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Steve Kerr: Coaching the Golden State Warriors to Joy, Compassion, Competition, and Mindfulness

"The truly civilized man is marked by empathy." – Malcolm Kerr¹

On May 10, 2020, nearly two months after the NBA suspended the 2019-2020 season due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Steve Kerr, Head Coach of the Golden State Warriors, called Ron Adams on the phone. Kerr had hired Adams as an Assistant Coach during his first year with the Warriors, in 2014. Together, in their first five full seasons, they guided the team to one of the most successful runs in the history of sports: five consecutive NBA Finals appearances, three championships, the single-season record for most wins, the highest 5-season winning percentage in history, and widespread acknowledgement as one of the game's few dynasties. Along the way, Kerr had earned the reputation for being one of the finest coaches in the game. To many, even more impressive than his ability to call the right play or make the right substitution, were his qualities as a leader and as an architect of the team's culture.

For Kerr and the Warriors, after five dominant seasons, the abbreviated 2019-2020 season had been a much different story. The loss of several star players, either to injury or free agency, as well as the cumulative fatigue of past seasons, hobbled the squad as it limped to a league-worst record. It seemed highly unlikely that even if the NBA opted to resume the adjourned season with playoffs that the Warriors would take the court again prior to the start of the 2020-2021 campaign.

Like people all over the world, Kerr and Adams had been sheltering-in-place in their homes since mid-March. They had touched base a few times, but as was typical during the early part of any off-season, they mostly focused on rest, recovery, and time with family. After a few minutes on the phone catching up, the discussion shifted to what was in store for the Warriors.

Much of the recent conversation around the league and in the press and amongst fans in California, centered on a single question: Would the 2020-2021 Warriors be able to get back to where they were from 2014 through 2019? Kerr suggested that the answer hinged on how one defined 'back.' Those outside the organization would likely view it as winning more championship rings. However, Kerr argued that for those in the organization, a different, less results-oriented definition was more immediately relevant. The goal should not be to win a certain number of games or to go deep into the playoffs. Instead it should be to reaffirm the team's culture and core values, and to find ways for the

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team to operate in accordance with them. At times, this would mean returning to techniques that had been established and engrained during the Warriors' years of dominance. Yet because (as in any new season) the roster would be made up of new players, players who had never been teammates, and players entering new phases of their careers, past approaches and norms would likely have to be adapted to some extent. In thinking how to accomplish this, Kerr and Adams agreed that they had to take a close look not only at the 'glory years,' but also at the losing season that they had just endured (see **Exhibit 1**).

Teaching, Travel and Tragedy

Steve Kerr was born in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1965 to parents Malcolm and Ann, and lived the first year and a half of his life in that city. Malcolm's parents (Steve's grandparents) had been professors and activists in Beirut, and like them, Malcolm became an academic, studying and teaching Middle Eastern and Arab history and culture. Malcolm and Ann, who would also go on to a career in academia, met while he was finishing a master's degree at the American University of Beirut and she was an undergraduate studying abroad. Although they established a home in Los Angeles, and careers at U.C.L.A., they retained deep connections to the Middle East, traveling there often and living for periods in Cairo with their four children, of whom Steve was the third of four.

Said Kerr, "Growing up that way shaped me as much as anything. Through travel, and through being raised by educators with broad worldviews, I experienced a wide range of cultures and languages through this lens of, 'We're from different backgrounds, but deep-down we're all the same. We're all humans, we all have vulnerabilities, the difference is merely in our experiences and how those vulnerabilities are manifested.'"

As a child, Kerr was described (by himself as others) as "quiet"² and "incredibly shy." But he was also "sports-obsessed," and his personality on the court was anything but reserved. "I was abnormally competitive," he said, "to the point where my hot temper could be embarrassing for me and for my parents, even during front yard basketball games involving family and neighborhood friends. Learning to contain myself was a challenge. But I believe the fires inside also drove me." He later elaborated on how sports helped him build confidence. "I needed basketball to bring it out of me...being interviewed by the media, getting more confident with myself, becoming a better player. I wasn't a very confident kid. But I was a good writer and I read a lot so I had a lot of that communication inside me."³

In 1982, when Kerr was a high school student in California, his father, despite the ongoing civil war in Lebanon, accepted the position of President at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Kerr travelled to Beirut shortly after, and got to know some of the Americans who would later be killed by militants in attacks on the U.S. Embassy and a U.S. Marines barracks. The following year he enrolled at the University of Arizona and became a member of the Division I basketball team.

In January 1984, Kerr's father Malcolm was assassinated outside of his university office by members of the Islamic Jihad Organization. The killing was a major international incident, and front page news around the world. "Before my father was killed, my life was impenetrable," said Kerr.⁴ "Later in life I found the loss gave me perspective. Basketball was something I obviously took very seriously, but I had this awareness that there were far more important things going on in the world."

