4 How to Build Belonging

The Relationship Maker

A while back a writer named Neil Paine set out to determine who was the best National Basketball Association coach of the modern era. He devised an algorithm that used player performance metrics to predict how many games a team should win. He crunched numbers for every NBA coach since 1979 in order to measure "wins above expectation"—that is, the number of times a coach's team won a game that, measured by their players' skills, they had no business winning. He then plotted the results on a graph.

For the most part, Paine's graph portrays an orderly and predictable world. The vast majority of coaches win roughly the number of games they should win, given their players' abilities—except for one. His name is Gregg Popovich. Coach of the San Antonio Spurs, he resides alone at the far reaches of the graph, a planet unto himself. Under his leadership, the Spurs have won no fewer than 117 games more than they should have, a rate more than double that of the next-nearest coach. This is why the Spurs rank as the most successful team in American sports over the last two decades, winning five championships and a higher percentage of games than the New England Patriots, the St. Louis Cardinals, or any other storied franchise. The title of Paine's graph is "Gregg Popovich Is Impossible."

It's not hard to figure out why Popovich's teams win, because the evidence is in plain view on the court. The Spurs consistently perform the thousand little unselfish behaviors—the extra pass, the alert defense, the tireless hustle—that puts the team's interest above their own.[*1] "Selfless," LeBron James said. "Guys move, cut, pass, you've got a shot, you take it. But it's all for the team and it's never about the individual." Playing against them, said Marcin Gortat of the Washington Wizards, "was like listening to Mozart." What's hard to figure out is how Popovich does it.

Popovich, sixty-eight, is a hard-core, old-school, unapologetic authoritarian, a steel-spined product of the Air Force Academy who values discipline above all. His disposition has been compared to that of a dyspeptic bulldog, and he possesses a temper that could be described as "volcanic," with much of the lava being funneled at his star players. Some of his more memorable eruptions are collected on YouTube, under titles such as "Popovich Yells and Destroys Thiago Splitter," "Popovich Tells Danny Green to Shut the F— Up," and "Popovich Furious at Tony Parker." In short, he embodies a riddle: How does a cranky, demanding coach create the most cohesive team in all of sports?

One common answer is that the Spurs are smart about drafting and developing unselfish, hardworking, team-oriented individuals. This is a tempting explanation, because the Spurs clearly make a concerted effort to select high-character individuals. (Their scouting template includes a check box labeled "Not a Spur." A check in this box means the player will not be pursued, no matter how talented he is.)

But on closer examination, this explanation doesn't add up. Many other NBA teams make similar efforts to identify, select, and develop hardworking, team-oriented, high-character individuals. And besides, a significant number of Spurs do not exactly fit the Eagle Scout profile. When Boris Diaw played for Charlotte, for instance, he was criticized for being lazy, party-oriented, and overweight; Patty Mills was released by his Chinese team for allegedly faking a

hamstring injury; and Danny Green was cut by Cleveland, in part, for his casual approach to team defense.

So the Spurs are not simply selecting unselfish players or forcing them to play this way. Something is making their players—even those who were selfish elsewhere—behave unselfishly when they put on a Spurs jersey. The question is what that something is.

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It's the morning of April 4, 2014, and the mood in the San Antonio practice facility is tense. The night before, in one of the most important games of the regular season, the Spurs were thumped 106–94 by their archrival, the Oklahoma City Thunder. The problem, however, was not the loss but the manner in which it had occurred. The game had started out promisingly, with the Spurs racing to a 20–9 lead. Then the team had imploded in a blizzard of misses and turnovers, including several by guard Marco Belinelli. It added up to be precisely the kind of demoralizing loss the team wanted to avoid as the play-offs approached. Now, as practice begins, there is a tightness in the air, a taste of unease.

