

Karen Zelnick:

So often leaders worry about eliminating weakness, but is that practice outdated? There might be research to suggest otherwise. Join us in today's conversation with Liz Ellis, COO and Chief Heart Officer of Angel Studios, and investor Dalton Wright, as we bring you both sides of a Perfect Pitch.

Karen Zelnick:

Perfect Pitch is a podcast from Kickstart that reveals the minds of both investors and entrepreneurs throughout a startup's journey. I'm your host, Karen Zelnick. Liz and Dalton, thank you so much for being here.

Dalton Wright:

Thanks, Karen.

Liz Ellis:

Thanks, Karen.

Karen Zelnick:

And Liz, before we jump into the discussion, I want to tell everybody a little bit about you. Before joining Angel Studios, you worked as the Director of Operations for Orabrush, and you volunteered as an American Cancer Society trainer to help boost the self-esteem of cancer patients. You're a Gallup-Certified Strengths Coach and CEO of Liz Ellis Coaching. I want to talk about that specifically, but basically that means that you're an expert in discovering strengths in others and reorganizing teams. And is there anything else you'd like us to know about you?

Liz Ellis:

Sure, that reorganizing teams part, we call that a Master of Human Tetris.

Karen Zelnick:

Like that.

Liz Ellis:

Because I can see where the pieces of the puzzle need to fit together for somebody to maximize their skills. But also about me, I've been married to my high school sweetheart for 23 years and we have six kids.

Karen Zelnick:

That's so great. We're so excited to have you on the show. And Dalton, it's always great to have you back. As always, we're going to have a link to your bio in our show notes. And Dalton, what's something our audience doesn't yet know about you?

Dalton Wright:

One thing that's kind of interesting about my background is that I spent some time as a kid out in Vernal. I have a lot of fond memories of my time in Vernal and enjoying the outdoors. It also has given me some perspective on how some of the rural markets operate in Utah and some of the needs that the schools

have and different areas that we can still find ways to support development of talent outside of this corridor that we live in right now. So trying to figure out how to bring more people into tech from environments and backgrounds and communities that aren't already involved in it.

Karen Zelnick:

Thank you. That's such an amazing perspective and passion to have as an investor because sometimes it can be very siloed and focused. So I love that. Thank you for sharing that.

Dalton Wright:

Did I give you enough time to think of yours? Because we want to know a bit about you too.

Karen Zelnick:

Yeah, we can dive in. Yeah, sure. Let's talk about me. No. I mean the first thing I thought of was Liz mentioned human Tetris. When I was a kid, I geeked out over Tetris. So I would play that on the Game Boy for hours and hours, my parents had to take it away. But another thing is I recently completed this emotional fitness course for leaders. My favorite course in that series was the one on curiosity and how you have to incorporate that into leadership. And I thought that was really fun. But Liz let's get back to you. I mentioned in our introduction that you're the Chief Heart Officer at Angel Studios and that's not a title we hear very often. What does that mean?

Liz Ellis:

So I actually took that title from Claude Silver of VaynerMedia. Now she's the Chief Heart Officer over there and she's doing amazing work. But for me it is keeping your pulse on the heartbeat of the company. The Angel Studios mission is to amplify light and we can't amplify light externally to our customers or our partners or our creators if we're not amplifying the light of every internal team member that we have. And so my focus is how do we constantly build and grow our teams in their own personal development, in their professional development, in better organizational structure so that as we continue to grow, they can thrive being their very best self with their own unique brilliance?

Karen Zelnick:

And I'm sure being a Gallup-Certified Strengths Coach ties into that. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about that?

Liz Ellis:

It's really easy to see what's external talent for somebody, right? Karen's got a great batting average or Dalton's got a great three point shot percentage. Or maybe a terrible one. Who knows?

Karen Zelnick:

I do not have a great bating average for the record.

Liz Ellis:

But it's really easy to see external talent and it's not as easy to see internal talent. And so Dr. Clifton wanted to study, "What would happen if we started studying what was right with people?" Distilled it down into 34 talent themes. And that's something that we do with every new employee that joins our team. We sit down with them, we coach them on those so that they have language for what they're

really good at. And employees that are able to live their strengths in the workplace are six times more likely to be fully engaged. People who live their strengths in their everyday life are three times more likely to report an excellent quality of life. That's kind of awesome. I want to magnify that in our team members.

Karen Zelnick:

Dalton, how have you seen this practice of focusing on strengths and really focusing on their team impact Angel Studios' success?

Dalton Wright:

Well, I think Angel Studios has had to be really flexible in how they motivate and retain talent. It's a company that, and we've talked about this with Neil the CEO in a previous episode, went through a lot of difficulties dealing with lawsuits, pivoting business models, and everything else that companies are dealing with in this environment with the pandemic and changes in hiring, retention challenges. This exists for everybody. But I think Angel has also had an additional layer of complexity with some of the challenges they face in the courts.