During his college career, Kerr was recognized as an All-American, helped Arizona reach the Final Four, and set the NCAA record for 3-point field goal percentage in a season. Lute Olsen, who coached Kerr at Arizona, said, "To be honest, I brought him on the team assuming we'd recruit over him the

following season. I don't think I've ever met anyone that's made more of an impression on me than Steve, knowing what he's come from and what he ended up being."⁵

Kerr also drew national attention when he found himself at the center of an ugly incident. In a game against rival Arizona State, opposing fans taunted him with chants of, "P.L.O.," "Your father's history," and "Go back to Beirut!" Said Kerr at the time, "When I heard it, I just dropped the ball and started shaking. I sat down for a minute. I'll admit they got to me. I had tears in my eyes. For one thing, it brought back memories of my dad. But, for another thing, it was just sad that people would do something like that."⁶

Professional Career

Kerr was drafted in the second round of the NBA draft, and played for several organizations before signing with the Chicago Bulls in 1993. At training camp in 1995, Kerr and the famously hard-on-his-teammates Michael Jordan, who though returning to the Bulls after a brief retirement was the undisputed team leader, got into an altercation. Despite the bad feelings in the moment, both men later remarked that the overall effect had been positive. For Jordan, the incident served as a sort of wake-up call that he was sometimes too antagonistic with his teammates. For Kerr, the scuffle proved his toughness and his refusal to be intimidated. Said Kerr, "I would say it definitely helped our relationship. Michael was testing me, and I responded. I feel like I kind of passed the test and he trusted me more afterwards."⁷

Kerr established himself as a key role-player off the Bulls' bench. Playing alongside future Hall-of-Famers Jordan, Scottie Pippen, and Dennis Rodman, and for future Hall-of-Fame Head Coach Phil Jackson, he was part of a team that won three consecutive NBA championships. In 1996, with only seconds left on the game clock, he made the shot that clinched the NBA championship for the Bulls, and cemented his reputation as a clutch performer. The 1995-1996 Bulls team also set the mark for best regular season record of 72 wins, 10 losses. (The record stood until the Kerr-led Warriors went 73-9 in 2015-2016.)

In 1998, after the Bulls' General Manager Jerry Krause dismantled much of the team following its third consecutive championship, Kerr landed with the San Antonio Spurs. The following year, under Head Coach Gregg Popovich and playing beside future Hall-of-Famers David Robinson and Tim Duncan, Kerr won his fourth NBA title as a player. After a stint with the Portland TrailBlazers, Kerr returned to San Antonio in 2003 and won his fifth championship, a number that in 2020 placed him 14th place all-time. He retired from the NBA in 2003. Despite starting only 30 games (of his 910 appearances) during his 15-year career, at the time he held the records for highest three-point field goal percentage for a season and for a career.⁸

The Broadcast Booth and Front Office

From 2003 to 2007, Kerr served as an analyst and commentator for NBA games broadcast by the TNT network. "It was a great learning experience for me," he said. "Before every game, I was afforded 15 minutes with the coach of each team. I got to ask questions and hear them talk about not only strategy, but how they thought about a wide variety of issues."

Kerr left his position in broadcasting in 2007 to serve as General Manager for the Phoenix Suns. His tenure in Phoenix was widely viewed as unsuccessful, and was scarred by among other things a public feud with Head Coach Mike D'Antoni. Said Kerr,

I took over as GM after a really painful time for the organization because we had probably just passed our best chance to win a title. We'd had this devastating loss. I was a consultant at the time, and the following year, we kind of felt like we're just not good enough. We were in a vulnerable state: good enough to win a lot of games, not quite good enough to win a title. We made the decision to really go for it. We really sort of changed, on the fly, midseason, our style. That's a lot of pressure on an organization. That's when you really have to hold firm, and we weren't bonded enough. It's hard to describe what that means, but there were just little things that we needed to be locked in on, that we weren't. Mike would tell you the same thing. He has some regrets. I have some regrets. It is the biggest regret in my entire career in basketball, not being able to make it work between the two of us, because we should have been a good combination.⁹

In 2010, after three years in the role, he returned to broadcasting.

A Long-Awaited Move to Coaching

Kerr had thought about a coaching career as early as his college days. Originally, he figured he would play as long as he could, then start his coaching journey as an assistant in the college ranks. However, as his pro career continued, he felt less of a connection to the college game and thought more about one day coaching in the NBA. "But I knew the sacrifices you made," he said. "When I retired at 37, my kids were 9, 7 and 4, and I wanted to be home. That's why I went into broadcasting."¹⁰ He then added, "Once I left the Suns to go back to TNT, my kids were pretty much in high school, one in junior high. That's when I started preparing to coach and going to different clinics, owners' conferences, being on different panels and talking to different people about how to prepare."¹¹

Despite these preparations, prior to accepting the job as Head Coach of the Warriors, Kerr's only real coaching experience had come with his 7th grade son's youth team. Still, Kerr was not interested in just any coaching job—a claim bolstered by the fact that before signing with Golden State it was widely reported that the New York Knicks would make him an offer. Although coaching New York would have given him the opportunity to work for the Knicks' new General Manager, Phil Jackson (his old coach in Chicago, who had gone on to win 5 more titles with the Los Angeles Lakers), the franchise had long been mired in accusations of dysfunction, underperformance, and ignominious ownership. "I was going to wait for a good team," he said. "It was a complete surprise that the job at the Warriors opened up. I was lucky that it did."¹² Warriors owner Joe Lacob said that despite his lack of specific coaching experience, he had known Kerr previously and considered him bright, knowledgeable, hardworking, and always well-prepared.¹³

"How are you going to coach your team?"

One of the first things Kerr did after being hired by the Warriors was to take a trip to Seattle to visit with professional football coach Pete Carroll. Recalled Kerr,

I'd watched Pete's teams for a number of years, and enjoyed the energy with which they always seemed to play. I figured I could learn a thing or two from him. After a day or two together, he asked me: have you decided how you're going to coach your team? 'Like what type of offense will we run?' I asked. 'No,' he said. 'That's not what matters most. The key is what type of culture you create, and what the guys feel every day when they show up at the arena.' He told me how it took him 10 years to figure out for himself that to succeed a coach has to have core values that come alive each and every day, and with

which the players truly connect. Because if the players cannot connect, values just become words on a page.

