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Eleven Rings: The Soul of Success

By Phil Jackson

The symbol is the ring.

In the NBA, rings symbolize status and power. No matter how gaudy or cumbersome a championship ring may be, the dream of winning one is what motivates players to put themselves through the trials of a long NBA season.

Jerry Krause, the former general manager of the Chicago Bulls, understood this. When I joined the team as an assistant coach in 1987, he asked me to wear one of the two championship rings I'd earned playing for the New York Knicks as a way to inspire the young Bulls players.

This is something I used to do during the playoffs when I was a coach in the Continental Basketball Association, but the idea of sporting such a big chunk of bling on my finger every day seemed a bit much.

One month into Jerry's grand experiment the ring's centerpiece rock fell out while I was dining at Bennigan's in Chicago, and it was never recovered. After that I went back to wearing the rings only during the playoffs and on special occasions like this triumphant gathering at the coliseum.

On a psychological level, the ring symbolizes something profound: the quest of the self to find harmony, connection, and wholeness. In Native American culture, for instance, the unifying power of the circle was so meaningful that whole nations were conceived as a series of interconnected rings (or hoops). The tepee was a ring, as

were the campfire, the village, and the layout of the nation itself—circles within circles, having no beginning or end.

Most of the players weren't that familiar with Native American psychology, but they understood intuitively the deeper meaning of the ring. Early in the season, the players had created a chant they would shout before each game, their hands joined together in a circle.

One, two, three—RING!

After the players had taken their places on the stage—the Lakers' portable basketball court from the Staples Center—I stood and addressed the crowd. "What was our motto on this team? The ring," I said, flashing my ring from the last championship we won, in 2002. "The ring. That was the motto. It's not just the band of gold. It's the circle that's made a bond between all these players. A great love for one another."

Circle of love.

That's not the way most basketball fans think of their sport. But after more than forty years involved in the game at the highest level, both as a player and as a coach, I can't think of a truer phrase to describe the mysterious alchemy that joins players together and unites them in pursuit of the impossible.

Obviously, we're not talking romantic love here or even brotherly love in the traditional Christian sense. The best analogy I can think of is the intense emotional connection that great warriors experience in the heat of battle.

Several years ago journalist Sebastian Junger embedded himself with a platoon of American soldiers stationed in one of the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan to learn what enabled these incredibly brave young men to fight in such horrifying conditions.

What he discovered, as chronicled in his book *War*, was that the courage needed to engage in battle was indistinguishable from love. Because of the strong brotherhood the soldiers had formed, they were more concerned about what happened to their buddies than about what happened to themselves.

Junger recalls one soldier telling him that he would throw himself on a grenade for any one of his platoonmates, even those he didn't like all that much. When Junger asked why, the soldier replied, "Because I actually love my brothers. I mean, it's a

brotherhood. Being able to save their life so they can live, I think is rewarding. Any of them would do it for me.”

That kind of bond, which is virtually impossible to replicate in civilian life, is critical to success, says Junger, because without it nothing else is possible.

I don't want to take the analogy too far. Basketball players don't risk their lives every day like soldiers in Afghanistan, but in many ways the same principle applies. It takes a number of critical factors to win an NBA championship, including the right mix of talent, creativity, intelligence, toughness, and, of course, luck. But if a team doesn't have the most essential ingredient—love—none of those other factors matter.

Building that kind of consciousness doesn't happen overnight. It takes years of nurturing to get young athletes to step outside their egos and fully engage in a group experience. The NBA is not exactly the friendliest environment for teaching selflessness. Even though the game itself is a five-person sport, the culture surrounding it celebrates egoistic behavior and stresses individual achievement over team bonding.

This wasn't the case when I started playing for the Knicks in 1967. In those days most players were paid modestly and had to take part-time jobs in the summer to make ends meet. The games were rarely televised and none of us had ever heard of a highlight reel, let alone Twitter.