Dalton Wright:

Liz has been instrumental in helping keep people motivated on the core vision of this business, even though there are a lot of ups and downs. That is really hard to do. We tend to be pretty short term creatures in a lot of ways and to stay focused on what the mission of the company is, even when you're having all of this volatility and things going on around you, I think takes a lot of great leadership. And to tie that specifically into your question around strengths, I think if you talk to people at Angel Studios, they'll say they did some of their best work in some of those most challenging moments. And so people were given the chance to rise to the occasion, you did that by allowing people's strengths to shine in moments of adversity rather than focus on what was going wrong or what they couldn't do.

Karen Zelnick:

Okay. I want to dive into specifically how did you do that, Liz? What are some tactical things that people can do to do what you did?

Liz Ellis:

Oh man, we've done so many things. When our company was small enough, I personally had one-on-ones with every single person every 30 days. We've now outgrown that size, and so now I have managers and leaders who are trained to do that and make sure that we're getting that understanding. Because gone are the days of, "Just leave of your baggage at the door. Come and give me your best work and then go outside again and deal with whatever's happening." That actually comes back to the whole myth of work-life balance. We have just scrapped that concept in our workplace and it's all about work-life integration. It's how do we actually address the human being underneath not just the tasks they need to do? Because then we're not just getting 100% of their effort, we start getting 110 and 120 because we're actually increasing their capacity.

Liz Ellis:

Back to Dr. Clifton, he wanted to prove this theory. And so he actually did a study at a university and he let students self select if they were an average reader or an above average reader. Then he put them all

through a year long speed reading course. The average reader started at about 90 words a minute, which is decent. The above average reader started at about 300 words a minute. It was a huge jump between the two groups. After they spent this year putting time them into speed reading, the average group went from 90 to 150, so they did improve. But the group who had started where reading was already their strength, any guesses of what their 300 words minute elevated to?

Karen Zelnick:

900?

Liz Ellis:

2,900.

Karen Zelnick:

Oh my gosh.

Liz Ellis:

Yeah. Even years later they retested these kids and the average readers immediately rubber banded back to the nineties. But the above average readers, they still stayed well above where they had started. And if we aren't helping people to address that holistic integrated approach, they can't give us their best work. They just can't.

Karen Zelnick:

Dalton, I would love to know how have you seen companies that focus on sort of what Liz has been talking about, how have you seen them perform compared to companies who maintain the mantra of, "Leave yourself at the door. Let's be heads down and then let's perform and then you can go be yourself again."?

Dalton Wright:

Every person, whether they're the founder, all the way down to the recent hire, everybody's looking for growth, everybody's looking to thrive. People do their best work when their strengths are being applied to important things. They feel stifled when they're working on their weaknesses, because it's a reminder that they've got to patch a hole and then they look around and they see other people that do something so naturally and they think that they're effective. But what they don't realize, and I think this is what strengths can reveal in people, is that there are other things that that person does that other people look at and think, "I don't know how they do that."

Dalton Wright:

I feel that way when I see super charismatic extroverts going to events where within an hour they know everybody in the room and they're friends with everybody. But I also know that there are other strengths that people have commented on wondering like, "Well, Dalton, how do you do that?" And so I think that those are the areas where I think we're happiest and we do our best work is when we know what our strengths are and our company knows how to help us use those strengths in a way that aligns with the objectives of the company.

Liz Ellis:

Yeah, one of the funniest parts of doing some of the strengths work with people is that they go, "Wait can't everybody just do that?" No, they can't.

Karen Zelnick:

No, in fact they cannot, Steve.

Liz Ellis:

Yeah. No, like that gift for analyzing things or that gift of really taking legitimate ownership of something or having true empathy for others, the way that people process information, they just sometimes forget that everyone can't do that. Not everyone sees the ending of the movie before the movie ends. Only people that are thinking strategically. So I just think finding that is a key piece of what Dalton was talking about. Because the market is getting more and more competitive, and not every startup can compete with Google salaries. They're not going to. We shouldn't even try to. And of course we need competitive pay, they're not going to come work for pennies. But we also need to make sure that we're showing what it is about our mission or our environment or other compensation opportunities that are bringing people in. Because one, we can't compete if you just compete on apples to apples. But two, you are creating such a better culture fit by bringing people in who also believe in where you're headed.

Karen Zelnick:

And what are some of the best ways you've found to communicate that? Because a lot of times people are reading job descriptions or they're reading company of files and they're like, "Okay, yeah, that sounds like a lot of nice jargon, but how do I know that that's actually true?" How are you able to effectively communicate that?