When Kerr returned home, he reflected on this advice, and on what he had experienced playing under Jackson in Chicago and Popovich in San Antonio. He elaborated,

I understood that my values weren't going to be the same as Phil's or Gregg's. Phil had grown up in South Dakota. Native American history and spirituality were really important to him, and that came through in a lot of what he did. The room where we had meetings and watched game film was decorated with Native American artifacts. Sometimes he would beat this big drum he kept. Community was another core value of his; he thought of us a tribe. Gregg has a vastly different background and approach. He's a military guy who is direct, matter of fact, prompt, and structured. That shone through how he operated. The lesson wasn't that one way was right, or better. It was, whoever you are as a person has to come through in your leadership. Authenticity helps foster a willingness and desire to be led.

Core Values

Said Kerr, "The values I decided I wanted the Warriors to have were rooted in my personality, and my experiences. Some of the things I acknowledged were important to me were: authenticity, communication, collaboration, and the ideas about humanity, sameness, and vulnerability I learned largely from my parents and the way they raised my siblings and me." Kerr got back to Carroll with a list of about ten values, and then, through discussion, pared it down to four, which he believed truly captured how he had been leading his life and what was important to him. They were: joy, competition, compassion and mindfulness.

Joy

Said Kerr,

Of the four, this is perhaps the easiest to understand, recognize, and impart. The idea behind it is that basketball is a game that we all started playing as children because it is fun. Even though now it has become for us a job, a career, something we're paid to do, something we take very seriously, that sense of pleasure and play must not be lost.

One way we cultivate joy is by having music playing during practice. That's pretty unusual in sports, actually. A lot of coaches still have that drill sergeant mentality—that they are the authority figure and that everything has to be serious and intense. The music helps keep guys loose and energized.

Another way we promote joy is through humor. This is most noticeable in our daily video sessions, when we review game film. The team has a great video editor, and my staff and I often have him splice in some humor, whether from movies, the sports media or other sources. Sometimes it's just random funny stuff, but a lot of times it's something relevant to our team—maybe something mildly embarrassing someone did or said—intended to get us laughing about ourselves and each other. Obviously I have to read the situation, though. When we're on a losing streak maybe it's not the time to crack jokes. Or, maybe a good cathartic laugh is just what we need to get back on track?

It's also worth noting that I'm exceptionally lucky to coach a team with Steph Curry. For as long as I have been here, he has been one of the team's stars and a leader who does a lot to set the tone. Day in, day out, Steph plays with more joy than probably any player I've ever been around. His joy is infectious.

Adams elaborated. "Steve is a special person. His view of life shapes his philosophy and the way he coaches. Take joy. Steve likes to laugh, and there is a lot of laughter with the team and the staff. It helps in moments of victory and in moments where things are going sideways. Laughter brings joy, and joy builds comradery."

Competition

Said Kerr,

This value acknowledges that at the end of the day, to have a successful career in basketball, you have to win games. I believe that some of the mindset required to win you have to develop and train in practice. Which is why we're always having contests. Sometimes they're basketball related. At practice we'll have shooting contests, or we'll keep score during drills or scrimmages. Other times we foster competition with things like ping pong tournaments, or team bowling nights. Pete Carroll was an inspiration here, as he always seemed to be, for example, pitting linebackers versus running backs against one another in these little challenges and tallying their wins and losses.

Said Harrison Barnes, who played several seasons under Kerr at Golden State, "Guys respect winning and he's played with the best, coached the best, won rings. The biggest part of coaching is cultivating the winning mentality. In practice, the locker room, all the stuff that happens before you see us at 7:30."¹⁴

Compassion

Said Kerr,

This one is probably the most unusual of the four, especially in the sports world, where the norms can encourage people to be tough, stoic, or even a bit callous. But it's probably the most important. It's also probably the hardest. One component is compassion for your opponent. That is relatively straightforward. Even though you're out there to win, you shouldn't forget to treat the other team with respect.

The bigger piece is having compassion for others in our organization. In many ways being a player or coach in the N.B.A. is a dream job, but that does not mean we don't face intense pressures, scrutiny, and stress. You've got injuries, criticism from the media and fans, concerns about playing time, salary issues, trades, the list goes on.

Compassion starts with understanding that everyone, from superstar Steph Curry down to the last player on the bench, is probably dealing with something. It's critical that we all acknowledge that while the nature of the adversity or struggle may differ somewhat, at the root level it's still about vulnerability and shared human experience. Curry or one of our other stars, Klay Thompson or Draymond Green, may be upset about a play they screwed up or a bad story that ran in the newspaper. Meanwhile, a reserve might be worried about getting released and whether he'll have to move his family to a new city in the middle of a school year.

Therefore, I try to do a lot to help all of us understand one another. Not only what we're struggling with, but where we come from, what's important to us, and how we deal with situations. For example, we've got two leaders, Steph Curry and Klay Thompson, whose fathers played in the N.B.A. They grew up in privileged, comfortable environments—good neighborhoods, stable families, first rate schools, financially secure. Their upbringings shaped how they deal with adversity. On the flip side of that, another team leader, Draymond Green, had a rough childhood in a rough neighborhood. It's one reason he responds to situations very differently. Then you've got an increasing number of foreign players—guys who don't necessarily speak English well, or who struggle to understand aspects of American culture.

Personally, I try to stay in close communication with all of the players and coaches and understand what is on their minds. Basketball is great because the size of the team is manageable—12 players and a handful of assistant coaches, plus some staff and front office folks. I'm always making time to have one-on-one conversations. Maybe it's ironic, but I often find I relate best to the bench players, because that's where I spent the majority of my playing career. I can sympathize with them. It means something to them when I talk about always being prepared because you never know when you'll be called upon to contribute. I'm living proof of that; it was my role for 15 years. Additionally, we typically assign a few players to each assistant coach. They are in constant communication, and the coaches keep me in the loop so I'm always quick to know when something is the matter.