That shifted in the 1980s, fueled in large part by the popularity of the Magic Johnson-Larry Bird rivalry and the emergence of Michael Jordan as a global phenomenon. Today the game has grown into a multibillion-dollar industry, with fans all over the world and a sophisticated media machine that broadcasts everything that happens on and off the court, 24/7.

The unfortunate by-product of all this is a marketing-driven obsession with superstardom that strokes the egos of a handful of ballplayers and plays havoc with the very thing that attracts most people to basketball in the first place: the inherent beauty of the game.

Like most championship NBA teams, the 2008-09 Lakers had struggled for years to make the transition from a disconnected, ego-driven team to a unified, selfless one.

They weren't the most transcendent team I'd ever coached; that honor belongs to the 1995-96 Chicago Bulls, led by Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen.

Nor were they as talented as the 1999-2000 Lakers team, which was loaded with clutch shooters including Shaquille O'Neal, Kobe Bryant, Glen Rice, Robert Horry, Rick Fox, and Derek Fisher. But the 2008-09 Lakers had the seeds of greatness in their collective DNA.

The players looked hungrier than ever when they showed up for training camp in August 2008. At the end of the previous season, they'd made a miraculous run to the finals against the Celtics, only to be humiliated in Boston and lose the decisive game 6 by 39 points. Clearly the beating we'd received at the hands of Kevin Garnett and company—not to mention the torturous ride to our hotel afterward through mobs of Celtics fans—had been a brutal experience, especially for the younger players who hadn't tasted Boston venom before.

Some teams get demoralized after losses like that, but this young, spirited team was energized by getting so close to the prize only to have it batted away by a tougher, more physically intimidating opponent. Kobe, who had been named the NBA's most valuable player that year, was particularly laser focused. I've always been impressed by Kobe's resilience and ironclad self-confidence.

Unlike Shaq, who was often plagued by self-doubt, Kobe never let such thoughts cross his mind. If someone set the bar at ten feet, he'd jump eleven, even if no one had ever done it before. That's the attitude he brought with him when he arrived at training camp that fall, and it had a powerful impact on his teammates.

Still, what surprised me the most was not Kobe's ruthless determination but his changing relationship with his teammates. Gone was the brash young man who was so consumed with being the best player ever that he sucked the joy out of the game for everyone else.

The new Kobe who had emerged during the season took his role as team leader to heart. Years ago, when I'd first arrived in L.A., I'd encouraged Kobe to spend time with his teammates instead of hiding out in his hotel room studying videotape. But he'd scoffed at the idea, claiming that all those guys were interested in were cars and women. Now he was making an effort to connect more closely with his teammates and figure out how to forge them into a more cohesive team.

Of course, it helped that the team's other co-captain—Derek Fisher—was a natural leader with exceptional emotional intelligence and finely tuned management skills. I was pleased when Fish, who had played a key role as a point guard during our earlier run of three consecutive championships, decided to return to L.A. after free-agent gigs with the Golden State Warriors and the Utah Jazz.

Though Fish wasn't as quick or as inventive as some of the younger point guards in the league, he was strong, determined, and fearless, with a rock-solid character. And despite his lack of speed, he had a gift for pushing the ball up court and making our offense run properly.

He was also an excellent three-point shooter when the clock was running down. Most of all, he and Kobe had a solid bond. Kobe respected Derek's mental discipline and dependability under pressure, and Derek knew how to get through to Kobe in a way that nobody else could.

Kobe and Fish kicked off the first day of training camp with a speech about how the upcoming season would be a marathon, not a sprint, and how we needed to focus on meeting force with force and not allowing ourselves to be intimidated by physical pressure. Ironically, Kobe was beginning to sound more and more like me every day.

