

Diagnosing Poor Laker Processes

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We judge NBA teams based on their on-court success, but there's a lot that goes into putting that team together and the behind the scenes team together that drives a lot of the decision making that leads to team success. Organizations like the Warriors, Heat, or the Spurs have been praised for having great front offices that make great decisions, but the Lakers seem to be operating by following processes that won't yield positive results long-term, and I want to address those organizational issues.

This input is coming from someone who does work around organizational structure and recruiting/developing/retaining talent every day, and wrote a master's thesis on improving recruiting practices. Basketball is fun side stuff. This is my education and profession.

The big issue I want to cover today is this: The Lakers follow awful hiring procedures for their front office and coaching staff, and if they don't vastly improve those processes we'll be fighting an upwards battle and banking on being lucky as long as the Buss' own this team and follow the same steps they have in the past.

Limiting the Pool of Talent

What You Should Do

When you're looking to fill a position in a business setting, you look internal and external many times. In both cases, you need to know what you're looking for. Internally, for a high level position (which GM or head coach are equivalent to in this setting) you succession plan and identify potential suitors early on. That way you can identify where they are, where they need to be, and can actively develop them to get them the skills and knowledge needed to reach the desired aptitude so that they're ready to take over a position. Externally, you can let people apply, but for higher level positions many times you're looking at the competitive landscape and trying to poach talent from other companies.

What LA Likely Does

The Lakers, on the other hand, seem to replace regimes almost entirely, inhibiting any succession planning. Externally, rather than working with the agencies that represent large groups of coaches and administrators, or surveying the massive field of options and finding ones that fit their needs, they've kept a narrow focus and only looked at people who have ties to the Lakers. This is objectively poor decision making on LA's part.

Essentially, instead of looking at a pool of all candidates that meet the baseline qualifications, you're narrowing your view to only looking at 1/30th of the league's potential talent (in the sense of former connections or employees). There are also international and collegiate options being

ignored. If we vastly underestimate the pool of international talent, and just say it's another 5 teams' worth, the Lakers are cutting their pool to 1/35th of what's out there.

Let's also underestimate the college talent that exists, and say there's only about 15 teams' worth of viable options out there (and I know first hand that there are some damn good options available). Now we're looking at 1/50th of the pool. In reality this is probably smaller, but we'll say 1/50th for now.

But Calipari Is Just Going to Say No and Waste Our Time

Yes, other options may not want the position. A college coach may ultimately decide to stay at their school, or another coach may like their assistant job at the Magic or Barcelona or wherever, but you NEED to consider the entire pool. Completely ignoring them is horrific process, and a process that no modern-day successful organization follows.

So we'll estimate that we're only considering only 1/50th of the options. That's narrowing your pool from 100% of available, viable replacements to 2%. Two freaking percent.

Think about it this way: If the Lakers were to only consider drafting players from 2% of power 5 conference schools (schools in the ACC, SEC, Big 10, PAC-12, and Big 12) colleges, that's 1.3 schools (65 teams x 2% = 1.3 schools).

Even if we pick a team that's been extraordinary successful in recent history, we'll say North Carolina (since they're tied for most titles in the past 10 years (2) and have the most title appearances (3)), THAT'S A TRASH PROCESS. No matter how good UNC's talent is, you're missing out on better options most times. If we use NC State instead of UNC, this is a catastrophe.

Instead of looking at drafting the top players from all schools, you're cutting down on so many good options. It's reprehensible to think that the 2% that you're choosing to look at will contain the best possible candidate.

If we assume that the best candidate is hiding behind one of 100 doors, and has just as good of a chance to be behind any door, and you pick just 2 doors, your chance of picking the best person is, oh wait, that's right, TWO PERCENT.

In reality there is more than one good option available at any given time, but narrowing the pool so severely greatly limits the opportunity the Lakers have to even consider hiring a good person.

Magic Johnson and/or Luke Walton may seem like great options when you don't have a clue who else is out there, and if the Lakers keep following poor process we will consistently be passing up on better options.

"But they have to know what it means to be a Laker"

That's some of the dumbest crap I've ever heard in a hiring process. What does that even mean? What does hiring an old Laker player or staffer do for your team that hiring someone who worked elsewhere and was wildly successful and is qualified for the position do? They know what it means to win?

Newsflash, that's not a Laker thing. Will players not respect a coach who wasn't a Laker in the past? I doubt it, because literally every other team doesn't have this issue and the players on the team aren't being raised in a cult and see a different coach as an outsider.

They're raised all around the country and are coming from all kinds of different backgrounds, college, and other NBA teams. This is just a bogus disqualifier that peddles some form of Laker exceptionalism that doesn't lead to smart decision making.

