

Business & Careers

Apply Spurs' model of success in your firm



David Namkung
The Headhunter

Even if you don't follow basketball, there are many leadership and talent management lessons that a hiring partner or professional development director can glean from coaches who regularly succeed in a hyper-competitive arena, an environment with many similarities to

the legal marketplace.

Coach Gregg Popovich and his San Antonio Spurs provide a unique example of how a team can reach unparalleled and sustained success at the highest level. This past season, Popovich's Spurs decisively dismantled LeBron James and the Miami Heat for the coach's fifth championship ring in 15 years, part of a record-setting 17 consecutive winning seasons. Unlike the legacies of the Bulls or Lakers, which enjoyed bursts of championships led by global celebrities Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant, the Spurs have cemented their place as one of the top teams in NBA

history through a longer but quieter run of excellence. Popovich's extended dominance has not hinged entirely on an individual star, but rather a seamless and team-oriented approach.

Law firms can similarly benefit their talent management and efforts by examining the keys to his sustained success.

Loyalty begets loyalty

Popovich has crafted a seamless style of basketball within the Spurs organization by developing a deep sense of loyalty from his players. Even during the difficult times when other coaches would have opted to swap out their aging players for upcoming talent, Popovich resisted trading away his key assets, keeping the big picture in mind—instead of replacing his star players, he invested even more into them by mindfully recruiting players to complement his existing roster.

This allowed the Spurs to maintain their efficiencies and refine their abilities as a group while inspiring his top stars to remain committed to the team, despite the potential to command 25 per cent salary increases elsewhere.

Law firms constantly groan about lack of loyalty from their associates, but often fail to recognize that loyalty is a reciprocal currency. In the face of challenging economic conditions, many firms panic over short-term overhead concerns and quickly turn to laying off staff and associates without appreciating the full costs associated with rebuilding a team down the road. Dismissals can erode confidence within the existing team, simultaneously damaging future recruitment efforts while prompting others to consider more secure pastures elsewhere. Accordingly, terminations should be used sparingly, with full recognition of their potential collateral damage.

Work smart

Another key to the Spurs' success is their religious devotion to efficiencies, ensuring the highest and best use of all players on the team. For example, their system has been built around passing the ball rather than running it, allowing for better shot opportunities and minimizing fatigue on their trio of veterans. In other words, Popovich optimizes the time his key players spend on the court by creating the circumstances to enable them to focus on what they do best: setting up and executing plays.

The equivalent in the law firm context is to optimize support systems for proper delegation. To ensure efficiencies, lawyers

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should be trained and enabled to pass down work to appropriate members of their team, particularly paralegals.

One of our clients, who enjoys a highly profitable practice, has scaled out his systems to ensure that lawyers focus on what must be done only by a lawyer; the rest is carried out by a carefully assembled team of support staff, research staff, paralegals and clerks aided by the latest software and technology. By keeping their focus on the law, his lawyers sharpen their legal skills at a faster rate and are less burdened by administrative tasks, and thus more likely to work harder and longer on matters they enjoy. Additionally, when a lawyer leaves his team, our client keeps the majority of the firm's system and intellectual capital in place, easing the growing pains of rehiring and transitioning new lawyers into his organization.

Your firm may equally benefit by regularly auditing your team's support systems and technologies to optimize work flow and maximize your efficiencies, allowing your lawyers to better serve the needs of your firm's clients.

Set the pace

Even with the off-season, consecutive back-to-back playoff runs take a toll on players. Perhaps Popovich's greatest strength has been his ability to pace his players for long-term success. The numbers don't lie: no single player on the Spurs roster this season averaged more than 30 minutes played per game, an NBA first. Proper pacing has allowed the Spurs' veterans to consistently play at a high level each season, with Tim Duncan setting another league record for most postseason minutes played. Beyond longevity, spreading the

team's minutes empowered the Spurs' bench and junior members to develop their skills more rapidly; the Spurs' 22-year-old Kawhi Leonard recently became the second youngest player to be selected the NBA Finals MVP.

Within law firms, star associates regularly lament that they are expected to continuously perform at a playoff pace with no end in sight. Firms often advertise that they intentionally run lean, allowing more responsibility for their associates. While this is often regarded as a benefit, it can quickly become a recipe for burnout and resentment if associates feel under-supported, unheard and isolated. Firms which have lasting success pace their associates properly to ensure they get peak performance out of their talent for the entire year—or better yet, their entire careers.

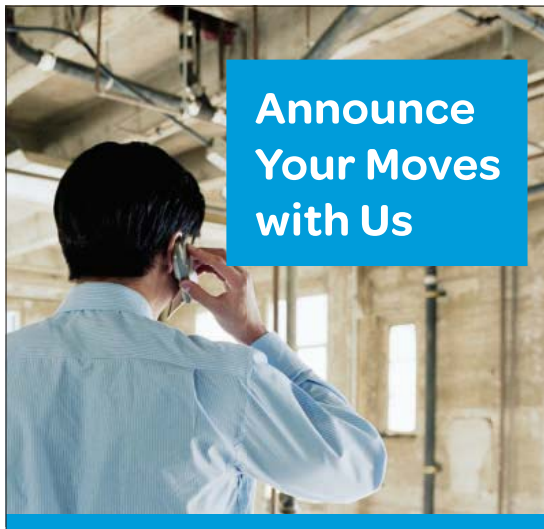
Proper pacing does not necessarily imply dramatically reduced hours, but certainly requires a high degree of communication and awareness. One of the busiest practice groups at a top-tier national firm in our market enjoys relatively low attrition rates based on their dedication to constantly monitoring the workloads of their associates through weekly team meetings.

At these meetings, each team member is able to explain which files they are working on, allowing the partners to better spread out their workload, pace client demands, manage upcoming vacations for the group—and most importantly, illustrate to each member how they are an integral member of the team.

A quote by philosopher Jacob Riis, translated into the mother languages of various Spurs players, is displayed on the walls leading into their dressing room: “When nothing seems to help, I go look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred-and-first blow it will split in two and I know it was not that blow that did it but all that had gone before.”

Team-building in law firms carries many similarities to what happens on the court, and the top leaders in both arenas appreciate that there are no shortcuts to success. Take a page out of Popovich's playbook and ensure that your team has what it takes to win today...and 17 years from now.

David Namkung is a director with The Counsel Network in Vancouver, vice-president of the Federation of Asian Canadian Lawyers (B.C. chapter) and a board member/volunteer of workinggear.ca. Follow him on Twitter @DNamkung.



The legal community is in the middle of some major changes with lawyers and their teams on the move. Many are finding new homes at established firms. Some have moved with entire practice groups. Still others have decided to open new doors at a new firm.

Let your community know about your changes. Announce your moves in The Lawyers Weekly, published every week.

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