In their groundbreaking book, *Tribal Leadership*, management consultants Dave Logan, John King, and Halee Fischer-Wright lay out the five stages of tribal development, which they formulated after conducting extensive research on small to midsize organizations. Although basketball teams are not officially tribes, they share many of the same characteristics and develop along much the same lines:

STAGE 1—shared by most street gangs and characterized by despair, hostility, and the collective belief that “life sucks.”

STAGE 2—filled primarily with apathetic people who perceive themselves as victims and who are passively antagonistic, with the mind-set that “my life sucks.” Think *The Office* on TV or the *Dilbert* comic strip.

STAGE 3—focused primarily on individual achievement and driven by the motto “I’m great (and you’re not).” According to the authors, people in organizations at this stage “have to win, and for them winning is personal. They’ll outwork and outthink their competitors on an individual basis. The mood that results is a collection of ‘lone warriors.’”

STAGE 4—dedicated to tribal pride and the overriding conviction that “we’re great (and they’re not).” This kind of team requires a strong adversary, and the bigger the foe, the more powerful the tribe.

STAGE 5—a rare stage characterized by a sense of innocent wonder and the strong belief that “life is great.” (See Bulls, Chicago, 1995-98.)

All things being equal, contend Logan and his colleagues, a stage 5 culture will outperform a stage 4 culture, which will outperform a 3, and so on. In addition, the rules change when you move from one culture to another. That’s why the so-called universal principles that appear in most leadership textbooks rarely hold up. In order to shift a culture from one stage to the next, you need to find the levers that are appropriate for that particular stage in the group’s development.

During the 2008-09 season the Lakers needed to shift from a stage 3 team to a stage 4 in order to win. The key was getting a critical mass of players to buy into a more selfless approach to the game. I didn’t worry so much about Kobe, even though he could go on a shooting spree at any second if he felt frustrated. Still, by this point in his career I knew he understood the folly of trying to score every time he got his hands on the ball. Nor was I concerned about Fish or Pau Gasol, who were naturally inclined to be team players. What concerned me most were some of the younger players eager to make a name for themselves with the ESPN *SportsCenter* crowd.

But to my surprise, early in the season I noticed that even some of the most immature players on the team were focused and single-minded. “We were on a serious mission, and there wasn’t going to be any letup,” says forward Luke Walton. “By the time we got to the finals, losing just wasn’t going to be an option.”

We got off to a roaring start, winning twenty-one of our first twenty-five games, and by the time we faced the Celtics at home on Christmas, we were a far more spirited team than we’d been during the previous year’s playoffs. We were playing the game the way the “basketball gods” had ordained: reading defenses on the move and reacting in unison like a finely tuned jazz combo. These new Lakers beat the Celtics handily, 92-83, and then danced through the season to the best record in the Western Conference (65-17).

The most troubling threat came in the second round of the playoffs from the Houston Rockets, who pushed the series to seven games, despite losing star Yao Ming to a broken foot in game 3. If anything, our biggest weakness was the illusion that we could cruise on talent alone. But going to the brink against a team that was missing its

top three stars showed our players just how treacherous the playoffs could be. The close contest woke them up and helped them move closer to becoming a selfless stage 4 team.

No question, the team that walked off the floor in Orlando after winning the championship finals in five games was different from the team that had fallen apart on the parquet floor of the TD Garden in Boston the year before. Not only were the players tougher and more confident, but they were graced by a fierce bond.

“It was just a brotherhood,” said Kobe. “That’s all it is—a brotherhood.”

Most coaches I know spend a lot of time focusing on *X*’s and *O*’s. I must admit that at times I’ve fallen in that trap myself. But what fascinates most people about sports is not the endless chatter about strategy that fills the airwaves. It’s what I like to call the spiritual nature of the game.

I can’t pretend to be an expert in leadership theory. But what I do know is that the art of transforming a group of young, ambitious individuals into an integrated championship team is not a mechanistic process. It’s a mysterious juggling act that requires not only a thorough knowledge of the time-honored laws of the game but also an open heart, a clear mind, and a deep curiosity about the ways of the human spirit.