To be completely honest, the Lakers would be MUCH more successful in this aspect of hiring if they were to only look at former Spurs for administrators or coaches, since the Spurs actually do all of the things I'm writing about in this piece. Just like Burger King used to (still does?) just place their restaurants near McDonald's locations, you can let someone else do the leg work scouting the locations and just trust their process and follow along. I'm not suggesting the Lakers do this, but I bet they'd get better quality candidates that way compared to the former Laker angle they've been working.

Knowing What You're Looking For

No matter if you have a full pool of candidates or just 2% like the Lakers are doing, the evaluation and selection process is another matter altogether.

It can be extraordinarily easy to not hire the most qualified person if you don't know what competencies you're looking for.

What You Should Do

In the business world, if you just had HR try to hire the best engineer without doing a job analysis and consulting with subject matter experts, incumbents, and industry resources to identify the skills, knowledge, abilities, and other necessary components needed to succeed in the job, you're having them go in blind to what the positional needs are and they're going to do a bad job.

If that's a bunch of jibberish to you, that's okay. Essentially, the people doing the hiring need to know what they're looking for. If you don't know what makes a good engineer, how the hell are you going to hire a good engineer?

What LA Likely Does

In the business world, you have people who know what they're looking for making the hiring decisions. We have Jeanie Buss, who I guarantee couldn't tell you a damn thing about

basketball scheme (and we shouldn't expect that from her) or tactical adjustments or any of the differentiating factors that make up a great coach. That's not within her expertise, but she's not bringing in the right people to do that because she wants to work with people she trusts (as Tania Ganguli stated on the 7/25/17 episode of the LakerFilmRoom podcast).

A lot of these issues may stem from the owners being where they are from nepotism, and the wanting to keep the Lakers a family franchise from top to bottom. They are where they are, but they HAVE to recognize the importance of good hiring processes and hire the right people, not the ones they have the best relations with. You can find the best people for the job and get along with them well. But getting along with someone well should not be step one in narrowing down a pool of candidates.

Using the Right Selection Measures

What Businesses Do

In the business world, there are many steps when you're looking to hire someone. The rigor and steps involved changes based on the impact of the position, but hiring an NBA coach is equivalent to hiring a C-Suite CEO, CFO, CMO, CHRO, et cetera, so we'll compare hiring practices for those positions more so than the steps it takes you to get a job as a cashier.

If I'm looking to hire a CEO, there's a lot going into that. I need a resume that helps us identify work history, impact, and some insight into skills and knowledge possessed. I'm interviewing that individual using behavioral questions that ask about how the individual has approached key challenges in the past to understand if the process they're taking aligns with best practices and organizational culture/approach. I'm having that individual take a series of assessments to gain insight into their skills in key areas that we've identified as predictors of success, whether it be some aptitude assessment or situational judgement test.

For individuals of that level (for the companies that can afford it), you have them go through an assessment center, which is a location where they'll spend 1-3 days essentially going through a simulation of what they'll experience on the job with actors or industrial organizational psychologists playing the roles of the people around them. You see how they interact with employees, how they solve common issues, and see how they react under pressure, when faced with surprise dilemmas, and can assess interpersonal skills in a way you can't by looking at a resume.

For many positions, most of those steps aren't used or needed. But for a CEO or an NBA head coach, for the substantial monetary investment and the enormous impact they have on the organization's success, you're moronic not to use the right measures to get as much insight into an individual before making the hiring decision.

What LA Likely Does

Instead of following those processes, the Lakers (and most NBA and NCAA teams) take a different approach. I'd bet a ton of money we don't take any of the steps I just described.

This is an issue I've been frustrated by at the NCAA level and have done a lot of digging into by talking to coaches and administrators and doing what research I could online. Whether at the college or NBA level, the people making these decisions are owners, GMs, or athletic directors. If the proper supporting cast isn't in place to assure these proper hiring procedures are in place, schools and teams are in the dark. That's why we have coaches in the league who run awful schemes. The people hiring them don't know the difference now and didn't know the difference when they were looking at candidates.

The way these individuals are assessed, likely by the Lakers, is different from the business approach. Interviews are conducted and background research is done. If they were successful in the past in other situations, the feedback on them from other sources is positive, and they kill in the interviews, they look like a great candidate.

Those components may give us insight into their personal skills and ability to create buy-in, but this approach leaves you without any real idea of their strategic or tactical expertise. None of those tests or simulations are used that'd give you this information, and it's unlikely even a film study of scheme is done to get an idea of how good they are schematically.

Looking at a coach who was successful in a different environment is also not a great way to judge their coaching ability if you don't understand what you're doing. Environment and personnel matter, but the evaluatory areas should be the processes and decisions the coach made, not necessarily wins and losses. Just like pitcher wins in baseball, there are a lot of things that produce a TON of noise in them that result in them not being an excellent way to identify true talent. The team needs to look at how the coach or front office person controlled their controllables and judge them on their impact and decision making, not the final result of an entire organization. There should be some positive correlation there, but there's also potential for great noise and bad hires if the proper steps aren't taken.

