Episode 5: Your Relationship with Email

Imagine this: You receive only six emails a week. One is from your district office and provides all the info you need for the week. One is from your principal and provides all the info your teachers need for the week. The other four are from the PLC teams that you support and are copies of their meeting notes and action items.

Almost no email, and none of it urgent. Just FYI stuff. What could you do with the extra time?

On today's episode, we examine your relationship with email. I'm your host, Frederick Buskey. The Assistant Principal Podcast focuses on the four themes of strategic leadership:

- Prioritizing purpose over urgency
- Dealing with problems instead of treating symptoms
- Prioritizing progress over action and
- Serving people ahead of completing tasks.

Email is such a critical thing because it impacts all four of the principles of strategic leadership!

- The way we typically use email today reinforces the primacy of the urgent at the cost of being purposeful.
- Email does not lend itself to deep and meaningful analysis and conversation, so it is almost always focused on surface level symptoms instead of root problems.
- Because email feels so urgent, we focus more on responding to email than actually using it to create progress.
- Finally, email consumes a disproportionate amount of time and attention at the cost of human interaction and helping people grow.

Today's show is in response to my work with all of the assistant principals in the APEx program. If you don't know what APEx is, you can check it out on my website at frederickbuskey.com/APEx.

At the beginning of this school year, I asked the APEx APs to identify their three biggest challenges and, unsurprisingly, email was one of the winners. In further conversations, some common themes emerged:

- Most APs receive 15-100 emails a day (with 50 being typical)
- Categories that take up the most time include discipline, teacher questions, athletics, testing, MTSS/Special Education
- Most APs scan email on their phones multiple times a day.
- Seeing alerts and knowing that there are unread/unanswered emails in their inbox adds stress to many APs.
- Many APs view the inbox as a to-do list

- APs approach email differently, with some feeling that careful crafting and thoughtful responses are important while others respond to emails as briefly and directly as possible.
- Most APs have a system for prioritizing email and use folders to manage their inbox
- Many APs will use phone calls to respond to complex emails.
- Many APs check email outside of work hours.

I'm not an email expert and you can find tons of videos and recommendations on the Internet, so why bother listening to this podcast? Aside from my soothing voice and uplifting demeanor, you might want to listen because we will examine email through a strategic lens.

If you look at typical email suggestions, they focus on responding to and organizing your email. This is like focusing solely on what you eat when you want to lose weight. Changing your diet is more complex than simply changing what you eat. Similarly, changing your email habits is about more than how you deal with the actual emails you receive.

I'm going to assume that you are listening to this while you are traveling, but you may want to wait until you are in front of your email. It isn't a requirement, but I will ask you to think about some things for which it might be handy to have your email in front of you. Of course, you could always listen to the podcast twice!

As we get started, it might be good to remember that email is a relatively new invention. Remember how we started this podcast, imaging that we only received a few emails a week and that they were all informational? That wasn't a dream, it was the reality twenty years ago. In 2000, if someone wanted something from you, they needed to either call, physically hunt you down, or leave a note. This is a profound thing to understand.

As a tool for sharing information, email is unsurpassed. The fundamental problem with email, is that we use it for many other things for which it was not designed.

Here's a fun thing to try if you are in front of your email: Review your emails from the past day or two. How many of the requests or questions you received would people have asked if they had to call or visit you?

My educated guess is not many.

This highlights two critical issues related to email:
1. While email started out being a communication tool, but it has become something else – a to-do list.

2. Because it is a communication tool, email makes it very easy, too easy, for other people to add things to YOUR to-do list.

When used inappropriately, which it often is, email becomes a way to add more work to people's plates.

Getting control of email involves three aspects:
1. Changing your relationship with email
2. Building complimentary communication systems
3. Managing the email you do get

Today we are focusing on the relationship aspect. We will dig into the other pieces in future episodes.

Let's dive right in and begin by looking at the relationship you have with your email. Yes, you have a relationship with email, and it is this relationship that makes email so problematic. That's why the first step to getting email under control is to change the relationship. Remember:

- Email is a tool. That means it should serve you, not the other way around.
- The primary purpose of the email tool is to facilitate the flow of information.

Any time you use email as something other than a tool and for a means other than information flow, you are changing your relationship with email. It's that simple. Tool. Information. This is the simplest step in taming the email best, but perhaps it is also the most challenging.

