Ep #462: Moving Forward with Grief, Not Around It



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hey there, Empowered Principals. This episode is a discussion around the incident that happened at an elementary school in Bend, Oregon. This is a trigger warning because it is talking about an assault that occurred at an elementary school where lives were lost. I think it's significant for us to talk about as school leaders, so I moved episodes around for this to land as soon as it possibly could. But I do want to give you a heads up, I am talking about the incident that occurred at an elementary school back on October 15th. Have a safe week.

Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to episode 462.

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.

Hey there, Empowered Principals. I've got something to share with you. I have a brand new program called The Empowered School. We're launching on October 27th. We're taking Empowered Principals who want to lead empowered school cultures. This will be a leadership experience for intentionally cultivating an empowered school culture.

One of the things that I coach on the most is around the culture of the school. How people think, how they feel, how they behave, the words they say, the actions, their mood, their attitudes. I coach on the interactions between the humans on campus more than any other topic that we coach on. Yes we definitely teach all of the skillset. But the art of building and cultivating a healthy and vibrant culture is the skill of a highly effective Empowered Principal. I hope you will join us for The Empowered School. The registration link is in the show notes. We'll see you October 27th.

Well, hello, my Empowered Principals. Happy Tuesday. I do hope you are having a beautiful Tuesday. I've moved podcast episodes around to record this conversation with you because as this drops, you're hearing this a

couple weeks past the school shooting in Bend, Oregon. Now, I'm recording this just two days after the incident. And yesterday, which would have been the day after the incident, I recorded a Facebook Live in the Empowered Principal group, the public group that we have.

So if you haven't yet joined and if you're on Facebook and you'd like to join, please join that group. I'm doing 365 videos, live videos where we're talking about the real deal. We're talking about what's coming up, such as these things. And I'm sharing coaching, wisdom, my own experiences. We're collaborating, connecting, and we are creating community. And that's what I'm here to talk about today.

I want us to talk about, as school leaders, how we move forward. Now, this is the perfect time to have this conversation because as you're hearing this, it's been a few weeks, two or three weeks since the incident occurred. This might be filled with emotion, guys. I'm just talking raw, live off the hip here a little bit. But I think it's something we need to talk about because it's been a couple weeks since it happened, and the world goes back to what it was doing beforehand, right?

There are families in Oregon who are waking up without their children, a school community that's waking up and going to work without their colleague, and their lives are forever changed. And yet the world must go on. We must move forward. And I've been coaching people on how we do that because it feels like we shouldn't move forward when somebody has been lost, when somebody's life has been taken, when a family, a school community, an entire community has been eternally changed from the events that occurred in their school. And yet they must move forward. And how, how do we do that?

And I think there is a difference, and there's a podcast on this, between resilience and hypervigilance. And this is a moment where we want to check in with ourselves to see, are we being resilient, or are we being hypervigilant? So I'm going to walk through the emotional journey here

because what happened on, I believe it was October 15th, in that school has deepened our fears, has made us even more enraged.

So when we hear about it, we feel shock, and then we immediately feel grief, and we feel angry, all combined into one. We're shocked but not shocked that it happened again. We are devastated for the families, and we are wondering, how does this keep happening? How could we go on again? How do we allow this to happen over and over and over?

I did a Facebook Live yesterday and spoke to this, but I looked up how many school incidents like this have happened since I started coaching. I've been coaching for nine school years. This is my ninth year going on my 10th year. And to date, there have been, according to one resource, 267 school incidents where people have been injured or deceased because of a school shooting. Since my son was born, and I know this very intimately, I was pregnant with my son Alex back in 1999. That's when he was born.

And the first school shooting in my awareness from my lifetime was the incident at Columbine in Colorado. And the reason that sticks with me so deeply is because that happened on April 20th of 1999. 13 children lost their lives that day. My son was born four days later on the 24th. And that shook the nation, if not the world, to our cores that the place where children should feel safest on this planet is their school. The most trusting place families could send their kids should be the school. And yet here we were. Something had penetrated across that threshold of trust and safety across school lines.

And I grieved so deeply four days before bringing Alex into this world. And while that week should have been tremendous joy, and it was, he is the highlight of my life, I still couldn't help but ask what kind of world am I bringing him into. And at the time, we thought it was a one-off. We hoped it was a one-off. We prayed it was a one-off incident. But since then, over 400 incidents have occurred. And he's 27 years old, but 267 of them, and I know there are different stats out there, so this was just the stats that I

found online. But 267 of them to date, as I'm recording this podcast on the 17th of October, occurred in the last nine years, school years.