The Results of That Process

And this lack of good process is apparent when you look at who's been hired.

From the schematic incompetence of Byron Scott and Luke Walton, it's pretty clear the people making the hiring decisions don't understand scheme. And don't get me wrong. Following the right process you could've come to the conclusion that Walton IS the right man for the job. But following the right process, you would've identified his strengths and his weaknesses, and recognized that his X's and O's weakness was one that could be lived with if, and only if, the team made sure his deficiency in this area was covered by hiring excellent assistant coaches who could carry the weight in that aspect of the game. That would've been perfectly fine. But the team didn't do that, and still hired Walton, so they clearly don't have a handle on evaluating scheme prowess.

Side note: I won't take up space here doing it, but if you think Luke Walton is a good scheme coach, please @ me (@T1m_NBA) and I can explain (and if you think Byron was, please delete your account). I scout scheme at the NCAA level, am a paid scheme consultant, have consulted with high school and college teams on scheme, and have diagrammed over 650 plays in the past 8 weeks of NBA plays, so I'm confident in my assessment of team scheme.

One issue that's prevalent and seen with a hire like Luke Walton is the assumption that just because someone is around smart people, they're smart. I can have a secretary listen to enough presentations to recite most of what I've covered today pretty well, but ask them to innovate and they're dead in the water. There are brilliant assistants with scheme, and then there are assistants who are great in other areas and can regurgitate the schematic messaging the rest of the coaching staff preaches but on their own don't possess the ability to make any tactical adjustments or create their own good sets. This is what I think we're seeing with Luke Walton.

You may be wondering why this is the case. To me it's pretty clear. Jeanie just doesn't know what she doesn't know. And what she knows is that she wants a winner who the players like, which are two things she thinks she can do the way she's currently operating.

What Should Be Happening Instead

If the Lakers want to hire better coaches and front office people, they're going to need to consult with subject matter experts (my DMs are open lol) who know the difference between good and bad when it comes to coaching. Interviews aren't enough. Film study on scheme, an analysis of in-game decision making, history of player development, or perhaps a simulation of sorts dealing with player conflict and in-game coaching are needed to truly gauge the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other important intangible factors of a coach. We have the money to do it, NBA head coaching jobs are highly desirable positions, so people will be willing to jump through a hoop or two so you can ensure they know their stuff.

The fakers will either self-select out and fade away or will fail those assessments, and you'll be left with better hires and respect from the rest of the league knowing you're getting the best people and working for the Lakers means you know for a fact you went through processes validating your abilities and you'll be working with highly talented staff members. There are multiple positives to following good process and hiring the right people. Oh, and you'll win more games because you have more competent individuals in positions and will have already identified their weaknesses and addressed them with development plans and by supplementing them with assistants who are strong in those areas.

Overall

Sometimes things work out, and the narrow pool you look at happens to contain a good option and you get a good GM and a good coach, but it's unlikely. Magic, Pelinka, and Luke may work

out, but follow the same procedure every hiring process and you'll end up with a mountain of poor results and every once in awhile get really lucky.

It's not process that creates sustainable success, and bad process to hire a meh GM that uses more bad process to hire a meh coach can lead to more bad process filling out that coaching staff with bad assistants. I think Magic and Rob are okay, but Luke's deficiencies have very clearly not been identified and responded to with assistant coaches that make up for his areas of weakness.

I understand why Walton wouldn't be fired after last season (and I don't think he should have been), but Magic and Rob had an opportunity to demonstrate an understanding that was missed by Mitch and Jim and rework Luke's coaching staff. Instead of old Arizona buddies and Walton's friends, his coaching staff should be filled with experienced individuals who are proficient in the areas we need (defense, shooting, player development, offensive scheme) and would help the team by covering areas Walton doesn't have great expertise in (all of em). Rather, the team hasn't made many moves and I don't believe Magic and Rob have even identified these areas as areas of need, as evidenced by the poor scheme we ran during Summer League (and the coaching staff said would be used during the season).

The Lakers are an incredibly financially stable organization and there is no salary cap on coaches, so if we were to implement the right recruitment and selection processes to poach top talent and open up our check book, there's no excuse whatsoever for LA not to have one of the best coaching staffs and front offices the NBA has ever seen.

We're the freaking Lakers, guys. That doesn't mean that we'll always have the best people and have in the past, but it means that we should be able to afford to get the best people and build what we're currently missing. If you want a culture of success, do it the right way.

If you have any questions or comments, feel free to reach out to me with a mention on Twitter (@T1m_NBA). My DM's are also open.

Keep it efficient,
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