

Ep #170: Generating Connection in 2 Steps with Erika Gutierrez



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Angela Kelly

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 170.

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 Robeck.

Angela: Well, hello my empowered leaders. Happy Tuesday. Welcome to the podcast. Today with me I am so excited because with me today I have one of my very own private one on one clients. Her name is Erica Gutierrez. She is a second-year lead principal for an elementary school. Erica and I have been working together for oh gosh, I would say four or five months now. She is just one of my favorite clients.

They're all my favorite, but she has done so much coaching work this year. She's applied everything we've talked about every single session every single week. She's put her heart and soul into her job, into her work, into her self-coaching. I had to have her on the podcast.

Now, I have to tell you guys something special about Erica. She was a little shy to do this. It took me quite a bit of prompting, but we eventually got her to say yes. So I'm so glad she's here today. She's really here to tell you about her leadership journey, her educational journey, and her coaching journey with me and with herself. What I love about Erica is that one of her leadership values, and you know that I've said this.

So for those of you who listen to the podcast on a regular basis, you know that the first step in the empowered principal program for my one-on-one private clients is that we align to our leadership values. One of the things I love about Erica is that her primary leadership strategy is connection. Erica

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really values building relationships and having authentic connections with her staff, her teachers, her colleagues, her students and her parents, her entire school campus and community. We are going to talk about that today.

We are going to share with you how she does that and maintains her sense of self, sets boundaries for herself, and has work-life balance. Because she has a little one at home. So she is not just a principal. She's a mom. So Erica, that was a long winded welcome. I'm so glad you're here. Welcome to the podcast.

Erica: Thank you for inviting me. I'm very excited.

Angela: I am so proud of you for saying yes. I'm so excited for me that you said yes. So I was just telling the listeners how it's kind of scary to jump on the podcast.

Erica: Yes.

Angela: Because we have thousands of listeners every single week. You don't have to worry because they are all on this journey with you. So we are all here together in support. We are just giving you all of the love and support for being here today. So thank you for that.

I want you to just start by telling the listeners what really inspired you to pursue school leadership. So tell them just your teaching background, your leadership journey. People love to know this. So let them hear all about Erica.

Erica: Well, this is my thirteenth year in education. I was three years as an assistant principal, and this is my second year as a principal. So being a

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principal through COVID has definitely been a challenge. Very different from what I hear from any other time, but we are where we are at. So I think being a principal has always been on the back of my mind.

I don't know that I've ever shared this with you, but I remember being in third grade. I always knew from as long as I could remember that I wanted to be a teacher. So people just know what they want to be. I've always wanted to be a teacher. So I clearly remember being in third grade in Ms. Straut's classroom. You get to do those what do you want to be when you grow up papers?

Angela: Yeah.

Erica: I was an ESL student. So sitting there in my classroom. I never was in trouble. I wanted to be in teacher. I was a perfect little kid, right. So I'm in sitting in Ms. Straut's classroom, and my principal walks in, Mrs. Thompson. I think her name was Thompson. She walks in, and my teacher asks me to read my paper out loud. I read it. I wish my mom had kept it, but throughout all these years finally reflecting back on what it was, now I understand why my teacher invited my principal.

So my paper went along something like this. It said, "When I grow up, I want to be a teacher. I'm going to teach as long as I can. When Mrs. Thompson dies, then I'm going to take over and I'm going to be the principal."

Angela: That's awesome.

Erica: So I think somewhere in the back of my mind, that has always been. Even in third grade, that has always been what I wanted to do. I never really thought I wanted to be a principal. Life kind of just read me in this

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direction. It has been an amazing experience. A difficult experience learning, but it has been a great experience.

Teaching has always been in my heart. I know as a Hispanic woman. My parents were from Mexico and immigrated here. I know the difference education has made in my life. I know that I'm able to have a better lifestyle and be able to provide more for my little one because of being educated. So it's so important for me to share that story, to share that story with my teachers, to share that story with our students, to share that story with our community. I feel like this is the best way that I can do that is by being an example of that.