Liz Ellis:

We actually have what we call our north star, which is like our vision for where we want our company to go. Inside of that, it then has some of our team principles and we just make that publicly available. It's embedded in our job descriptions so that people can go and just read through it, understand better who we are and what we do before their first interview even happens. And it's fascinating to see when people have done that versus people that we ask them about it and they go, "Oh I think you read a thing." You're like, "Hmm, interesting. I don't know that you're going to, I love it here."

Karen Zelnick:

You read one thing?

Liz Ellis:

Yeah, right? Like, "We gave you a ton of context." Especially right now, we are literally hiring five people a week right now. Every team meeting, we're introducing new people. It feels a little out of control, but it's also really exciting. But we're recruiting people. They're in jobs they love, they're getting paid well. They have no reason to want to come to us until we start sharing our mission and our vision and our purpose and why we're doing what we do. And they get bought in and they're like, "Okay, I want to be part of something bigger than myself. I want to contribute to the greater good in some way." And that's what turns people's heads enough to then listen to the pitch and hear about the job and find out what they're going to do. And then you can start talking compensation and the nitty gritty details and working

that out. But if you don't have that passion to even turn their head, they're not going to take a look at you.

Karen Zelnick:

Yeah. Dalton, any thoughts on that?

Dalton Wright:

We're at an age right now where I think we have a lot of abundance in a lot of ways, people who work in technology. It's almost like the paradox of choice. There are more choices than ever. You have more accessibility to companies to work for. And that can be a little bit paralyzing in some ways, because you have so many things to look at. And so I think that's where a lot of tech workers, if they're not there already, they will continue to find themselves in these positions of taking a step back and thinking, "Yeah, I could stay where I'm at and make a lot of money or I could go take the swing on the thing that will maybe make the difference that I want to make in the world." And they're leaving what feels safer to go for something that feels riskier but more meaningful oftentimes.

Liz Ellis:

I agree with we're head to do that. And a piece of that too that sometimes we don't consider is people do get elevated to that level and they want to then find what is their ultimate contribution or what legacy can they leave? We also need to consider in our employment that we have different tracks for managers than we do for individual contributors. So often it's a one track place where an individual contributor has to step into management to get a promotion or to be elevated in some way. But I've found time and time again that there are individual contributors who are so passionate about the work they do, especially in engineering, they want to contribute to the greater good through the amazing code that they write. They don't want to step in into a leadership role. And a lot of companies forget that and they think the only track is management. So that's just another piece I wanted to add, to make sure that you really understand your people and where they're headed. And then that way you have really solid ICs and really solid managers who want to be managers.

Karen Zelnick:

I think that's such an important point because you do see that so often that to progress, they have to become a manager and they're like, "But I'm giving up the work that actually really drives me and why I show up. And now I don't actually get to do that." I'm really glad you brought that up.

Liz Ellis:

And they may not be suited for that. Certain people are really well suited for that and love doing that kind of work, and others, not so much. So why force them into a role that isn't magnifying their unique brilliance?

Karen Zelnick:

I want to jump in here and say for people who might be listening and thinking like, "I don't have the skillset to intuitively know what people want." That can be scary. So I think it's okay to put practices in place in your company that give you insights like that. Some companies do user guides. And so they actually ask people like, "How do you like to receive recognition? How do you focus best? Do you need quiet time? Do you need collaborative time?" So I think it's okay to acknowledge that you're not going to

be able to guess for everybody, and find ways to get them to tell you what they need and what they want so that you can then play to their strengths.

Liz Ellis:

It's 100% okay to just ask, just open the dialogue.

Karen Zelnick:

That doesn't make you a bad manager.

Liz Ellis:

No. No. It makes you a good manager.

Karen Zelnick:

Yeah.

Liz Ellis:

"Help me understand. Do you want feedback? Do you not want feedback? Do you need positive appreciation?" They want to tell you because they want to be recognized. They want to be appreciated and they want to be stretched to grow to their next thing.

Karen Zelnick:

I agree. So Liz, it's great to think that everyone is where they fit in the company, everyone's playing to their strengths, but even that doesn't prevent burnout. So what are some practices that help?

Liz Ellis:

First, making sure that people have a piece of their job. They love that they're not just doing daily grind every day. But second, a piece that I've really been trying to implement is stepping up to a higher level. The reason burn outcomes is because we're living more minutes of our day by default, instead of by design. When we're going through the motions of the things we should, we're supposed to, we have to, those are the things that burn us out. When we are living design, the things we desire to do, we want to do, we're excited to do, we don't experience as much burnout.