Adams echoed this sentiment. "He believes there's something special about each one of these guys as humans and players. And he works very diligently about fostering that in each individual---this isn't some pie in the sky thing."

Kerr continued to describe how compassion was achieved within the team, adding,

We do a lot of group dinners. On the road, we rent out restaurants and invite players' friends and families to join. Often one of the best ways to learn about a person is to spend time with the people closest to him. Parents and children especially. Families are a huge part of it. They are welcome to travel on the team plane. It's not as glamorous as it may sound, but it happens a few times a year. At home, we always have kids around. They're a big part of the environment. At the arena we have a play room next to the locker room.

Again videos play a role, too. Our video editor, Laurence Scott, does these great personalized birthday videos and weaves in everything from game footage to home movies. They're yet another way to get to know each other and that everyone's humanity shines through.

Still, at the end of the day, this too has to be authentic. Genuine compassion cannot be manufactured. There are times I have to tell players, 'I don't have the answer.' Even that, I feel, is compassion because admitting to not knowing is a form of vulnerability. I cannot overstate the value of simply acknowledging what someone else is going through.

Mindfulness

Said Kerr,

Mindfulness may be the most elusive for us, in part because although we practice these things, neither myself nor anyone on my coaching staff is qualified to lead the group

through yoga, breathing exercises, or meditation. We need someone from outside. While we had someone great my first season at Golden State, who led team and individual sessions, since then the role has been difficult to fill. The driving idea behind mindfulness, however, is that there is immense value in being more present, and in understanding how to enter and remain in that state we often refer to as 'the zone.'

Season to Season, Day to Day

When Kerr arrived at Golden State, he introduced these values to the players and staff by writing them on a whiteboard and leading a discussion about their origins and definitions. He also, at his first meeting with the team, sought to establish his vision. "That vision," he said, "was to build off of the team's success the previous year, before I arrived. And I talked about that success. I gave credit to my predecessor, Mark Jackson, who in a lot of ways had done a great job, and had led the team to 51 regular season wins in his final year. I said, 'You guys have already accomplished a lot. Let's not change too much, but let's find ways to be even better, especially on offense.' From a basketball standpoint, that meant playing a faster tempo, sharing the ball more, and bringing the depth of our roster to bear. That's where, after a lot of thought, I came up with what became our team motto: *Strength in Numbers*."

To help convey his message, Kerr showed a custom video that featured examples of the type of basketball he wanted the team to play on the court, as well as music and a humorous cameo from the legendary announcer (and friend of Kerr's), Marv Albert. Said Kerr, "It was meant to be informative, but also show that we would have fun and be creative and not take ourselves too seriously." He made it clear, however, that this part of the job was not particularly collaborative. Added Kerr, "Creating and presenting that vision was my job, and the foundation had to be based on my expertise and my vantage point. Execution is where the collaboration has to kick in."

Draymond Green, one of the Warriors players, reflected on the culture Kerr instituted when he joined as Head Coach. "When Steve arrived, he built a culture of empowerment where, one man down, the next man has to step up. And it's not just on him, it's on everybody to come together and empower that next man and have his back through whatever the situation is. The system he taught us is all about continuing to move on, you just continue to flow."¹⁵

Kerr added that, in subsequent seasons, the list of core values was not something he talked about from the outset, or even all that frequently. "They're familiar to the guys who have been around for years. For new guys, ideally they *feel* the values before we ever get to naming them. My preference is to talk specifically about the values once a year, part way through the season."

Goal Setting

Kerr also maintained a firm opinion on the types of goals that he should set for the team. "The goals are always going to vary somewhat depending on the composition and nature of the team," he said. "But we have never set a goal to win a specific number of games. Instead I look to more big picture and process-driven goals. One year, our goal was to 'be dominant on our home court,' because we felt like in previous years it was an advantage on which had not fully capitalized. Another year, we had a goal to take more high-quality shots. To help us get there, we had a specific statistical goal: to pass the ball 300 times per game as a team (up from around 250 the prior year)." According to Kerr, even after hitting that mark became routine, and he ceased to share the exact number each day with the team, he continued to highlight sterling examples in the film session as a reinforcement. "Many players still asked for the stats though, because it had become such a touchstone for them."

Added Kerr, "One thing that resonated with everyone that first year was the goal of winning a championship. None of us (in our current roles) had done that, but we all wanted to badly, so in a way it was easy to get on track and focused. In later years it was harder to get back to a goal because we'd already checked the championship box. To some extent players said, or maybe just felt, 'That was great, but it didn't solve *all* my problems. Also it was really hard, and a ton of work.'"

Daily Gatherings

"You'll never see a headline," said Kerr, "that reads 'The Warriors called a team meeting today.' That's because we gather every day before practice for a video session and for people share whatever is on their mind, be it positive or negative." Kerr believed that being together daily helped create a sense of normalcy around open and honest conversation. "That way," he said, "you avoid two things. One is the need to ever make a major correction. It's way better to make constant, minor adjustments, and to nip problems in the bud before they can escalate. This is true with cultural issues, as well as any conflicts that may arise between individuals in the organization. I might let guys cool off for a night, but the next morning, you can bet we're going to address any tension. No elephants in the room."

The other problem these sessions helped prevent was having the team feel like a meeting was unusual, or in any way a punishment. "In some organizations, team meetings feel like being sent to the principal's office," said Kerr. "Dealing with issues in that context is stressful, and unnatural. Make communication feel normal, make it a habit, and develop your skills over time. For me, that's always been the way to go. It's amazing what happens when you get people to just talk."