Angela: You are being an example of that. That is why I love coaching with you so much is because you truly do align to who you are. You know yourself very well, and you align to that. Then you show up every single day as that person. What I really love about you is your willingness to be vulnerable. You have a lot of courage and a lot of capacity for vulnerability, but in this very like soft loving way.

You embody so much love and connection that it makes sense to me why connection and relationship building is truly your superpower and how you show up in every single thing that you do. It's really fun to watch. I love the story about your third-grade teacher. That is so great. You even knew, "I'm taking over this position."

Erica: Yes, yes. It's funny because you know through the world of social media, I've actually looked her up. Because in my third-grade mind, I thought she was really old. I don't think she's actually that old. I found her on Facebook. I thought about emailing or sending her a message. Then I was like I don't know. She's going to think I'm crazy. Maybe I will someday. She probably won't remember.

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Angela: Oh, I bet she will. Even if she doesn't, she will be so touched that you remembered her. Because that moment meant so much for you.

Erica: Oh absolutely.

Angela: Just like we have these memories as kids. What I love is to know that the kids that we have served throughout all of the years in our career have memories like that of us. I think that's what's really special.

Erica: Yes, yes.

Angela: All right. Let's talk about coaching. Because so many of the listeners out there, they're fascinated by the work that I do, but they're a little bit hesitant. They're like, "What is it exactly? What do we do? How do I work with you? What does the work entail?" So like the listeners want to know.

They want to ask the question what compelled you to hire a leadership coach? Really from the space of where were you at the time? What was your mindset at the time? What was going through your mind? Where were you on an emotional level? So can you tell that story about coaching? The problems you were facing, the solutions, all of that good stuff. Then how you made that decision to commit an investment in yourself.

Erica: Last year as a first-year principal, you think, you know you don't know it but then you live through it. Being a principal, even though I have some great administrators within our district that we're each other's support. You know we are friends. We do support each other. You still don't see them day to day. You still aren't with them. It's not like having a teacher friend. Teacher friends I think are so important. But they're not just down the hall and you can go in and chat with them.

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So I found myself feeling lonely. Every school has their own problems. Every school has its own heartbeat. My story and my concerns and my issues that I was having, I couldn't really go to another administrator. I mean I could have gone to another administrator, but it was just different. So I needed someone who wasn't my husband—my poor husband—or that wasn't just a teacher that was also part of my instructional leader team that wasn't part of our staff. Someone that I could actually talk to and just be completely open.

So I think I first found your podcast, and that's how I figured out who you were and what you did. I kept thinking maybe that's what I need. Maybe I need someone to just talk to. I didn't know what I needed. Honestly, I just knew that in August when I finally sent the email and was like, "Okay, I need some support." It was in the middle of the COVID craziness and the pandemic, coming back to school and doing virtual learning. Then knowing that our kids were possibly coming back. Just trying to live through all of that.

At that point, I knew that I needed someone else. Someone that I could talk to. Someone that I could express my concerns and help me, guide me through those issues being real. Being very kind, but just being real with me. Some of the things that I was facing were problems that other principals had never faced with it being COVID and a pandemic and all of that.

Angela: Right.

Erica: Some of the other things were just more personal things. Things that I needed some support with. I remember having this conversation with you, and I told you I feel like I've always, like I said. Even from the third-grade story. I don't feel like I know it all, but I've always kind of had a goal. I've

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been able to accomplish my goal without even...It's just part of me, I think. Just knowing I'm going to do the next thing, and this is the next thing I'm going to do.

I found myself thinking like why am I doing this? Why am I sitting here as a principal where I just felt lonely and didn't know if I was doing it right. Just needed that support. At that moment is when I reached out to you. Even just talking to you that first day. I remember sitting at my mom's. It was during the summer. That was the only place we went to because everyone was locked up. So I remember going over to my parent's house, sitting on the couch, and just letting it all out. Like everything that had happened that year. It had just been such a hard year.

It has been the best thing that I've done for myself. That investment because it is an investment. You think about you invest in other silly things. In Starbucks and coffee and things that you don't need.

Angela: Right.