Changing our relationship requires a better understanding of how we actually use email outside of its intended function for disseminating information. If you have the time to quietly reflect, pause the podcast and think about all the ways that you use your email. If you have access to your email, you can review recent messages and think about these questions:

- How many simple questions did you get asked?
- How many messages felt urgent?
- How many were actually urgent – in the sense that someone was going to get hurt if the email wasn't attended to immediately?
- How many emails were FYI?
- How many requests did you get to do things that weren't essential to your job responsibilities?
- Finally, how many emails had anything to do with helping your teachers get better?

[pause]

You might be thinking, "So what? Why is it a problem that email serves all of these different functions?"

The simple answer is that misusing email stops you from being strategic:

- Using email as a multipurpose tool means that email consistently demands your attention, focusing you on what is urgent. This makes it harder to be present in the moment and to focus your actions on what is most important to fulfilling your purpose.
- Using email to work through any but the most mundane of issues limits us to dealing with things on a surface level. Email is not a way to address root problems.
- "Dealing with" individual messages stimulate the reward pathways to our brains and makes us feel as though we are achieving something. This is action without progress.
- Finally, all that time spent with your phone or computer is time you aren't spending with people, and if you aren't with people, you aren't helping them grow.

If you had no email – none – how much more time could you spend observing classrooms and helping teachers to improve their craft? Or helping highly stressed students learn better coping mechanisms?

So, here is the relationship challenge: Can you use email almost exclusively as a tool for sharing and receiving information?

That probably means figuring out alternative ways to do the following:

- Create and manage to-do lists
- Engage in in-depth discussions
- Scheduling
- Responding to requests and inquiries
- Becoming aware of and responding to emergencies

Here are some things I'd like you to do this week:

1. Find a different vehicle for emergencies. If you thought you were having a heart attack, you wouldn't email your doctor! You probably carry a walkie-talkie. Let the important people know you won't be glued to your email over the next week or so.
   a. I know some of you out there have responsibility for substitute teachers, bus drivers, or other things that happen after hours. Checking your email right before you go to bed and again before you even get out of bed in the morning is a terrible way to live, but I admit that I don't have a great solution for that. I wonder if having a messaging app on your phone that was ONLY used for after-hours critical situations might work. If you have suggestions, please let me know.

2. Turn off alerts. If you only do one thing, TURN OFF YOUR ALERTS! They don't matter. If you've done step one of creating different vehicle for emergencies, then there is NOTHING in your email that you need to be aware of.

3. Set three times a day to check email. These should be times when you can focus and respond to anything that needs responding to. Later we will talk about conditioning, but for now know that your "quick" response to emails is conditioning other people to send you more emails.

4. Be mindful. Begin tracking what kind of email you get and thinking about other ways to deal with it.
   a. Is it informational?
   b. Is this a request? From who? For what purpose? Is it important for *your* purpose?
   c. Is it something that requires a discussion?
   d. Is it an inquiry, the answer to which the person could have found somewhere else?

As we begin wrapping up, here is a quick recap of the main points:

1. Email was designed as a tool to facilitate the flow of information and that should be its primary purpose.
2. The first step in getting control of email is changing our relationship with it.
3. The first step in changing our relationship is to begin understanding and being mindful of the different ways we currently use email.
4. You have four tasks this week:
   a. Establish an emergency notification system that does not rely on email
   b. Turn off your email alerts
   c. Schedule three times a day to check email and only check it during those times
   d. Be mindful of the type of email you get

Next week we will dig into creating systems and changing people's expectations around email. We'll look at a number of specific techniques and you should walk away with some solid actionable strategies.

One other thing before we go. One of the tenants of strategic leadership is that small improvement today is better than big improvement later. I wanted this to be a bigger podcast that encompassed all aspects of email, but that podcast wasn't going to get made for another week or so. So, I have tried to be strategic by providing something of small value today, instead of asking you to wait weeks for something better.

If you enjoyed today's show please subscribe and rate this podcast.
I'm always trying to improve the show, so if you have feedback, please email me at fbuskey@gmail.com. This podcast supplements the APEx program. APEx stands for Assistant

Assistant Principal *Ex*celeration

Principal Excelleration. If you'd like more content tailored towards the needs of assistant principals, you can learn more about APEx at frederickbuskey.com/APEx.

That wraps up today's show! I'm Frederick Buskey and I hope you'll join me next time for the Assistant Principal Podcast.