Ep #463: How Your Relationship with Power Shapes Your Leadership



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With Your Host

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Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to episode 463.

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, and welcome to *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*. You know we've been doing this for a minute here, and I'm so proud that this is the ninth school year of *The Empowered Principal®*, and we have had a lot of conversations. We've coached a lot of school leaders out there, but what really matters the most to me is that when you listen to the podcast, when you invest your time and your attention into this podcast, that you walk away feeling better about yourself, feeling more empowered about who you are, your identity, feeling hopeful, feeling capable, or at the very least, we've planted some seeds of contemplation.

You might not walk away with, "Oh, I know the next step," or, "I know who I want to be," or, "I know what I need to do," or, "I know how to figure this out." It might not be that level of clarity. Sometimes we simply plant a seed of awareness, plant a seed that invites us into observation or contemplation. We explore something that may not have an answer, a concept that impacts our daily experience as school leaders, but doesn't have a all-or-none answer. And that's what we're going to dive into today.

I have been exploring and having conversations with fellow school leaders about the relationship that we as humans have with power, and particularly our relationship with power in the context of education. So let's dive into that today.

I hear school leaders, I say it myself, and I hear other people saying it, but in the context of education, we talk about the powers that be. And when I

think about the term "powers that be," I am referring to some anonymous person, authority figures, people in positions of authority who I believe have the power, the control, the leverage, the agency. And when I think about the powers that be, they control, they leverage this power from a distance. They're not in my physical circles. They're away from the boots-on-the-ground type of work that teachers are doing, students are doing, school leaders are doing, district leaders are doing.

Every power that be—so teachers might talk about the powers that be and be referring to the district administrators. Principals might be referring to district administrators or maybe county administrators or if you're in, you know, private school, maybe the diocese or some distant form of power that we believe have control over our experience in our position, our seat on the bus. And when we talk about the powers that be, we often get very frustrated, kind of blow them off. There's a general sense of helplessness. At best, helplessness, at worst, oppression. But in these conversations, we are very subtly or very not subtly giving up our power to them.

We hand over the power to the powers that be. So not only do they have positional power, title status power, they now have our power. We hand it over because they have what we perceive as more power than us. We give it over, and that is when our desires, our goals, our dreams, they start to fade. Hope will start to dwindle, and we become very resolved to the powers that be retaining that power forevermore, that it's permanent.

And you can take this contemplation into many different directions, but we need to bring it up in the context of schools, exploring our relationship with power as school leaders because we are in positions of power. We technically were granted authority by the powers that be and by those we are leading. Society grants us a certain level of power as a school leader. And what we don't realize when we are in a position of power or we have a title of power or we feel a certain status of power, we have a relationship with power itself.

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We have an opinion of power, whether it's good or bad, right or wrong, whether we should have power, whether we shouldn't have power, whether others should have power, whether they shouldn't have power. We have a very, you know, all-or-none thinking about power. We might be in resistance to power, we might be avoiding stepping into our power. We might confront power in some people and not in others. We might be in conflict with our own power or in conflict with other people's power. And then I think about how we identify. We might identify as a powerful person, or we identify as a disempowered person.

So there are so many avenues to exploring the relationship with power, but I think it behooves us to have the conversation as educators around our thoughts, our beliefs, our opinions, our experiences around power, because whether we are acknowledging it or not, power plays a highly significant role in the everyday decisions and actions and outcomes and experiences that we are creating.

Students have thoughts around power, teachers have thoughts around power, site leaders have thoughts around power, parents have thoughts around power, district, everybody up has thoughts about power because we're humans. We have thoughts around the concept of power, very strong opinions perhaps, or maybe disempowered thoughts and feelings around power, but it's interesting to explore, and here's why.

It comes down to our belief and our ability to have what we want, to experience what we want, to achieve what we want, and our relationship with power obviously stems from our past experiences. We have examples of power that were very empowering, very encouraging, very courageous building, confidence building.

And then we have other types of experiences that felt very degrading, dismissive, discouraging, disempowering, and oppressive depending on, you know, the spectrum of impact you feel based on these experiences

with power. And power, interestingly enough, our relationship with power, similar to our relationship with money, our relationship with time, how we relate to other people, it feels different in different situations.

So for example, the way you feel when you're in your group of closest friends, the people you feel most comfortable with, the people you love, the people you laugh with, the people you've grown and matured together with, the people who knew you back in your 20s and now they know you in your 50s. There is a balance or there is a sense of power, there is a relationship of power, personal power, your thoughts and opinions around other people's power in that group, the power of your group dynamics. That is one concept of power, one area of your life in which you have thoughts and opinions and feelings and beliefs around power.

And then you think about work, the circles you have around work, different relationship with power in that context. So I point that out because we have a very complex relationship with power, and how power might feel when you were a child and your thoughts about your parents or your thoughts about authority figures, your thoughts about the world and the people in the world who had power or the organizations or the messaging, the narratives around power.