So all of that to say, we are exhausted from being shocked and being devastated and grieving and being angry and then feeling hopeless and helpless and feeling disempowered because that's the road it takes us down. We're shocked, though not surprised, we're angry, we're grieving, we're devastated. We can't imagine it happening in our own backyard. But every single time this happens, it is personal to an educator.

For those of you who aren't educators who listen to this, maybe you're in the car with your spouse or your friend who listens to this podcast, educators go to work every day afraid of the day that it's their school, their children, their students, their community. As a principal, my biggest fear wasn't the test scores if we failed or having to go up in front of the school board or having an angry parent or having to deal with public scrutiny. All those things, they weren't things I wished for. They were not pleasant things, but my biggest fear was that a child or a staff member would be injured on my watch.

And I served a school that served the CEOs and engineers and all of the brilliant humans over at Microsoft and at Google and Facebook. I was right in the heart of Silicon Valley, serving executives' children. I also was serving military children, and I was also serving families within our community who were getting education for the first time, our highest need families. I had a very diverse school.

And my biggest fear was that on my watch, something would happen to one of those babies or one of the people serving those babies. And even though I did have an active shooter on my campus one time, they weren't coming for the kids, they were running through, but terrifying nonetheless. And I will tell you this, we feel every loss, whether it's on our campus or not.

So what do we do moving forward? This is what I am doing for myself and for those I'm serving and for this community of empowered principals.

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Number one, we have to be fully transparent about how we feel. Hypervigilance would be saying, oh my gosh, that's terrible, that's awful. And now I'm going to go back to school and make sure we hyperprotect our school, that we get everything in check. And we are more deeply afraid, more deeply upset, but we're not going to feel those feelings. We're going to just go try and protect ourselves.

We're going to go into fight or flight and we're going to build up deeper walls. We're going to review our plans. We're going to do active shooter drills. I'm not saying any of that's wrong, but notice that we skipped over the feelings and went straight to fear and then acted on the fear. And we know, in this case, the doors were locked. Everyone followed protocol. It took three minutes for this incident to occur. Everyone did everything right.

Kids knew what to do. Kids were interviewed and they knew how to lock the doors. They knew where to hide. Teachers knew what to do, faculty, maintenance crews, the school was locked. They followed all the protocol and still yet, when someone wants to cause harm, they find a way to break through. It's not to say we don't have protocols, it's not to say we don't practice because unfortunately, that's what we must do to move forward.

But to truly move forward, we must feel the feelings. And I know I'm preaching this on the top of the mountain here. I talk about feelings a lot. They drive everything. We have to feel our grief. And it helps to have that grief witnessed, which is why I go on Facebook live and cry, which is why I'm here struggling to speak to you because I feel profound grief for the loss of those children and teacher. It was a support staff member. Another teacher is in, hospitalized at this point, along with another student.

So while the stats haven't settled yet, and maybe they have by now, hopefully, everyone is okay and has recovered by now. But that's less of the point. It's not how many, it's that it happened and how we feel about it and what we do. We suppress because we have to move on. We suppress the anger because we feel disempowered and what are we going to do

about it? We've been angry before. I invite you to feel all of it, the rage, the disgust, the devastation, the pain. We need to feel all those feelings.

And we need to be real about them, and we need to do it first because we then must hold space for our staff members to have conversations about it. Because they need to experience the feelings fully, honestly, transparently so that they have space in their bodies to then hold space for children who are afraid, children who have feelings about it, their classrooms having community conversations within their classroom because we all have to feel those feelings, acknowledge them, validate them, allow them, process them all the way through in order to be able to hold space for our community.

And we've got to do this in pretty quick pace. We are feeling the feelings, we're grieving together. A community that grieves together supports one another together. And you will notice that we pull together as humans, we pull together during tragedy for a moment, but it's very uncomfortable. There's a lot of feelings, big, intense feelings. And we want to get back to normal as soon as possible. That's hypervigilance. Resiliency is, we're in this again, we're going to go through the whole thing again, all of it.

We're going to grieve again, we're going to be angry again, and we're going to go through the whole process again, not to bypass it, not to dismiss it, not to rush through it, all the feels. And why do we do that? Why would I ask somebody to actually grieve, to feel their pain? Number one, it has wisdom, information, guidance, answers, next steps. When we feel the grief, we feel the pain, we're saying what happened matters. We valued those lives. We valued that they were at school. We valued the support instructor who threw her phone at the perpetrator and tackled the person.

We value each and every person who did the right thing, who locked the doors, who came up with the drills, who had the kids practice the drill because lives were saved. We honor that. We feel that pain for their loss, and we have information in that pain. Why are we feeling this pain? And

then you'll see like your body will shift into anger, but you're just enraged about it. That rage has information.