Erica: Shoes and all the stuff. Really, I value...One of my values, probably even say my love language, is spending time with people. So having someone that I can know that is there, sometimes that's what gets me through the week is knowing that midweek I'm going to have someone that I can talk to. Just let it all out, get some advice, and just continue moving through the week.

That has been amazing. That has been one of the best things that I've done. My husband doesn't have to hear it all now. You know, sometimes for a relationship that's also important. I knew in August when I reached out to you...It probably was because it was just us two in the home and my little one. At that point, you were really isolated from the world.

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Angela: Yes.

Erica: I needed someone else to be able to coach me and guide me through some issues that in my mind seemed huge. You were really able to help me and like, “Okay, like step out of your brain. Let’s think about it, and let’s process it.”

Angela: Yes. You said so many amazing things. So one of the things I remember about our consult was that when I asked you, like why did you make the call? Why did you decide to sign up for this call? Why right now? Why is the right time? I remember you saying to me, “I need somebody in my corner. I need to know that there’s somebody in my corner that I can trust who 100% has my back, who believes in me, and that is completely separate and neutral from all of this other stuff going on.”

Because you were dealing with some pretty intense situations at the time. That really spoke to me. That really spoke to me. It really made me realize the value of coaching. Because there isn’t a lot of other support like this available for especially the site leader. I know that there are organizations out there who provide programs and mentorships and classes and workshops.

All of that stuff is amazing, but what this offers, I believe. And you really helped solidify it actually for me as a coach was it’s you and me, and that’s it. There’s 100% trust, 100% safety. It’s you feeling like even when you’re out there alone battling the battles of the campus and all of the hard work that you do out there, you know in your heart that every week we have this touch point. Every week we have this opportunity that you aren’t the leader who’s giving out energy and giving out solutions and providing support.

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You get to receive. You get to receive the love, receive the support. And be reminded that you are special. You are doing so much. You are doing enough. You are being enough. You have the power to manage your life and your emotions and the work that you do and set those boundaries. All of that work, you have that every single week. I think the moment you said, "I just really want somebody in my corner." I was like that is worth a million dollars because it is such an isolating job.

Erica: It is.

Angela: So I'm so honored to be your coach. Another thing I heard you say was now you don't have to tell your husband. I remember coming home. He was my boyfriend at the time, now my husband. Day after day, week after week I was just dumping and dumping and dumping. Kind of just venting really. Not really looking for solutions. I didn't want him telling me what to do. I was like just listen. He was like, "I'm tired of listening."

The beautiful part about a coach, like I've been in the shoes. I know exactly what you're going through. We can kind of cut to the chase and get to the part where we help you feel better really quickly or help you come up with a solution. Whatever the case is. The value of coaching isn't just that someone's in your corner. The ripple effect is that it benefits your marriage, and it benefits your family time. You're not thinking about work when you're at home because you've done that with the coach. You can go home and be with your husband and be with your son.

It impacts the way that you lead. It impacts your teachers. Because when you're feeling empowered, you empower them. You build up their capacity. Like I just love seeing how much work you've done to allow the coaching not just to end with you, but to let it extend into every part of your life.

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Erica: Absolutely. One of the first things that I remember. So I'm diabetic. One of the things that I need to do is exercise. I remember one of the first conversations that we had was just I don't have time. I don't have time. What am I going to do? I know that it has nothing to do with being a principal, but at the same time it has so much to do because if I don't take care of myself then I can't take care of my school, my family. All the other things that go with it.

So it was just you helping me block out some of that time. Just making sure that I was being wise with my time. That was very helpful and very powerful. Then also giving myself. I say you giving me, but really giving myself permission to really step away.

Angela: Yes.

Erica: A couple weeks ago I took two days off. I was like why am I taking time off? It felt so good, and I needed to. It was just good to just be away. I told my staff I'm like, "You know, I planned some days." I tell my staff like you have to take time for yourself. So absolutely I think it goes beyond just the conversations that you and I have. It goes into the self-care. I'm in a doctoral program. Part of that is managing my time. With COVID, with everything else, with being a mom.

Angela: Yes, yes. It's a lot.