In terms of addressing the team's values, he added, "We try to be consistent in living by values, so that we don't have to go back and spend a lot of effort on corrections. But it's interesting: if we feel like team is in bad place, and we think about the values, we'll almost always see that something is missing." Adams added, "We've been able to build this unique culture and the culture can absorb different people, good times and bad times. People buy into the culture easily and listen to their leader when they're successful. But culture is also helpful as something to leverage during difficult times."

Roster and Team Composition

Although Warriors General Manager Bob Myers had final say over all trades, draft picks, and other player transactions, he and Kerr often discussed roster issues. Said Kerr,

Dynamics are very important. You want to have the right mix of veterans and players still trying to establish themselves. Younger guys are often fighting—to prove themselves, to climb the ladder, to get bigger contracts, to put up impressive personal statistics. Older guys tend to be calmer, more secure, more complacent even. But they know what it takes to make it, so they can be the glue, so to speak. Having too many of either can lead to trouble. It's also a matter of personalities and leadership styles.

Different players brought different strengths to the team and Kerr effectively managed the dynamics by investing in each player and having regular one-on-ones with them. Adams commented, "Steve is always the rah-rah guy. He sees something sometimes that we don't see, often recognizing the small contributions each player makes."

The Team: A Dictatorship or a Democracy?

Another key component of Kerr's coaching style was deciding when to assert his authority, and when to solicit input from others. "It's tied to compassion," said Kerr. "It's recognizing that I may not

have all the answers, and that others will feel slighted if they aren't afforded the chance to share their ideas. Also," he added, "in a strange way, you can gain even more respect by admitting that you don't have all the answers, and it can give you more power as a leader."¹⁶ Added Adams, "He is thoughtful, kind, and a great listener. His messages are succinct and poignant. Unlike lots of other coaches, he is neither in love with his own voice nor compelled to assert dominance through lots of oration."

Again Kerr saw the most obvious example in the pre-practice or pre-game video sessions, and traced the origins back to something he observed as a player in San Antonio. Recalled Kerr,

"We're going to go under the screen," Popovich said during a team meeting.

"No, we gotta go over," replied Avery Johnson, then the team's point guard.

Pop was firm. "We gotta go under."

Johnson slammed his fist on the table and shouted. "YOU DON'T SEE WHAT WE SEE OUT THERE!"

*(Said Kerr) It was a good reminder to me because this is Pop, one of the best in the world at his business, and his point guard is like, 'You don't see what we see.'"*¹⁷

While Kerr recognized the importance of providing others the opportunity to give input, he acknowledged that it was not always appropriate. "If we're out there getting crushed," he said, "it's probably not a good thing to say to your guys, 'Well, anyone have any ideas?' That's when you have to take some control over the situation and show your expertise. When you're in a film session, or when things are going well, those are great times to encourage your guys to say, 'Here's something we might want to try...' In general, though, the message is, 'No single person, not even me, has all the answers. But together we'll find a way.'"

Sometimes, Kerr noted, this approach was easy. "Take Draymond," he said. "His leadership style is vocal. You don't ever have to ask him to chime in. Often he is the guy I want to us to be listening to, but not always. We had another player, Andre Iguodala, who was a different type of leader—quieter, but with an amazing knowledge of the game, especially on the defensive side. Sometimes I had to call on him in meetings—'Andre, what do you think we should do in this situation?'" Said Iguodala, "It keeps me on my toes. If he asks, I have to know what I'm talking about. I just can't throw anything out there."¹⁸

Kerr also highlighted a time he granted his players even more control—one when the context was also much different. He elaborated, noting,

Typically, late January is a time in the season when players tend to succumb to some amount of fatigue and boredom. (They've been full-steam with the team since training camp in September, and the All-Star break, which for most guys is a welcome few days off, is still a few weeks away. One year, to combat this, I let the players coach one of the games themselves. (Part of my job is pacing the team, like a jockey knowing when a horse should conserve energy and when it's time go all out.)

That night, I made the substitutions, but the guys were responsible for drawing up a game plan based on the scouting reports and for deciding during the game which plays to run and when. The guys loved it. It was a real reset for them mentally, in that they felt excited and relaxed and free to express more creativity. They even developed several plays that we utilized in subsequent contests. Oh, and we also won by something like 40 points.

Managing in Different Directions

Kerr credited Warriors owner Joe Lacob with helping him understand more about what Lacob referred to as 'managing in different directions.' Said Kerr, "I'd never heard that phrase, but it's a big part of my job...to involve everybody and communicate with everybody. It's so easy, especially when things are going poorly, for management, to wonder about decisions regarding who's playing, or why we're running certain plays, or for assistant coaches to speculate about the moves the front office is making, such as making trades or making draft picks. Pretty soon you can have everyone pointing fingers. I try to communicate constantly in order to pave roads before they get bumpy. Although I must admit, as our coaching staff has grown considerably (it's now up to around 12 people), this has become an even bigger part of my job and sometimes has proven quite challenging."¹⁹

Soliciting input was also something he did with coaches and staff. Said Nick U'Ren, one of the team's Special Assistants, "I'll share my thoughts and at the end I'll be thinking, 'That's really freaking cool that he asks me.' I mean, I'm sure he does care what I think, but half of the value of doing this is the feeling I have afterward. I love this guy because he asked what I thought. So I always think to myself, 'Does he really care or is he just making sure I feel valued?'" Added Assistant Coach Bruce Fraser, "Kerr occasionally considers too many opinions. Sometimes I have to remind him that, at the end of the day, he's the smartest person in the room."²⁰