So I want us just for a second to consider that power is not about the situation. If we were to drop the people involved and the situation and just remove that part of it, remove the person, remove the situation, the set of circumstances, and just explore the relationship with power itself, it will help us separate from our thoughts and feelings around the person or our thoughts and feelings about the situation at hand or the set of circumstances we were facing or the age that we were when it happened.

So when we just think about pure power and our relationship directly with power. So I think about power in a number of ways. Number one, I think about it in terms of being a noun, power as a noun. Power as a noun is

permission. It's positional authority. It might be personal agency. It might be your identity. So when you think about power as a noun, person, place, thing, it's the permission to exercise your power. It's the title and status, the positional authority to exercise power. It's the personal agency that you feel you have. It's your identity when it comes to power.

But as we all know, power is also a very strong feeling and emotion. We feel powerful when we feel in control, when we feel safe, when we feel secure, when we feel assured, when we feel anchored. We might have feelings of courage as we're leaning into power or boldness as we're leaning into power, confidence as we're leaning into power. Perhaps we might have feelings of energy, momentum, desire, drive, excitement, enthusiasm. You know, when you're revving and you feel powerful because you're eager, you're hungry, that's an emotion, a fuel that leads you to acting powerfully.

So those emotions are fuel. You can have powerful emotions that drive powerful actions, and those actions can be very powerful, right? You might be very decisive or very directive with people. I also think about power as a result, the power to accomplish some kind of goal, some kind of achievement, the power to acquire an asset, something physical that you want, the power to create income, the power to buy the car you want, the power to get the promotion.

The image that we want to portray, the persona, our appearance, character traits that we have, our reputation with other people as a society, like within the context of society, the power of owning the narrative, owning how we got what we wanted, and the power of being, the power of doing, the power of having.

I'm going to talk more about that concept in the future, being, doing, having. This is something we're deep diving in this concept in the Empowered Principal Collaborative. So more on that later, but I want you to just stick

with your relationship with power. What are your thoughts around it? How do your thoughts and opinions and feelings shift in different contexts?

And in the field of education, I hear and I listen to the stories of many, many, many school leaders, hundreds of school leaders, and they say, "We want the power to do what we want to do, to have what we want to have, to achieve what we need to achieve, to be what we desire to be. We want the power to make decisions for our campus, our staff, our students, for teachers or for teaching itself, for learning. We want to be in power. We want the power to be more in control of our own schedule, of how we do business, of how we spend our time. We want the power to prioritize what we believe is best."

And in the same breath, and I've done this too, so I'm not calling anybody else out that I'm not calling myself out on. In the same breath, we will also say, "But I don't have the power to make decisions for our campus. I don't have the power to be more in control of my own schedule or my time or my calendar. I don't have the power to prioritize what I believe is best because I have to follow what other people think is best." And I know this so well. I did this so well.

This power relationship, it was my mantra. It was my state of being. It was my state of belief. It was my identity, my experience. And when something good happened, it was my identity. I had the power. And when I failed, it was I didn't have the power. So it was what I used as the reason for both. When something went well, it was because I had the power. When something didn't go well, it's because I didn't have the power.

And I want us to notice what's happening. Please take a moment to zoom out in education, and we will see it from different lenses. The lens of the student, "I have no power. I'm required to come to school by law. My parents make me, the school makes me, the law makes me. I don't want to be here, I don't want to do it. Teachers make me do this. I don't have any

power." They abdicate the power to the teacher, the classroom, their peers, their principal's terrible, mean. You're so mean to the kids. And the parents are mean, the law is mean, the curriculum stinks, right? All of it. They have no power.

And we could agree with them. Actually, if we look through a certain lens, they don't have power, perhaps, or do they? And we agree with them, and then we perpetuate their belief. Look at the context of our teachers. We don't have the power. The district this, the principal that, the parents this. Okay, that could be true, or it could not be true, but we lean into the truth because, why?

Notice how our relationship with power is very dependent on the situation. When we want something, but we can't have it, we say we don't have the power. We are left with the wanting, the pining for, the desire to have it inside of the belief that we lack the power to have it. So I want a promotion, but no one will promote me. Therefore, I lack the power to achieve my goal of having a promotion, of receiving a promotion. We externalize the power when we don't have what we want.

But when we get what we want, we're like, "Yeah, I worked really hard for that promotion. Darn tootin' I got that promotion. I had the personal power." So just notice how your relationship with power ebbs and flows and sways. So we exercise power where we believe that we have power, and we blame power in the areas where we believe we don't have power.

And why do we do this? Why do we play this game with ourselves as humans, not just educators, all of us? Why do we maintain this kind of dual relationship with power? And the way that I see it is we will leverage it to feel a certain way that fuels actions that create a certain outcome, right? So for example, you want the promotion. You believe that you can achieve the promotion, obtain the promotion, receive the promotion. You believe you

have the personal power to impact or influence the receiving of that promotion, and you feel safe to do so. Here are the things I can do.

I'm going to pull the levers where I have power. I have power here, here, and here, and some people think, "Oh, I'm going to try and leverage power by convincing this person or selling this person or controlling their image of me." Like, we try different levers of power, and we find that the levers of power that work are the internal power that we have, the belief systems, our emotional energy, the way we approach receiving the promotion, the belief that the promotion is coming. If not this one, another promotion's coming, that the promotion is already ours, and we can leverage certain power points within ourselves because those levers that we pull feel safe.