Erica: With being the best person I can be in every situation. Trying to be a friend. I think one of the great things that I've done working with you and coaching with you is figuring out that I need to put myself first. Knowing that I need to take time for myself and plan those times. I've even told my staff this. I've sent out newsletters and I've told them, "You need to plan fun."

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Like I have a day during the week where I plan fun. Because you find yourself that you want to be a good mom. You try to be a good mom. You try to be a good principal, but then you forget about those people who were really there for you, your friends. So now I plan like one fun time during the week. Sometimes that's the only thing that keeps me going is knowing that on Wednesday afternoon, I'm going to go have dinner with friends or a date night. Just planning fun. Through coaching, I've been able to give myself that permission and know that it's important so that I can fill my bucket and then in turn turn around and continue leading.

Angela: Oh gosh. This is so good. Okay. So first of all, I just want to recap what she and I've been working on. Number one, like back to the very first conversation we had. Her first thought was that she didn't have time basically to take care of herself. She didn't have time to deal with exercise. She was too busy. She is busy. Like we're just going to put that on the table. She's a mother. She's a principal. She's a wife. She's a friend. She's a daughter. And she's in a doctoral program. Like she's not your average school principal. She's doing everything.

So it would be easy for me to agree with her and say, "Oh you're right Erica. You don't have time because you're doing all of these things." I wasn't willing to let her believe that story because that story didn't serve her body. It didn't serve her mental wellbeing, her emotional wellbeing, her physical wellbeing.

It's my job as her coach not to tell her she's right or wrong, but to ask her to question if that's absolutely true. Is there another sentence, another thought she could think in her mind that would serve her better? So I would love to hear what's the thought you think now about your time? Because you're still doing all of those things, right?

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Erica: I am. You know.

Angela: But do you feel stressed about time like you did in the beginning?

Erica: No, definitely not. Definitely not.

Angela: What's the change?

Erica: Just knowing that it's my time, I think. Just that it's my time. That I take ownership of my time. That I decide how I spend my time. That I plan my time beforehand. So it's just looking at it differently. I think also giving yourself grace.

Angela: Yes.

Erica: Because there's still a million things that have to be done. I could stay here until 9:00 p.m. everyday and not be done. Just knowing that giving myself certain days where I stay late, and then the rest of the week like giving myself a time where I go home. I go home, and I am a wife, a mom, a friend, a student.

I think it's just looking at it differently and knowing that it's my time, and I decide how to spend that time. Instead of constantly playing catch. Like giving yourself that time to play. That time to work hard. That time to study hard. It's just giving yourself the time. Knowing that you're the owner of that.

Angela: Yes. This is what happened. She shifted from thinking that time was happening to her. That everything within her job was happening to her, and that it was in control of her schedule. That even though she signed up for the doctorate, the time was happening to her. Versus now she

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determines the time. She decides how much time she's going to work, how much time she's going to exercise and move her body, how much time she's going to spend at home, how much time she's going to spend on her studies. She is now in control of that. Simply by shifting that thought to time's happening to me versus I'm in control of my time.

The other thing I heard you say, and this is definitely a part of the empowered principal process, is it's one thing to cognitively understand that you are in control of your time. It's another thing to prioritize yourself and physically put it on the calendar and then honor that. So when it says 4:00, go home, go pick up your son early, and go to the park, you actually honor that and do that.

Erica: Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. I think before even as an assistant principal, you forget. You're like I can do that later. I can do that later. Before you know it, later is not there. You've lost connections. To me, connections are so important. You lose not friendships, but you just kind of drift away. That's the last thing that I want to happen with these people that I love that I care so much about.

Angela: I know, yeah.

Erica: To me, that's important. Like I always think people over anything. Like spending time with people is my love language, and that's what I enjoy doing. Like yes, I have all this paperwork. Yes, I have all these other things that I need to do and will get done, but they will get done. They will get done. I just need to prioritize.

Angela: It sounds to me like you just set time boundaries. Like I'm going to give the newsletter 30 minutes. Or I'm going to give the report that I'm writing an hour or two hours or whatever. You're not letting it take you

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days and weeks and months. Making this drama in your head about oh my gosh. The site plan is going to take me months to write. Versus saying okay. On Tuesday from two to four I'm going to do section one. Thursday from nine to ten I'm going to do section two.

