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Gregg Popovich Leadership

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Book Review

I read Clayton Geoffrey's book about the leadership and life lessons from Gregg Popovich's storied career as the coach of the San Antonio Spurs. One of the early leadership pieces the author talks about is how Popovich treated everyone the same, whether it was his playing days or his coaching days. Whether it was a superstar like Tim Duncan, or a benchwarmer, he treated them all the same. He wasn't necessarily a hard nosed coach though and tried to remind his players' of their worth when possible. One example of this is when he was given the task as an assistant for the Spurs that he had to make roster cuts to make room for a superstar by the name of David Robinson. His move was to cut Avery Johnson. Popovich made sure to let Johnson know that he was good enough to play in this league and that someone would pick him up off of waivers.

While he could be nice when needed, Popovich is known as a coach that is stern and honest at many times, a strength that has been utilized many times. One of the early times this was utilized was when he was an assistant for the Golden State Warriors. His primary job as an assistant was to help mend the relationship between Don Nelson and Chris Webber, a relationship that some saw as irreconcilable. He was able to get them to a place where they were able to work together.

Popovich was not a flashy coach or player either. He focused on the basics and built his gameplans around that. He focused a lot on the big picture of the game and didn't let little things get to him. That showed throughout his life as one of his first living situations, despite being an assistant coach in the NBA, was described as a three furniture space with just a bed, a sofa, and a

chair. On the court, he had players work on few plays, but with multiple reps to get it right rather than having a ton of plays and only going over them a few times.

Popovich used a holistic approach when evaluating players. He looked way beyond the size and speed of a player. He looked at their character traits and basketball IQ and their intensity on the court. When looking at character traits, the first thing he looked at was their ability to see the bigger picture over themselves. He also looked at players who could take criticism and feedback. There was no room for players with an inflated ego on Popovich's teams. This allowed his teams to have great chemistry and a team full of selfless players. It was the mindset Popovich used when he was a player as he was undersized, but played with a lot of intensity. This mindset helped him to make the Air Force basketball team and nearly make the Olympics squad and an NBA team.

Popovich was also not stubborn. One example here is when he had Spurs legend Tony Parker over in San Antonio for a workout. Popovich was not pleased at all with Parker's performance and did not plan on picking him up, but Parker went and impressed other teams. This great performance with other teams got to Popovich and he gave Parker another chance to prove himself and the rest is history for the Spurs.

Another example is when the NBA started to transition into a much more offensive league, meaning the defensive style that Popovich employed would need to be changed. He wasn't stubborn to this and changed the Spurs style of play to a much more offensive style. They ended up being the fifth highest scoring team the year he employed this change. This adaptability from Popovich was key to continuing the team's success they had seen. He also played with a team style of basketball where no players averaged over 30 minutes a night other than Tony Parker. This was an approach different to some teams that values individual skills more. This

team style basketball was inspired by him learning not to put all your eggs in one basket. This is something that bit the Spurs when he was an assistant coach when the team focused their entire team around David Robinson. He knew that depth in his team was a key to the continued success that his teams had for over 20 years.

Outside of sports, Popovich was a family first man. An example of this comes from one of his assistant coaches, Mike Brown. Brown was going through marriage troubles and told Popovich he was going to be later than usual to the team plane that was leaving for Chicago. Popovich told him to miss the trip entirely to take care of the family matter and threatened to fire him if he was on the plane. Also, off the court, Popovich was keen on having team dinners in moments that were needed. It allowed players to cool off and talk to each other after a tough loss and provide fellowship with each other.

Before getting into my reaction, I want to say growing up and still to this day, Gregg Popovich is my favorite NBA coach in history and one of my favorite coaches in the history of sports. Basketball also isn't one of my top three favorite sports, I enjoy watching it, but whenever I could watch the Spurs teams from the late 2000's to the mid 2010's it was quite satisfying. Popovich's team style basketball is such a polar opposite of the play we see in the NBA today in my opinion and I think that is partially why his teams struggle like they do now. This is another changing period that Popovich will need to adapt to like he did once before if he wants to succeed.

Getting into the leadership aspects of the book, there are obviously no perfect coaches, but in my opinion, if you built an ideal coach, Popovich would have many of the traits that the author lists. I have a great amount of respect for how he carried himself in his college years while he was playing. While he did not have the size that a typical professional basketball player

would have, he more than made up for it with his work ethic and attitude. Too many times we saw athletes who are incredibly gifted who do not work hard enough because they expect things to be handed to them. On the other side, we see athletes who are not gifted physically who just give up because they got dealt a bad hand. It is always refreshing to see stories like Popovich who did not give up and fought.

I respected how he treated all his players the same. Every player got yelled at and complimented. Popovich had no favorites. There are numerous examples in sports of coaching coddling their best athletes and playing favorites with playing time when they make too many mistakes out there. It causes burnout and hurts team chemistry when this happens. I also enjoyed that he had the ability to be stern and honest but not have that switch on completely. I think many coaches often have an issue with being hardheads which also causes burnout and causes athletes to fall out of love with the game they are playing.

I thought Popovich's ability to build a team with depth that worked well is something that is rare today. Today we hear a lot about max contracts and big-time players and super teams. We have seen many times when teams that are loaded with talent do not win at all as much as they should because they do not gel the way they should to win. A current example that comes to mind is the Los Angeles Lakers with LeBron James, Anthony Davis, and Russell Westbrook. Three All-Stars and the team is on the outside looking in, in terms of the playoff race.

Lastly, I respected that Popovich made sure players and coaches had a life outside of basketball. The story of him making sure his assistant coach stayed back to help resolve a family matter resonated with me. It is important for all that are associated with a team to remember that a team and sports are temporary, family and people are going to be there far longer than basketball.

Personally, Popovich has a lot of qualities that I am looking to imitate as I transition into teaching and coaching. I want to be a hard worker and not let physical attributes or outside forces affect my attitude. I want to build teams that gel well and create lifelong friendships between players and coaches. I want my players to know that there is life outside of sports and that life is important. On the results side, I want to be able to adapt well to the changing climate of the game I am coaching.

In terms of critical thinking skills, I used a lot of the experiences of Popovich and tried to relate them to how I could use them in the future. I want to emulate the success Popovich had while creating lifelong friendships.

Geoffreys, C. (2017). *Gregg Popovich: The inspiring life and leadership lessons of one of Basketball's greatest coaches ; an unauthorized biography*. Calvintir Books.