

EMBREY INSIGHTS



QUARTERLY CALL RECAP

POUNGING THE ROCK: WHAT THE SPURS TEACH ABOUT SUSTAINING EXCELLENCE

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The San Antonio Spurs were poised to win the 2013 NBA championship. They led the Miami Heat 3–2 in the series and held a five-point advantage with 28.2 seconds left in Game 6. Champagne was on ice, a celebratory dinner was planned, and the trophy sat courtside.

Then it unraveled. Miami forced overtime, won Game 6, and went on to claim the championship in Game 7.

But head coach Gregg Popovich didn't cancel the postgame dinner.

"We didn't celebrate, but we cried, we laughed and broke bread together," Spurs CEO R.C. Buford recalled during EMBREY Insights' Q2 webinar on April 14.

One year later, facing the same opponent, San Antonio won the 2014 NBA championship. Buford and Spurs Chairman Peter Holt told EMBREY CIO Garrett Karam that connection, unity, and culture made that response possible.

Those principles still define the organization today.

Build Culture First

Holt's father, Peter M. Holt, became majority owner of the then-struggling Spurs in 1996.

"My mom and dad didn't know much about basketball," Holt said.

What they did bring was a clear philosophy: do the right thing, put in the work, and results will follow.

That foundation shaped key decisions, including elevating Gregg Popovich to head coach, now the NBA's all-time leader in coaching wins, and building a team aligned around shared values.

By prioritizing character, accountability and values-based leadership, the Spurs created an environment that attracts and retains like-minded talent.

Pound the Rock

A central theme of the Spurs' philosophy is "pound the rock," the idea that success is built through consistent, collective effort.

Like a stonecutter striking a rock repeatedly before it splits, results are the product of work done long before the breakthrough.

"Character, selflessness and pounding the rock are at the top of our funnel," Buford said. "That's how we evaluate players, coaches and everyone in the organization."

Avoid Losing Habits

Change is inevitable, in sports and in business. How organizations respond to it is what separates them.

Buford noted that teams in rebuilding phases often develop losing habits. The Spurs were intentional about preventing that.

“We don’t allow that to happen,” he said. “We hold each other accountable to standards that elevate everyone.”

Holt added that while change can be uncomfortable, it also creates opportunity. Former Spurs players like David Robinson, Tim Duncan, and Manu Ginobili have remained involved in leadership roles, reinforcing continuity across generations.

“There’s a unique part of our organization that people are attracted to and don’t want to leave,” Holt said.

Off the Court

The Spurs’ impact extends beyond basketball. The organization maintains a strong commitment to community engagement regardless of performance on the court.

“It’s the ability to create joy, positivity and help others that keeps us going,” Holt said.

Buford emphasized that shared experiences, especially during difficult periods, strengthen connections.

“When hard times come, we’re a voice that can bring people together to help solve big problems,” he said.

Bigger than the Scoreboard

Talent and execution matter, but what sustains performance over time is culture – not just what you do but how you do it. The Spurs have built a culture rooted in accountability, continuity, and shared standards, one that holds up whether the team is winning or rebuilding.

“The focus involves being part of something bigger than yourself,” Buford said.

That mindset isn’t tied to a single season or outcome, it’s what allows an organization to navigate change, absorb setbacks, and continue to perform over time.

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