It's just you have a plan, you know exactly when you're doing it, how much time you're giving it. Then your brain can relax knowing it has a space. It has a place. It doesn't have to be like, "Oh, when am I going to do the site plan?" It's like nope. I've assigned it a time, a date, and a duration. It's going to get done in that time. Check the box, right? You feel so much better and more in control when you take true ownership of your calendar.

Erica: Absolutely.

Angela: Yeah. I love that you put—Oh, this is the other thing I love that you said. When you're putting fun on the calendar, it makes it more valuable. So our time is like money. We spend time the same way we spend money. When you put something on your calendar, that signifies. It's like allotting money or time. Like time and money is the same thing. Like you're allotting that much time to that activity.

If fun never gets on your calendar, it's kind of like saying to the universe, "Well, this isn't really important. This doesn't really matter. Because it's not valuable enough to put onto my calendar." What I teach is what goes on your calendar, shows what you value. How you spend your time shows what you value. So.

Erica: Absolutely. It's something that I'm still working on. Something that I still have a long way to go. I definitely think that I've done, and I've grown just in the past few months with that. It's just looking at it from a different

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angle. Definitely something that I need to continue working on and growing on and perfecting. It's helped.

Angela: Well, we're not going to be robots about this where our schedule's perfection and we're perfectly robotically going through our schedule. That's not really the intent. The intent is just to shift our thoughts to, "I'm in control of my time. I'm going to give myself the grace and luxury of having some downtime and some rest time and some exercise time. When we fail at that basically or we overwork or we underwork, whatever it is, we just write it off and learn from it and keep going.

Erica: Yes, yes. Absolutely. It's just understanding how it works.

Angela: Right, yeah. Just playing with it a little bit, right.

Erica: Yes.

Angela: Yeah, it's kind of fun. Okay. So let's get into connection. Can you share the process that you went through of aligning your leadership values, specifically that value of connection? And why you decided the value of connection? It's importance for your, your staff, and your students.

Maybe some traditions that you've started at your school. Because you have been sharing some really fun things that you have been doing with your staff. I just love talking with you each week because you always are doing these great fun connection activities. So tell the listeners your whole thought process around that value of connection.

Erica: So I don't know that I knew that I valued connection so much until I started coaching with you. I've always known that I loved talking with people and listening to people. Just hearing their stories. As a teacher, I

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think one of the things. You know you always have those administrators that you just love. I think about my first principal that hired me. I remember my first year, last year, I called her. I was like give me some advice. Because I was struggling. It's hard being a first-year principal.

I remember she picked up the phone. I texted her, and she picked up the phone. It was like your mom was calling you. It was my principal, my first one. I was like oh my goodness. I did something wrong. She picked up the phone. She goes, "Erica, what did I do?" I go, "I don't know. That's exactly what I want to know. What did you do?" I remember I was kind of in my emotions. It had been a rough day. She goes, "I made you feel like family. We were a family."

At that moment, I realized that that was exactly what it was. As a family, you have those connections. I know people have different experiences with their families, but I value family. I value my family. At that moment, she was absolutely right. Not everyone in your family is always going to be happy with you. In your family, you tell people the truth. You tell them how you feel because you want them to be okay. Like in a hard difficult situation, you would tell your sibling, "Hey, you know what? This is something that's going on." You have that comfort of telling people that.

So in that moment, I was like she is absolutely right. To me, having those conversations with people, learning about people, knowing people. Knowing what makes them go, what they want to do, what they want to be when they grow up. Even as teachers I want to know like what do you want to be? Where do you see yourself? It goes beyond just an interview question. When they tell me, I really keep it in mind. Like this is what you want to do. How can I help you grow there?

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It's so important. It's so important. To me, I know that when people, specifically like the principals that I've had have been amazing. I don't know if they've been amazing to everyone, but to me they've been amazing. I think it's because I value who they are as a person. Not everyone's perfect. We all have room to grow. I wanted to know them. I don't know if that makes sense. I wanted to get to know them. By that, I learned more about them. I wanted to know more. I wanted to be like them.