For example, think about positional authority power. You're a principal or you're a district leader, and there is a dynamic of power that surrounds people's beliefs on positional authority. So it feels very safe to speak up to teachers, to have tough conversations, to ask them what's working, what's not, to invite them into exploring a different approach to classroom management or teaching.

It feels safe to leverage that power because of the positional authority dynamic. It feels safe to speak with students because there's an adult power dynamic going on there. And we agree that adults have power when it comes to speaking with children, and that principals have power when it comes to speaking to teachers, and that district administrators have power when it comes to speaking to principals and teachers.

So we will leverage it when it feels safe. And then we will, on the same token, leverage the lack of power mentality when things don't feel safe, when we don't know what to do, when we've tried and failed. For example, when you were a child, it might not have felt safe to speak up to your parents because we were young. They had the power and we didn't. They were the bosses, we were the children.

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And now as adults, we feel that little kid feeling when we go to speak to our boss because they have positional authority. They're the boss, we're the subordinate. It doesn't feel safe to speak up, so we don't feel we can leverage our power. So we leverage the lack of power. I don't have the power to speak up. Why? That's my boss.

"I'm not sure how to do this XYZ. I don't know how to engage my staff during a staff meeting or professional development. I don't know how to get parents to volunteer, to entice them to come in and volunteer. I don't know. I lack the power." Or sometimes we tried to leverage power and we failed at it, and now we feel ashamed or we feel embarrassed. So many people will say, "I've tried to bring up test scores. I've tried to get kids to want to come to school. I've tried. I've tried. We've tried to get teachers on board."

But the scores end up flatlining. The teachers end up complaining. The students still don't come to school. And you publicly feel embarrassed because you have put yourself out there. You tried to leverage your personal power and it flatlines. So then what do we do? Because of the feeling of embarrassment or ashamed that we feel, we say, "Oh, the reason for this must be outside of our power."

So when we think about power, we really are thinking about protection on either end, safety. Either we feel safe to exhibit power, or we don't feel safe to exhibit power. We feel afraid of having too much power because of what people might think of us, because we don't want to hurt somebody, because there would be such a burden if we had all this power. It would be so much responsibility. We don't know if we could hold the responsibility, and could we handle all of this responsibility and this power?

We're also afraid of having too little power. And that's what I hear school leaders saying. I thought I was going to have more power, I have less power, or I don't have the power I thought I would have. So what is the right amount of power? There's no amount of power that feels 100% safe

because even when you're playing on the spectrum of power, there's too much that feels too scary and too little that feels oppressive and frustrating. And we want to sit in the little middle there, right? The plus one, minus one. It's kind of like the emotional bandwidth scale.

So notice yourself. What for you feels safe? What for you feels like protection? What is the right amount of power? And the truth is, there is no answer here. There's no right amount of power. It's just what feels right for you. It's a contemplation. This is something we are exploring simply for the sake of creating some awareness and some clarity because the relationship that we as leaders in positions of authority, we have power. We have personal power, we have positional power. We have a certain level of power in our society in terms of what different people think and feel about educators and school leaders.

There's no right answer here. This is for you to explore because when I zoom out and I observe education at large and I look at the macrocosm of education, the institution of it, I see the conflicting dynamics of our very complicated human relationship with power, but we don't talk about that because it's uncomfortable. We're not directly addressing and exploring our understanding of power, but that is what is keeping us stagnant. That's why kids aren't learning because we're not talking about their power.

When they're exercising it, the way that they're exercising it. Kids will exhibit power, temper tantrums, verbally exerting their power, physically refusing to do their work, getting up throwing chairs, verbally assaulting people, physically assaulting people. They will exhibit power. Doesn't mean it's the best way for them to exhibit that power or that it's safe for them to exhibit that power.

Sometimes they don't know how to exhibit power. It's something we need to teach. We need to discuss. We need to talk about it because we have limitless personal power, but we want to leverage it. We want to navigate it

in a way that is productive and healthy for the person and those around them.

So this is a very open-ended conversation. We don't walk away today having all the answers, but you do have contemplations that you can question and you can consider and you can start to answer for yourselves. What is your relationship with power and what different contexts? Do you feel you have power? In what areas? Why or why not? Where would you like more power and why? And what would it mean to have all this power in your life?

And if you had the power in the area that you are craving power, then what? What are we going to do? What would we try? What would we say? How would we approach school leadership? We are afraid of power because of what we make it mean, because of what we make it mean about others, because of how we've seen it exercised and leveraged from other people in our lives or from, you know, society at large or from the powers that be, as we say.

So contemplate this. Have a conversation about it with somebody you trust. Be willing to explore the power of power and the relationship you have with it, because this will move us closer to the outcomes and the experiences that we want to personally experience and the experiences that we want to help cultivate in others for themselves, to empower them.

So here we go. Buckle up. It's going to be a really powerful year. I love you. I appreciate you. Have a beautiful week. We'll talk to you 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.