Kerr's willingness to share the privileges and responsibilities of decision making were also on display when twice during his tenure with the Warriors he had to take extended absences due to complications from back surgery. During these two periods the team recorded a combined 46 wins and 4 losses.²¹ Although Kerr monitored the team's performance, and made himself available to coaches and players, he trusted them to step up, perform, and look out for one another. Kerr also wanted the interim head coaches, Luke Walton and Mike Brown, to be themselves rather than try to impersonate him. "He said, 'Mike, everyone labels you a quote unquote defensive coach,'" recalled Brown. "'And that's BS. I just need you to come coach and be you.'"²² Added Myers, "Some people crave that feeling of things falling apart when they're not there. Steve's the opposite."²³

Credit and Blame

Kerr saw clear benefits to stepping up or stepping back were when credit and blame were being dispensed. He elaborated:

My thoughts on this subject were shaped in part by my experiences in Chicago. We had a general manager, Jerry Krause, who in many ways was truly excellent at his job. But he had this habit of saying, 'Players don't win championships, organizations win championships,' in a way that felt like he was desperate for praise and dismissive of guys on the roster. If only he would have said, 'Look, we're incredibly lucky to have Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen,' I'm confident a lot more people would have been inclined to talk about what a good general manager he was.

Therefore, I try to accept blame when things go poorly, and push the praise to others when we're succeeding. It's such a no brainer, but some people find it really difficult. Everyone likes others to say nice things about them. A common misperception is that the best leaders are totally selfless and don't care at all about praise. That's not true. All humans crave affirmation. But if you are generous with credit and try to give it away, then you'll still get plenty. Maybe even more.

Kerr tried to instill this idea in his players. "One of the big things I want them to understand," he said, "is that it's not always the same player coming up big for us. One night it might be one of our stars, but the next night it might be someone off the bench. It's important that everybody is able to celebrate accomplishments that are not specifically theirs. I do my best to model that." His willingness to deflect praise was also on display when he spoke about his supposedly brilliant use of half-time breaks during games. "That's something that the media made a much bigger deal out of than it deserves to be. Like all teams we try to balance getting some rest and coming up with working on preparing for the second half, but we don't do anything all that remarkable or exceptional."

Coaching Steph Curry versus Coaching Draymond Green

Kerr found that he formed and maintained very different relationships with different players over the years. "Steph Curry and I are a lot alike," he said. "Personality-wise that is. Obviously he is a far better player than I ever was. But in some of the ways we communicate, express ourselves, deal with stress, like to laugh, we are similar or at least complementary. Coaching him has always felt relatively easy." Added U'Ren, "You know how Steve always talks about Steph having that combination of humility and confidence and how that's a recipe for leadership? Steve's got the exact same thing."²⁴

Green had a very different personality, and Kerr found that coaching him was a very different proposition. "He is the most complex player I've ever tried to coach," said Kerr. "He's intense, he's a thinker, he has the heart of a true champion, and he's a guy I deeply respect and admire. But he can fly off the handle. We've had many moments of yelling and screaming at each other. Strangers would be forgiven for thinking, 'Those guys must hate each other.' That's not the case, though it's true I have not always done or said the right things to help him. It's something I'm still working on, that we're both working on, and probably will for as long as we are together."

In reflecting on his relationship with Kerr, Green noted,

One game, Steph pulls up for this crazy shot. Then Klay did the same thing. Our lead slipped from double-digits to down to one. Kerr called timeout. And at that point, I've taken one shot and have no turnovers. But he looks right at me and goes, 'What the f--- is wrong with you? Get your f----- head in the game!' I was shocked. Why is he yelling at me? But he's smart because he knows exactly what I'm going to do. I'm gonna get mad and then I'm going to yell at everyone else and get them going. Now, is that a tactic? Is it on purpose? I don't know. That's coaching. Sometimes I sit there afterward and think, 'Damn, that motherf----- got me.' But he knows me. You couldn't do that to someone else. He has a feel for it. That's his thing. He has this feel for exactly what each player needs. He knows that yelling turns on something inside of me. If he just said, 'Don't shoot that shot, it's not right for us,' it wouldn't work. We're as close as anybody on the team. I can talk to Steve about anything. We can go at each other and know it's never personal.²⁵

Sounding Off on Non-Basketball Issues

As coach of the Warriors, Kerr also developed a reputation for sharing his thoughts on a range of social and political issues, including gun control and civil rights. He was also a vocal critic of Donald Trump's campaign and presidency. Kerr credited his propensity to weigh in to several sources. The first was his upbringing. Said Kerr, "I would be totally different without the political conversations at the table and at barbecues about what was going on in the world."²⁶ Next, two of Kerr's coaches, Jackson and Popovich, were also known for their willingness to engage in issues off the court. Said Kerr, "I remember Phil talking to the team about gun control, and asking the players: 'How many of you have guns? How many of you know that if you have a gun in your house you're more likely to

have a fatality in your house?’ It was a real discussion, with guys saying that we need to have some level of protection, because we are vulnerable in many ways, too.”²⁷ For Kerr, the issue was also a matter of authenticity. There were issues that were important to him (gun control most notably, as well as politics and military intervention in the Middle East) as a victim, a parent, and a citizen. When asked at a conference about where sports figures and celebrities should fit into public discourse, his reply was, “They fit in anywhere they want. As American citizens they have the right to speak.”²⁸

A “Bad Season”

During Kerr’s first five seasons coaching the Warriors, the worst the team finished was second place. However, before the start of the 2019-2020 season, many believed that this streak would finally end. Two of the team’s star players (Kevin Durant and Andre Iguodala) had been lost to other teams. A third star, Klay Thompson, would miss the entire season due to a serious knee injury. The team’s hopes for a successful campaign were further diminished when just several games into the season Steph Curry suffered an injury that would keep him sidelined for months. With more than three quarters of the season remaining, the Warriors’ record stood at just 4 wins and 16 losses, and it seemed unlikely that they would even make the post-season. “It’s natural for teams to have peaks and valleys,” said Kerr. “Even for dominant teams, like the Bulls teams of the 1990s, it’s incredibly difficult and exhausting to keep performing at that highest level. You’ve got the pressure, the attention, the roster changes, and the fact that other teams are gunning for you with a hunger similar to what you had the first time you won.”