So to connections are so important. Connections are important to me as a family. Like I said earlier, my extended family they still live in Mexico. So I really value family. Because when you don't have your cousins and your aunts, you don't get to go to all the family events because they are a whole country away. When you do have that, you value it. So that's something that's so important on like a personal level.

Then I think somehow it just goes into my professional world as well. I remember I was a teacher that'd walk around like, "Hey, how are you?" You know? Just trying to get to know teachers. Trying to learn from them. I've always been a learner. I always tell my staff I don't know everything, but together we're going to make a team. We're going to have the best response, the best ideas because we are a team. Everyone brings something to the table regardless of if you are a first-year teacher or a 20 year teach or a first-year principal or a ten-year principal.

So to me, just knowing about people, just getting to know them is so important. With my teachers, it's about knowing what makes them go. Knowing what's going to keep them motivated. Getting to know them. Sometimes it's about really getting to know the heart of the person and understanding where they're coming from so you can help them grow.

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As a principal, one of the things we do is have those challenging conversations. The same way that in the classroom you invest in your students and you get to know your students and you get to know all about them and all about their families. You get to know their goals and you get to know what makes them go. It's the same thing with the teachers.

When I realized that it was the same thing with the teachers, it was like my biggest ah-ha moment. That I could walk into their classroom and just visit with them. Just be intentional about visiting with them. Be intentional about getting to know them. Because at some point we are all, as principals, going to have those difficult conversations.

When we do, you've invested into them. You've had that connection. It doesn't come from a place of you're doing something wrong. It comes from a place of, "This is what happened. Now let's work through it. You're still an amazing teacher, but we're going to work through. How can I help you grow and continue growing?" So that is so important to me. Just knowing people, knowing people and the heart of them.

Angela: Yes. When you said that you had amazing principals, and you said I'm not really sure. Then you started to explain why. I want to point the listeners to this moment because the reason you experienced your principals as amazing humans is because you authentically genuinely wanted to get to know them for who they were. In that quest to know these humans as your leaders, your brain was consciously looking for the good in them. Consciously like picking out the parts that were amazing. So your memory and your experience of them. Because the way that we feel is always triggered by our, what is it Erica?

Erica: Brain?

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Angela: Our thoughts, right. So our thoughts create our emotions. What Erica just said that she did, and I don't even know if she caught it herself. She said, "I use connection as the way to find the amazingness in every human I interact with." Her brain is looking. It's called confirmation bias when your brain is looking for those answers. When she believes that people are amazing, she's going to see the amazingness that's in them.

What I love about how Erica approaches leadership from a school principal perspective is that she's always out there looking for the good in people, the best in people, the positive sides of people. Because of that, her experience of her teachers and her students and her family members in the community is a positive one. You are doing that without even realizing that. Not everybody is wired to see that value in connection. You so beautifully just described exactly how to do it.

If you happen to be a listener out there who feels like connection is hard or connection is awkward or you're not good at connecting. I know that was a story I had in my brain up until last year. That I'm not good at connections and I'm kind of an awkward person. I don't know what to say. When you think that about yourself, of course that's how you're going to show up and it's going to be awkward.

If you decide hey, wait a minute. Everybody out there has something positive about them. I'm going to just seek out the good in them. That thought that you carry around with you Erica, it's such a beautiful thought. It helps you. It serves you, right?

Erica: Yes. I think knowing people's stories.

Angela: Yes.

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Erica: Because if you know people's stories whether it's a parent that just walked into my office and is very upset. Sometimes when a parent is upset, they're not upset with you. When a kid is upset, they're out of control. It has nothing to do with a person they're taking it out on, being reactive to. It really has to do with something else. Something deeper.

I find that if I can somehow—And maybe they won't tell me. A lot of the times parents will walk into my office and they won't tell me what's going on. In the back of my mind, knowing that there is something else deeper than just me helps me not take it as personally. Same thing goes with my teachers and with my students.