Gregg Popovich walks in. He's wearing a misshapen T-shirt from Jordan's Snack Bar in Ellsworth, Maine, and shorts a couple sizes too big. His hair is spare and frizzy, and he is carrying a paper plate with fruit and a plastic fork, his face set in a lopsided grin. He looks less like a commanding general than a disheveled uncle at a picnic. Then he sets down his plate and begins to move around the gym, talking to players. He touches them on the elbow, the shoulder, the arm. He chats in several languages. (The Spurs include players from seven countries.) He laughs. His eyes are bright, knowing, active. When he reaches Belinelli, his smile gets bigger and more lopsided. He exchanges a few words, and when Belinelli jokes back, they engage in a brief mock-wrestling match. It is a strange sight. A white-haired sixty-five-year-old coach wrestling a curly-haired six-foot-five Italian.

“I’m sure that was thought about beforehand,” says R. C. Buford, the Spurs’ general manager, who has worked with Popovich for twenty years. “He wanted to make sure Belinelli was okay. That’s the way Pop approaches every relationship. He fills their cups.”

When Popovich wants to connect with a player, he moves in tight enough that their noses nearly touch; it’s almost like a challenge—an intimacy contest. As warm-ups continue, he keeps roving, connecting. A former player walks up, and Popovich beams, his face lighting up in a toothy grin. They talk for five minutes, catching up on life, kids, and teammates. “Love you, brother,” Popovich says as they part.

“A lot of coaches can yell or be nice, but what Pop does is different,” says assistant coach Chip Engelland. “He delivers two things over and over: He’ll tell you the truth, with no bullshit, and then he’ll love you to death.”

Popovich’s relationship with longtime Spurs star Tim Duncan is a case in point. Before selecting Duncan with the first overall pick in the 1997 draft, Popovich flew to Duncan’s home in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, to meet the college star. They didn’t just meet—they spent four days together traveling the island, visiting Duncan’s family and friends, swimming in the ocean, and talking about everything under the sun except basketball. This is not a normal thing for coaches and players to do; most coaches and players interact in short, highly calculated bursts. But Popovich wanted to connect, to dig in and see if Duncan was the kind of person who was tough, unselfish, and humble enough to build a team around. Duncan and Popovich evolved into what amounts to a father-son relationship, a high-trust, no-bullshit connection that provides a vivid model for other players, especially when it comes to absorbing Popovich’s high-volume truth-telling. As more than one Spur put it, If Tim can take Pop’s coaching, how can I not take it?

A few minutes earlier the Spurs had gathered in the video room to review the Oklahoma City game. They had sat down with trepidation, expecting Popovich to detail the sins of the previous night, to show them what they did wrong and what they could do better. But when

Popovich clicked on the video, the screen flickered with a CNN documentary on the fiftieth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act. The team watched in silence as the story unfolded: Martin Luther King, Jr., Lyndon Johnson, and the Selma marches. When it was over, Popovich asked questions. He always asks questions, and those questions are always the same: personal, direct, focused on the big picture. *What did you think of it? What would you have done in that situation?*

The players thought, answered, nodded. The room shifted and became something of a seminar, a conversation. They talked. They were not surprised because on the Spurs this kind of thing happens all the time. Popovich would create similar conversations on the war in Syria, or a change of government in Argentina, gay marriage, institutional racism, terrorism—it doesn't really matter, as long as it delivers the message he wants it to deliver: There are bigger things than basketball to which we are all connected.

"It's so easy to be insulated when you're a professional athlete," Buford says. "Pop uses these moments to connect us. He loves that we come from so many different places. That could pull us apart, but he makes sure that everybody feels connected and engaged to something bigger."

"Hug 'em and hold 'em" is the way Popovich often puts it to his assistant coaches. "We gotta hug 'em and hold 'em."[*2]

Much of that connection happens around the dinner table, as Popovich is obsessed with food and wine. His obsession can be gauged in a number of ways: the size of his home wine cellar, his part ownership of an Oregon vineyard, and the constant presence of the Food Network on his office television. But most of all it can be seen in the way he uses food and wine as a bridge to build relationships with players.

"Food and wine aren't just food and wine," Buford says. "They're his vehicle to make and sustain a connection, and Pop is really intentional about making that connection happen."

