quickly change not just your perspective, but your actual experience of school leadership. So with that, we will end. Thank you again. It's been wonderful. And I look forward to more conversations. And for you, Empowered Principals, have a beautiful week. We'll talk to you guys next week. Take good care. Bye.

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.