

## How to Outwit Your Opponent:

### What You Can Learn about Success from an NBA Team

By Toby J. McGrath | August 2015

The most successful NBA franchise since 1999 is not, unfortunately, my beloved Boston Celtics. It's not the loathed Los Angeles Lakers. It's not the formerly LeBron James-led Miami Heat. No, the most successful NBA franchise since 1999 is the San Antonio Spurs.

Over the past fifteen years, the Spurs have won 11 division titles, 6 conference titles and 5 championships. No team has even come close to that type of longevity of success in the same time period. The question is, "Why?" The answer: "Diversity of thought."

Okay, so my heart broke a bit when the Celtics lost the lottery for the first pick in the 1997 draft. This bit of luck allowed the Spurs to draft the key player of their franchise, Tim Duncan. Yes, the Spurs were able to claim a once-in-a-generation player in Duncan, but the Spurs can credit their franchise's overall success to their willingness to embrace "diversity of thought."

The concept of "diversity of thought" is that how we are hardwired and what our experiences have been drives our thoughts and consequently, our actions. Social psychologist Kurt Lewin said, "Behavior is a function of the person and his or her environment." This concept has been studied widely. A summary of the studies find this: Who we are—our race, age, socio-economic status, experiences in life, culture, and genetic makeup—defines how we see the world. No big surprise there. However, what people do instinctively often harms the level of success of the organizations they work for.

Typically, when organizations hire people for a job, even when going to great extents to be objective, they invariably hire someone just like them. (Don't take my word for it but you should take Dr. Lauren Rivera's word. She wrote about the phenomenon

in an article for the New York Times, "*Guess Who Doesn't Fit In At Work*") The San Antonio Spurs have taken the opposite approach. They draft and hire anyone but themselves because they want all the ideas on the table, not just the obvious ones of a similar-minded group.

The leader of the Spurs, Coach Gregg Popovich—or, as many affectionately refer to him, Coach "Pop"—is by no means a warm, cuddly, granddad type. He went to the Air Force Academy and then served for five years in the Air Force. He has a sharp and cutting wit. You might think, with his military background and his acerbic tone that he is rigid in his perspective, but he's not. To the contrary, Coach "Pop" wants diversity of ideas around him.

When a team is created in sports, in business or in any organization, you want to be able to have as many different perspectives as possible. Diversity of thought is essential to outwitting your opponent, whether it happens on the hard court, in the boardroom, the courtroom or anywhere else. When we hire people just like us we are narrowing our ability to be successful. Not the San Antonio Spurs. Oh, no. They double down on diversity... and win...and win...and win.

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The Spurs' franchise players are Tim Duncan (Virgin Islands), Tony Parker (France), and Manu Ginobili (Argentina). Look again at those countries. Not only are these three different countries, but also three different continents! The diversity evident in the roster does not end there. Last year Tiago Splitter (Brazil), Boris Diaw (France), Patty Mills (Australia), and Marco Belinelli (Italy) were all on the list, and the remaining eight players on the roster were from the United States, from as diverse regions as inner-city Los Angeles and rural New Hampshire.

Now, you may say, "Well, sure, they're from different countries, but many international players are on NBA teams." This is true, but not all organizations have opened up their minds to the different ways basketball is played around the world and incorporated these ideas into their system to maximize success. The Spurs allow for diversity of thought on and off the court, applying what they learn to their system so that their players are in the best position to keep winning.

The diversity of thought in the Spurs organization goes well beyond who is on the court and what they bring to the team. It goes beyond their head coach, too. I'm going to let you in on a little secret. The Spurs are about to dominate for another fifteen years because of one of their assistant coaches. Becky Hammond is the first woman NBA coach—and she is more than qualified. She was a phenomenal player in college, overseas, and in the WNBA. Coach "Pop" put Becky Hammond on his bench because she knows basketball, plain and simple. In doing so, he is bringing more diversity of thought to the table.

This approach is working. Becky Hammond coached the Spurs' NBA summer league team to the league championship. This accomplishment marked the first time a defending NBA champion team has also won the summer league championship in the same year. But their coaches and an international roster with a game plan that understands basketball on a global scale aren't the only reasons the Spurs will keep winning. They will win as long as they are willing to

go against conventional wisdom and continue to pick people who can help them think outside of their own set of norms and understanding.

Embracing diversity of thought works not only in the business of basketball but also in many other types of organizations. As a doctor diagnosing a patient you want as many ideas as you can have from a diverse group of specialists. As an entrepreneur entering a new market you want input from all kinds of stakeholders. As a public policy maker seeking ideas from both parties will ensure the right policy for more people—leading to the most successful solution for your constituents.

Practicing diversity of thought is why the Spurs are the most successful business in a \$4.5 billion and growing industry. Other teams can cover Tim Duncan all they want, but they will not be able to outwit their opponent until they, too, make room for people who are not like themselves, on and off the court. By broadening our understanding and learning from others' experiences, we can find and grow success, now and for the long term. I'm taking the Spurs to win it all in 2030.



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