With parents, I've had a parent who called me the other day. Through this pandemic, and the child was going to be quarantined. We've all had those stories of quarantining. They were very upset. It's just listening to them. Just listening to the concerns and the problems. At the end of the day, I didn't change anything. Because there's rules that we have to follow. The student was still going to be quarantined.

At the end of the day, it was just listening. It was just taking the time to listen. Parents value that. It's like they remember that from later on whenever you do have to make that difficult parent phone call. They value that. That you took the time before and listened to them.

That's something else that I think we as educators, as administrators, as people. The cell phone. Like you're always connected somehow. So I make it a point to make it where whenever I'm with someone, I'm with someone. Sometimes I find my mind just wandering. Physically it's easier to kind of put the phone away.

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I've even had to take my watch off because it was distracting. I would be talking to someone, and before I knew it, I wasn't talking to them anymore. I was reading the text that was coming through on my watch. I had to take it off because it was giving me that anxiety of I'm not even listening to the person that's standing in front of me.

So, to me, connection is so important. It's one of the things that I talk to me teachers about building relationships with their students and how important that is. If you can really capture a student's heart and you know what makes them go and what makes them tick, then you can teach them.

Angela: Yeah. I love this so much because you simplified connection into two really simple steps. Number one, you ask a question. Number two, you stop and listen. Actually stop and take the time to listen to the answer.

Erica: And remember.

Angela: It's as simple as that. When you really do listen, you do remember. When you're really listening and you're taking in, there are pieces that just capture your attention. When you're asking like hey how are you, and then you're zooming down the hall and you don't even stop to listen to what the person said or even look at them. You'll never know who you even walked by first of all. Second of all, what their answer was.

So the two steps to connection, ask people. I like to ask people, "How are you feeling today?" versus how are you doing. Because we have this generic, "Oh, I'm fine."

Erica: Yes.

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Angela: “How are you doing?” “I’m fine.” If you say how are you feeling, they have to almost like stop and think. Like, “Wait a minute. How am I feeling?” That drops them into their body, and then you genuinely like instantly have more of a connection with them.

Erica: Absolutely. That’s something that I...People have told me, “How do you remember that about me? I told you this.”

Angela: That’s so cool.

Erica: Somehow in the back of my mind, I just store. I’m not good with names, for whatever reason. I’m not the best with names. It’s something that I have to work towards. I remember details about people. I mean like names with the 800 students that I have. That’s something that I’m working on, but there’s also 800 students. Definitely I remember things about people. They’re always kind of like, “How did you remember that? When did I tell you that?” They’re always surprised whenever I’d remember like a very specific detail.

That doesn’t mean that I’m like the best at it. I wish I had more time. I think that’s why I value time so much because I wish I had time to like spend with specific teachers. So I do try to walk around in the mornings and visit with them. How are you? How’s it going? Is there anything you need? Through social media we’re all friends. Sometimes, “Hey, I saw that you did whatever it was. How did it go?” Like getting to know them. Getting to know their heart, who they are as a person. Because more than just a teacher, they are a person. So really getting to the core of who they are.

One of the things that I did my first year as a principal is we had a leadership retreat. So I invited all my team leaders, and we went to the beach. We have a beach house. It was fun. We did work, but it was fun to

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get to know people on a different level. It was fun to just see people, interact with people. Teachers who didn't necessarily know each other, for them to connect. That was amazing. We built some really strong bonds during that time.

Angela: Yeah. Just recently you did another really good team building event. I'm trying to remember what it was.

Erica: We do celebrations. We do staff celebrations.

Angela: Oh that was it. You're right. That was it. Just really quickly tell them what that is.

Erica: Yeah. So every Friday we have it's like the price patrol. We have music. I have a cart. We have music. At the beginning of the year, the teachers have to do a little one pager of things about me. So we print that out. I think the best part of it all is that we sent out a survey. It's on the staffing letter every week. So they complete it like a Google form. They have to nominate. So teachers are nominating each other. So they're praising each other. They're growing each other. They're helping each other fill their bucket.