The Spurs eat together approximately as often as they play basketball together. First there are the team dinners, regular gatherings of all the players. Then there are smaller group dinners, handfuls of players getting together. Then there are the coach's dinners, which happen every night on the road before a game. Popovich plans them, picking the restaurants, sometimes two a night, to explore. (Staff joke: Bulimia is a job requirement.) These are not meals to be eaten and forgotten. At the end of the season, each coach gets a leather-bound keepsake book containing the menus and wine labels from every dinner.

"You'll be sitting on the plane, and all of a sudden a magazine lands on your lap, and you look up and it's Pop," says Sean Marks, a former Spurs assistant coach who's now general manager of the Brooklyn Nets. "He's circled some article about your hometown and wants to know if it's accurate, and where you like to eat, and what kind of wine you like to drink. And pretty soon he's suggesting places where you ought to eat, and he's making reservations for you and your wife or girlfriend. Then you go, and he wants to know all about it, what wine you had, what you ordered, and then there's another place to go. That's how it starts. And it never ends."

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One misconception about highly successful cultures is that they are happy, lighthearted places. This is mostly not the case. They are energized and engaged, but at their core their members are oriented less around achieving happiness than around solving hard problems together. This task involves many moments of high-candor feedback, uncomfortable truth-telling, when they confront the gap between where the group is, and where it ought to be. Larry Page created one of these moments when he posted his "These ads suck" note in the Google kitchen. Popovich delivers such feedback to his players every day, usually at high volume. But how do Popovich and other leaders manage to give tough, truthful feedback without causing side effects of dissent and disappointment? What is the best feedback made of?

A few years back a team of psychologists from Stanford, Yale, and Columbia had middle school students write an essay, after which teachers provided different kinds of feedback. Researchers discovered that one particular form of feedback boosted student effort and performance so immensely that they deemed it "magical feedback." Students who received it chose to revise their papers far more often than students who did not, and their performance improved significantly. The feedback was not complicated. In fact, it consisted of one simple phrase.

> I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them.

That's it. Just nineteen words. None of these words contain any information on how to improve. Yet they are powerful because they deliver a burst of belonging cues. Actually, when you look more closely at the sentence, it contains three separate cues:

1. You are part of this group.
2. This group is special; we have high standards here.
3. I believe you can reach those standards.

These signals provide a clear message that lights up the unconscious brain: *Here is a safe place to give effort*. They also give us insight into the reason Popovich's methods are effective. His communications consist of three types of belonging cues.

- Personal, up-close connection (body language, attention, and behavior that translates as *I care about you*)
- Performance feedback (relentless coaching and criticism that translates as *We have high standards here*)
- Big-picture perspective (larger conversations about politics, history, and food that translate as *Life is bigger than basketball*)

Popovich toggles among the three signals to connect his team the way a skilled director uses a camera. First he zooms in close, creating an individualized connection. Then he operates in the middle distance, showing players the truth about their performance. Then he pans out to show the larger context in which their interaction is taking place. Alone, each of these signals would have a limited effect. But together they create a steady stream of magical feedback. Every dinner, every elbow touch, every impromptu seminar on politics and history adds up to build a relational narrative: *You are part of this group. This group is special. I believe you can reach those standards.* In other words, Popovich's yelling works, in part, because it is not just yelling. It is delivered along with a suite of other cues that affirm and strengthen the fabric of the relationships.

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When you ask the Spurs about their greatest moment of team cohesion, many of them give the same strange answer. They mention a night not when the Spurs won but when they suffered their most painful loss.

It happened on June 18, 2013, in Miami. The Spurs were on the verge of winning their fifth NBA championship in a historic upset, having built a three-games-to-two lead in the best-of-seven series against the heavily favored Miami Heat. Going into the game, the Spurs were confident enough to plan for a possible celebration by booking a large private room at Il Gabbiano, one of their favorite restaurants.