Our emotions are energy that drive our actions. When we are in pain, we grieve, we cry, we scream, we, you know, scream into a pillow, punch a pillow, we take a walk, we hug one another. We conduct rituals. We light candles, we get flowers, we plant trees. We do things to honor, to acknowledge. We sit in the grief. And then you'll see there's anger. Anger has different emotions, different energy. And it invites us into different kinds of information, different kinds of skill sets, different kind of next steps, actions, wisdom.

When we're angry, what do we do? We support, we speak out, we vote, we discuss policy, we discuss the why. We have fuel that drives us to have conversations, tough conversations, courageous conversations about why this keeps happening and what we are doing about it and asking people who have the authority to do something that they do something. When we are angry, angry is a very intense emotion, but it has a lot of energy behind it.

So we can leverage that for action, for decisions and actions. What other feelings come up for you? Everybody feels a little bit differently. Maybe they need to lean into the fear. When I was a principal, I had so much fear. Anytime it happened, it was like, oh, one step closer, another one closer to it happening. It could happen anywhere. It's happened in rural schools, city schools, elementary schools, high schools. No one is exempt from the possibility of it happening.

So how do we move forward? We anchor in those emotions. We feel them. We invite them to share their insights, their wisdom, their next steps. What should we do here with this? What's the most empowered action we can take, the most empowered decision we can make? How else do we move forward? We continue to process as we need to because our emotions come in waves. We've got to clear that out so that we have space to think

and to lead and to support others. We never want one of these incidents to be taken for granted. We want to honor and acknowledge it and move forward.

And the way that we move forward is to process, is to honor, is to celebrate their lives. It's to refine our own practices, our own policies. It's to invite us into question, are we living in the way that's aligned to how we want to live? Are we living in empowerment or are we stuck in the fear, in the victimness of it all? Are we saying, well, we can't do anything about it, we're just sitting ducks, or are we willing to dig a little deeper and decide we're not going to be sitting ducks?

We're going to educate, we're going to empower, and we're going to improve. We're going to learn from this. We're going to grow from this. Maybe your school takes on, you know, I think it's Silver Fork as a sister school. Maybe you start building community with them. Maybe you start building community in your own school. It doesn't have to happen at your school to pull together and to build community.

Isn't it time that we move forward in our schools with community, with connection, community, with empathy and respect and understanding and pulling together, working together, moving forward together, not in isolation, not in hypervigilance? We cannot control other people's actions. We only can control how we show up moving forward. We don't stop. We might pause to take the moments to feel. Give your staff permission to grieve. Give them time to just build community and conversation within those classrooms. I promise you your school will be better off for it.

Give a staff meeting up to talk about this. Scrap whatever's on the agenda and let's say, hey, let's do a check-in. I mean, I don't even know how many school shootings or incidents have occurred this school year alone, but this isn't the first one. People remember this, the body's keeping score. You might not be thinking about all of the past incidents on a daily basis, but it's in there. We do make decisions from those subconscious fears, from that

unprocessed anger or the unprocessed grief. It's down there and it's driving the decisions and actions we take. So are we doing it from a place of fear or a place of deeper love, deeper respect, deeper community? What is the intention moving forward?

My invitation to every school leader out there is that we move forward towards empowerment. We do not let these things disempower us, but we do authentically take the time to grieve, to feel our anger, and to sit with the emotion and say, fear, what's the next best step here? Anger, what is the next best step here? Grief, what is the next best step here? Not even in what you need to do. I'm talking about who we need to be as leaders. It's an invitation to connect internally with ourselves and reconnect with all of those that we lead and teach.

This is about humanity, the human experience. Moving forward requires us to, yes, move on, feel the feelings, learn from them, make empowered decisions around them, and honor what it took for us to learn those lessons, that insight, that wisdom. We never take an incident like this for granted. We use it to empower ourselves and to honor their legacy and to move ourselves closer to humanity, closer to connection, closer to community. That is my wish for you, your school.

So I want to say to the families who have been forever touched, the communities who have been forever impacted, we see you, we hear you, we stand with you. Education is about uniting and empowering. It's about bringing people together. We literally bring an entire community together on a campus every single day. Schools were built in communities.

And in a world where technology is so brilliant and so amazing, it's also has us more isolated in some ways. But school is a place where we can gather, we can be in person, we can be in the energy of one another, we can create a culture of love, deep love for the humans that we serve. May this never happen again. May it never happen on your campus. And may us

always honor the process in how we move forward towards empowerment. Have a beautiful and empowered week.

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.