Although Kerr accepted that the team would not be raising another championship trophy in June 2020, he did not see the remainder of the season as merely a formality. “We talked a lot about being productive,” he said. “A lot of that meant developing younger guys, new guys, and guys who had not seen as much playing time previously. That included on the court stuff, obviously, but it also meant taking time to steep them in the culture and values we believe helped us be so successful for so many years.”

Adams also reflected on the 2019-2020 campaign, saying,

We had these five great seasons, and then, this past year, a really bad season. It was interesting to observe the culture this past year, because in my opinion this losing team exemplified the philosophy of the program as well as, if not better than, the teams who won all those championships. Even though we were getting beat all the time, guys were staying happy, getting along well, and giving it their best night-in and night-out. There was less silliness, because the team was younger and there was more of an emphasis on molding the players, but I’ve got to say—this season was probably the best indicator of culture and of what Steve has tried to do in his five seasons with Golden State.

Kerr was mostly inclined to agree, adding,

In some regards I did more coaching this past year than I had ever done before. (This was not a team I would have trusted with the self-coaching exercise several years prior.) That’s not to say it all went smoothly. As always, I had challenges coaching Draymond, who with Steph’s injury became our sole veteran leader. I wanted to give him a bit of a break because I assumed he was physically and emotionally tired. So I didn’t engage him as often to hash things out. But eventually, through discussion, I learned that he felt I wasn’t coaching him. What I thought of as respect and space, he thought of as indifference.

This was also the year I probably put the most pressure on myself. We lost a lot of close games, and I'd find myself awake late at night wondering what would have happened if I'd have made a different call at a key moment. Sometimes I felt as if I let the team down. When you're winning, you don't need to prove the value of the culture – the natural high of victory does that. When you're losing, you have to sell it a bit more. I tried to do that by talking about how the work we were doing would benefit the team the next year, and benefit the guys throughout their careers even if they were to end up with another team. I talked about how a team's journey is like a life journey – everything isn't always going to go great, but opportunities should not be squandered.

Looking Ahead

As Kerr and Adams wrapped up their call, they found themselves in agreement. With the pandemic still raging, it was unclear when they would find themselves back on the court with their players. Fall 2020 at the earliest was their guess. But the day would come eventually, and when it did their priority would be to deliver the right messages about how the previous losing season had not been in vain, and how, as always, the keys to success would be found in the team's culture and values more so than in the physical abilities of its star players.

One way Kerr planned to convey this message was by recounting the one game that stood out in his mind more than any other. "2019, Western Conference Finals, Game 6, in Houston," he said. "We were on the road, had suffered several injuries (including to Kevin Durant), and were trailing. But then everything clicked. The guys banded together, they brought out the strengths in one another that they had learned over the course of several seasons. We came back to take the lead. Then, with the clock running low, we had a possession where Iguodala, Thompson, Green and Curry – who together had been the core of this team for so long – all touched the ball. It ended with Thompson hitting a 3-pointer that was in effect the knockout blow. More than in any other game I have coached, I believe our culture was on full display, and was what spurred us to victory."

Kerr was getting a little misty, but his face began to widen into a jubilant smile. "As a coach, what I ache for is not just winning the game. It's that feeling when everybody is connected and joyful and competing together. There's no feeling like it."²⁹

Exhibit 1a The NBA c. 2020

- The National Basketball Association (NBA) was created by the merger of the Basketball Association of America and the National Basketball League on August 3, 1949.
- In 1950 the league was comprised of 11 franchises. By 2020 that number had grown to 30 (29 in U.S., 1 in Canada). The league divides those 30 teams into two conferences (Eastern and Western), each with three divisions and five teams per division. (The Warriors play in the Western Conference, Pacific Division.)
- A team may have up to 17 players on its active roster. Coaching staffs are generally composed of 1 head coach, 3 to 4 assistant coaches, 1 to 2 behind-bench assistant coaches, 1 scout, 1 to 2 statisticians, 3 to 4 training staff, 2 to 3 medical staff, and 3 to 4 video coordinator staff members.
- NBA teams have a salary cap, which is calculated as a percentage of the league's revenue from the previous season. For the 2019-2020 season, the cap was set at \$109.14 million. During the 2019-20 season the Warriors' Steph Curry was the highest paid player in the game at \$40.2 million. At least 7 players in the league made over \$37 million.
- The regular season runs from October to April, with each team playing 82 games (41 home, 41 away). Every team in the NBA plays every other team during the regular season.
- Playoffs begin in April and conclude in June. The top eight teams from each conference reach the playoffs. All series, including the NBA Finals, are best of seven games (i.e. first team to 4 victories wins the series).

Source: Casewriter Research (www.nba.com, www.basketball-reference.com, www.espn.com).