THE KEY TO SUCCESS IS COMPASSION

In his new adaptation of the Chinese sacred text *Tao Te Ching*, Stephen Mitchell offers a provocative take on Lao-tzu’s approach to leadership:

I have just three things to teach:

simplicity, patience, compassion.

These three are the greatest treasures.

Simple in actions and thoughts,

you return to the source of being.

Patient with both friends and enemies,

you accord with the way things are.

Compassionate toward yourself,
you reconcile all beings in the world.

All of these “treasures” have been integral to my coaching, but compassion has been the most important. In the West we tend to think of compassion as a form of charity, but I share Lao-tzu’s view that compassion for all beings—not least of all oneself—is the key to breaking down barriers among people.

Now, “compassion” is a word not often bandied about in locker rooms. But I’ve found that a few kind, thoughtful words can have a strong transformative effect on relationships, even with the toughest men on the team.

Because I started as a player, I’ve always been able to empathize with young men facing the harsh realities of life in the NBA. Most players live in a state of constant anxiety, worrying about whether they’re going to be hurt or humiliated, cut or traded, or, worst of all, make a foolish mistake that will haunt them for the rest of their lives. When I was with the Knicks, I was sidelined for more than a year with a debilitating back injury. That experience allowed me to talk with players I’ve coached from personal experience about how it feels when your body gives out and you have to ice every joint after a game, or even sit on the bench for an entire season.

Beyond that, I think it’s essential for athletes to learn to open their hearts so that they can collaborate with one another in a meaningful way. When Michael returned to the Bulls in 1995 after a year and a half of playing minor-league baseball, he didn’t know most of the players and he felt completely out of sync with the team. It wasn’t until he got into a fight with Steve Kerr at practice that he realized he needed to get to know his teammates more intimately. He had to understand what made them tick, so that he could work with them more productively. That moment of awakening helped Michael become a compassionate leader and ultimately helped transform the team into one of the greatest of all time.

KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE SPIRIT, NOT ON THE SCOREBOARD

Management guru Stephen Covey tells this old Japanese tale about a samurai warrior and his three sons: The samurai wanted to teach his sons about the power of teamwork. So he gave each of them an arrow and asked them to break it. No problem. Each son did it easily. Then the samurai gave them a bundle of three arrows bound together and asked them to repeat the process. But none of them could.

“That’s your lesson,” the samurai said. “If you three stick together, you will never be defeated.”

This story reflects just how strong a team can be when each of its members surrenders his self-interest for the greater good. When a player isn’t forcing a shot or trying to impose his personality on the team, his gifts as an athlete most fully manifest. Paradoxically, by playing within his natural abilities, he activates a higher potential for the team that transcends his own limitations and helps his teammates transcend theirs. When this happens, the whole begins to add up to more than the sum of its parts.

Example: We had a player on the Lakers who loved to chase down balls on defense. If his mind was focused on scoring points at the other end of the floor instead of on making steals, he wouldn’t be able to perform either task very well. But when he committed himself to playing defense, his teammates covered for him on the other end, because they knew intuitively what he was going to do. Then, all of a sudden, everybody was able to hit their rhythm, and good things began to happen.

Interestingly, the other players weren’t consciously aware that they were anticipating their teammate’s behavior. It wasn’t an out-of-body experience or anything like that. But somehow, mysteriously, they just sensed what was going to happen next and made their moves accordingly.

Most coaches get tied up in knots worrying about tactics, but I preferred to focus my attention on whether the players were moving together in a spirited way. Michael Jordan used to say that what he liked about my coaching style was how patient I remained during the final minutes of a game, much like his college coach, Dean Smith.

This wasn’t an act. My confidence grew out of knowing that when the spirit was right and the players were attuned to one another, the game was likely to unfold in our favor.

Questions to Ponder:

1. What lessons can be applied to this team?

2. What stage is this team in and how can the team advance toward stage 5?