From tip-off, game six was tight, and the lead swung back and forth. Then, toward the end of the fourth quarter, the Spurs went on a dramatic 8–0 run to take a 94–89 lead with 28.2 seconds left on the clock. The Heat sagged; the crowd went quiet. The championship seemed clinched. According to win-probability statistics, the odds of a Spurs victory at that point were 66:1. Along the edge of the court, security personnel started assembling, ropes in hand, to cordon off the court for the celebration. In the Spurs' locker room, attendants

placed chilled champagne in ice tubs and taped up plastic sheeting over the lockers.

Then disaster.

LeBron James attempted a long shot and missed, but the Heat corralled the rebound and James made a three-pointer: 94–92. The Spurs were fouled and made one of two ensuing free throws, giving them a three-point lead with nineteen seconds left. Miami had one possession left to attempt to tie the game. The Spurs' defense dug in, pressuring the Heat and forcing James to try a long three-pointer, which missed badly. For a second, as the ball caromed high off the rim, the game seemed over. Then Miami's Chris Bosh snagged the rebound and flicked the ball to teammate Ray Allen in the corner. Allen stepped back and swished a three-pointer that seemed less like a basket than a dagger. Tie game. The contest went to overtime, where the newly energized Heat kept up the pressure. The final score was 103–100. The Spurs had gone from almost-certain victory to one of the most devastating defeats in NBA history.

The Spurs were in shock. Tony Parker sat with a towel over his head, crying. "I've never seen our team so broken," he said later. Tim Duncan lay on the floor, unable to move. Manu Ginobili could not look anyone in the face. "It was like death," said Sean Marks. "We were gutted."

Players and coaches naturally assumed the team would scrap the gathering at Il Gabbiano and go back to their hotel to regroup. But Popovich had other plans. "Pop's response was, 'Family!' " Brett Brown, then an assistant coach, later told a reporter. " 'Everybody to the restaurant, straight there.' "

Popovich left before the team, taking a car with Marks. When they reached the empty restaurant, Popovich started working, preparing the space. He had the tables moved—he wanted the team together in the center, with coaches close by, surrounded by an outer ring of family. He started ordering appetizers, picking dishes that he knew his players would like. He chose wine and had the waiters open it. Then he sat down.

“He looked as sad as I’ve ever seen a person look,” Marks recalls. “He’s sitting in his chair, not saying a word, still devastated. Then—I know this sounds weird—but you can just see him make the shift and get past it. He takes a sip of wine and a deep breath. You can see him get over his emotions and start focusing on what the team needs. Right then the bus pulls up.”

Popovich stood and greeted every player as they came through the door. Some got a hug, some got a smile, some got a joke or a light touch on the arm. The wine flowed. They sat and ate together. Popovich moved around the room, connecting with each player in turn. People later said he behaved like the father of a bride at a wedding, taking time with everyone, thanking them, appreciating them. There were no speeches, just a series of intimate conversations. In a moment that could have been filled with frustration, recrimination, and anger, he filled their cups. They talked about the game. Some of them cried. They began to come out of their private silences, to get past the loss and to connect. They even laughed.

“I remember watching him do that, and I couldn’t believe it,” R. C. Buford says. “By the end of the night, things felt almost normal. We were a team again. It’s the single greatest thing I’ve ever seen in sports, bar none.”[*3]

[*1] This is more impressive when you consider that selfishness is incentivized in the NBA. In 2013, researchers Eric Uhlmann and Christopher Barnes analyzed nine seasons worth of NBA games, comparing behavior in the regular season with behavior in the play-offs. They discovered that players who made a shot in the play-offs received $22,044.55 additional salary per field goal made. Players who passed the ball to a teammate who made a shot lost $6,116.69. Passing the ball instead of shooting is the equivalent of handing a teammate $28,161.24.

[*2] Popovich makes these connections in spite of the fact that—or perhaps because—he is a studious avoider of technology. He does not use his computer; his assistant prints out emails. While his staff persuaded him to

buy an iPhone last year so that he could receive texts, he has yet to send one. He does all his communicating in person, up close.

*3 The Spurs went on to play game seven with cohesion and energy that surpassed their game six performance, though they ended up falling to Miami. The Spurs kept the unopened champagne and used it the following year after they defeated the Heat in five games to win their fifth championship.