So every week on Friday, we choose two to three staff members. We take those comments. We take the music. They never know where we're going. We take music, balloons, and a little gift bag. We walk around and we celebrate them. I read what their peers or their coworkers have said about them. It's like you would have thought that you won the lottery. Like I've had tears. Just excitement. The kids are excited. The teachers are excited. You hear the music. You don't know where the music. The kids come out in the hallway and they dance. It's a great way to end the week.

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Then on top of that we also do that with our students. So the teachers nominate one student from every class to come down and celebrate. So they come down. We wait for all of them to gather. “Erica is in Ms. So and So’s class. Today we’re celebrating her because she did this, this, and this.” It’s something so simple, and then we call home. We call home for those students, and we read the exact same thing for the parents.

For the staff, we do the same thing. We call their spouse or their mom or whoever it is that is on their emergency contact. Usually it’s like, “Oh my goodness thank you. She works so hard. Or my spouse is doing this or that. Or they’re so happy to be at your school.” It’s just a good way to end the week. I do have to tell you one more thing about that.

Angela: Yes.

Erica: So obviously as educators, we borrow ideas from everyone.

Angela: Yes.

Erica: So one of the connections I have is I have some teachers who are university program. So their mentor from the university comes in. She was one of the ones that gave us the idea. It was because I sat across the table from her. Told her hey, this is what’s going on. She was like, “Well, this is something that we’ve done.” We took the idea and made it bigger. Even that came through a connection of someone that I didn’t necessarily have to be connected to.

Angela: Yes. Exactly, exactly. That is such a pretty bow on the end of that story. I love it.

Erica: Yes.

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Angela: So finally one last little question. If the listeners could take one thing away from your experience as a leader or through your experience with the coaching. If anything you want to share with them, what's one thing you would like them to know?

Erica: One thing? One thing for coaching, don't be afraid to send that email and ask for help or ask for coaching.

Angela: It's so fun.

Erica: It is fun. I have grown so much. Not just professionally. Personally. It's something that will get me through the week on a rough week. I have someone that I can coach with. Okay this is what's going on. Help me work my way through it. Help me think about it. Help me brainstorm. Sometimes it's simple things. Sometimes it's bigger problems. That has just been such blessing and such a good experience. I've told you this before. There's weeks where I'm like okay, how am I going to do this? How am I doing to do this? Then just talking it through.

Angela: Yes.

Erica: First of all, giving yourself that 45/50 minutes that we spend each week. Allowing yourself that time. Because it is a gift to yourself. Like you kind of feel weird at first because it is kind of like what do you mean this is my time and we're going to talk about myself? Because as a principal, you do spend time with other--

Angela: You're thinking about everybody else all the time, right?

Erica: Absolutely. It's just giving yourself the time.

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Angela: It doesn't feel normal to turn the mirror to yourself. So it feels awkward at first, but then once you get in that groove it feels like a luxury, I think.

Erica: Absolutely. Yes. No, I think it is absolutely a luxury. Like I said, it's been an amazing experience. Then for connection, I'm always open about I want to know more about you. Sometimes as a principal, people see you as kind of like, "Well, no. You're the principal. I shouldn't know that about you." Just being real and being human. Just be real with your stuff.

Like I have these problems. I have these issues. Being transparent, telling your story. Which, for me, is something that I'm personally working on telling my story. Just telling your story because someone can grow, and someone will grow. Be open about what you've experienced as a person to get you to where you're at.

Angela: Yes.

Erica: Even what you're experiencing, especially this year as the year is going on and the struggles that you're having. Because they're having them too, just in a different way. Just them knowing that you're right there with them side by side. I think that grows that connection.

Angela: Absolutely. Well, Erica, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for letting me be your coach. I'm so honored. And for taking this hour to share your story with the listeners because I know there are probably dozens of listeners out there who are in your shoes who are where you were a year ago. They're interested in getting the support they need, but they were afraid to.

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Your courage to share your real authentic story with the listeners is helping somebody right now as they listen to this podcast. So thank you for your courage. Thank you for your honesty and your openness and your willingness to be one the show today. I really appreciate it. I'm so honored to be connected with you.

Erica: Yes, thank you. It's been amazing.

Angela: Yes, awesome. Have a great week everybody. We'll talk to you guys next week. Take care. Bye.

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