Liz Ellis:

So a couple of ways that we've helped to do that is to make sure that people are involved in the planning so that they have buy-in. People support what they help to create. But then also having a higher level vision. "What's the purpose that we're doing this for?" Because a lot of times you'll say, "Well, I have to make this phone call or I have to call this person. I have to send that contract." But maybe those are all connected to the purpose of expanding the business. A mission of expanding the business, that's tangible and that's something I can focus on being excited about instead of making that call and signing that contract and da, da, da, da.

Liz Ellis:

My next favorite strategy is automate, delegate, delete. What am I doing repetitively that maybe can be automated? Personally in my own life, I now do grocery delivery. When I first signed up, I was like, "Oh

my gosh, what a waste of money to pay for grocery delivery. I should do it myself." Hear that, "should"? Burnout. Instead, now my groceries just get delivered every week. If I forget, I can literally order groceries in three minutes, laying in bed before I go to sleep that night, they get there the next day and my kids put them away when they get home from school. Automate.

Liz Ellis:

Delegate. Where am I doing something that maybe someone could do it better? So frequently in startups, as things start to grow, we forget that it's okay to give away pieces of the job we're doing. We feel like either, "If I give that away, what job will I have left?" Or, "I've always done that job, so of course that's part of my job." And as we willingly start giving those away, start delegating to people who are more suited. We grow the organization so much faster. And then ultimately, delete. What are we doing that we don't need to do anymore? Maybe back in the startup days, we were sending a report that everybody needed that was super critical. Maybe we're still sending that report week, but nobody actually opens that email. So why are we spending time putting it together if nobody's using it anymore? So start getting hyper critical of the things that are on your list. What's the purpose of why you're actually trying to do what you do, and what are the actual outcomes to get to that purpose rather than the 47 things on the to-do list?

Karen Zelnick:

Thank you so much for those insights. I just want to keep talking we're out of time. I want to keep talking about this for the rest of the day because I'm so passionate about it. But we do want to be respectful of both of your time. So Liz, I just have one final question for you. This is something that we like to ask everybody, and that is, what is an effective practice that you've implemented in your work or personal life that has had a great impact on your success?

Liz Ellis:

I'm going to go back to the one we just said, honestly, it's chunking that time, it's getting all that stuff out of your head. I'm kind of nerdy and so I actually have a spreadsheet that has things I need to do daily, things I need to do weekly, things I need to do monthly, things I need to do annually like renew your car registration. Like stupid stuff. But that way I don't have to think about it. It's just written down. It's already captured. It allows me to take pieces and say, "You know what? I really, really want to do this. I really want to take this class or I really want to study this or I really want to read this book." And I can capture it so I don't forget, but I can also very conscientiously stick it in a parking lot spot.

Liz Ellis:

I literally have a square on my grid that is a parking lot that I can knowingly say, "I'm going to hold that for later so I can concentrate on something different." And then intentionally and voraciously apply that automate, delegate, delete. What are you doing that you could automate? What are you doing that someone could do better than you? And what are you doing that you're just doing because someone else expects it or maybe some school teacher taught you that, but it's not really effective for you? Just get rid of that stuff.

Dalton Wright:

What Liz just said. I think it's great advice. You can get so busy in just the job of running a company. But I've heard this, and we've talked about this on this podcast on multiple occasions, how can you play to

your strengths when your day is dominated with things that feel like weaknesses to you? I love the advice and I need to find ways to implement some of those guidelines in my own life, I think.

Karen Zelnick:

I think we all do, but yeah, thank you for reiterating that, Dalton, because we cannot state that enough on this podcast, that advice to make sure you're creating space to play to your strengths and to do what you do best. So thank you. Thank you both so much for being here. It's been such a rich discussion with so many good takeaways. So we really appreciate your time.

Karen Zelnick:

I think my biggest aha moment definitely was what we've been talking about. What can you delegate? What can you get rid of and what can you automate? And I will be a geek with you, Liz and I will create one of those spreadsheets. And I'm just so excited to see how that improves my life. And Liz and Dalton, thank you so much for being here.

Dalton Wright:

Thanks, Karen. And thank you, Liz.

Liz Ellis:

Thanks, Karen. Good to see you guys.

Karen Zelnick:

And of course, thank you for listening as we dive deep into what it takes to create the Perfect Pitch. If you want to learn more about Dalton Wright from Kickstart or Liz Ellis and her team at Angel Studios, we'll have a link to the company and a longer bio in our show notes at kickstartfund.com. You can listen to more episodes of Perfect Pitch wherever you listen to your podcasts. And if you like what you're learning, leave us a review or rating. We'll be back next time with more insights from entrepreneurs and the investors who fund them. So be sure to subscribe so you don't miss a thing.