Exhibit 1b NBA 'Dynasties'

- **The Minneapolis Lakers of the Early 1950s** won 3 consecutive championships from 1952 to 1954, thus becoming the NBA's first 'dynasty.'
- **The Boston Celtics of the late 1950's and 1960's** won 11 NBA championships in 13 years. Led by Hall of Famers Bill Russell and Red Auerbach (Head Coach), the team achieved a record 8 straight championship wins from 1959 to 1966. (No other team has won more than 3 consecutive titles. The team peaked at 65 regular season wins during the period.
- **The L.A. Lakers of the 1980's** made 7 of the 10 NBA Finals during the decade, and won five of those championships. They were led by Hall of Famers Pat Riley (Head Coach), Magic Johnson, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. The team was nicknamed the "Showtime" Lakers due to their exciting style of play and how the franchise came to be associated with the Hollywood/celebrity scene. They peaked at 65 regular season wins during that period. The team was able to repeat as champions in 1987 and 1988.
- **The Boston Celtics of 1979 to 1987** appeared in the NBA Finals 5 times in 7 years (1981-1987), and won 3 of those championships. Led by Hall of Famers Larry Bird (this period in franchise history came to be known as the 'Larry Bird Era'), Kevin McHale, Robert Parish and once again Red Auerbach (now as GM), the team achieved a then league-best 67 regular season wins in 1986. The team was also known for its heated rivalry with the Showtime Lakers. The team was never able to repeat as champions.
- **The Chicago Bulls of the 1990's** reached the NBA Finals 6 times, and won 6 championships. Led by Hall of Famers Michael Jordan (often heralded as the greatest player ever), Scottie Pippen and Phil Jackson (Head Coach), the Bulls were twice (1991-1993 and 1996-1998) able to 'three-peat.' In 1995-96 the team peaked at 72 regular season wins, setting a new all-time record.
- **The Los Angeles Lakers of the 2000's** reached the NBA finals 7 times between 2000 and 2010, and won 5 championships. From 2000 to 2002, led by Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O'Neal, they became the third and most recent team to 'three-peat.' In 2009 and 2010, the team, still led by Bryant but without the services of O'Neal, again were able to repeat as champions. The team peaked at 67 regular season wins in 2000.
- **The San Antonio Spurs of 1999 to 2014** reached the NBA Finals 6 times during this period, and recorded 5 championships. Head Coach Gregg Popovich and Hall of Famer Tim Duncan participated in all of those campaigns. Duncan was joined on the court for the 1999 and 2003 championship seasons by Hall of Famer David Robinson. The team peaked at 63 wins in 2006. The team was never able to repeat as champions.

Source: Casewriter research (www.nba.com, www.basketball-reference.com, www.espn.com).

Exhibit 1c Biographies of Key Figures

Ron Adams was born in Laton, California on November 18, 1947. He played basketball for Fresno Pacific University before beginning his coaching career there, coaching from 1969-1974. He went on to become an Assistant Coach at United States International University, then an assistant coach at UC Santa Barbara. He moved onto the professional level as head coach for Sunair Oostende, a Belgian team. In 1998, Adams became an assistant coach for the Milwaukee Bucks. After five seasons, he became the assistant coach for the Chicago Bulls. He was then an assistant coach for the Oklahoma City Thunder from 2008 to 2010. He rejoined the Bulls in 2010, once again as assistant coach. Adams joined the Golden State Warriors as an assistant coach on June 23, 2014.

Stephen Curry was born in Akron, Ohio on March 14, 1988. He played three years of basketball for Davidson College. In 2009, he was drafted First Round, 6th pick by the Golden State Warriors. Curry was named the NBA's Most Valuable Player two years in a row in the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 seasons. His 2015-2016 MVP title was the first time in NBA history a player was elected MVP by a unanimous vote. A point guard, he is widely considered one of the best shooters in the history of the game, and is also known for his creative and often acrobatic style of play.

Kevin Durant was born in Washington, D.C. on September 29, 1988. He played one year of basketball for the University of Texas before being drafted in 2007 by the franchise that in 2008 became the Oklahoma City Thunder. After 8 seasons in Oklahoma City, he signed with the Golden State Warriors in 2016. He departed for the Brooklyn Nets prior to the 2019-2020 season. He has won two NBA championships, an NBA MVP Award, two Finals MVP Awards, two NBA All-Star Game Most Valuable Player Awards, four NBA scoring titles, the NBA Rookie of the Year Award, and two Olympic gold medals. A small forward, he is widely regarded as one of the best scorers in NBA history.

Draymond Green was born in Saginaw, Michigan on March 4, 1990. He played four years of basketball for Michigan State. In 2012, he was drafted in the 2nd Round, with the 35th overall pick, by the Golden State Warriors. A power forward known for his strength, toughness, and intensity, Green was named NBA Defensive Player of the Year in 2017.

Klay Thompson was born in Los Angeles, California on February 9, 1990. He played three years of basketball for Washington State. In 2011, he was drafted in the 1st round with the 11th overall pick by the Golden State Warriors. On December 5, 2016, Thompson scored 60 points in 29 minutes, in a 142-106 victory over the Pacers. In doing so, he became the first player in NBA history to score 60 or more points in fewer than 30 minutes of playing time. Like Curry, he is widely heralded as one of the greatest long-distance shooters in NBA history.

Source: Casewriter research.

Exhibit 1d Warriors 2009 to 2020

Season	Head Coach	Wins (Regular Season)	Losses (Regular Season)	Place (Western Conference)	Playoff Result	Notes
2009-10	<i>Don Nelson</i>	26	56	13	NA	<i>Steph Curry joins Warriors</i>
2010-11	<i>Keith Smart</i>	36	46	12	NA	<i>Franchise worth an estimated \$450 million</i>
2011-12	<i>Mark Jackson</i>	23	43	13	NA	<i>Klay Thompson joins Warriors; Season shortened due to lockout</i>
2012-13	<i>Mark Jackson</i>	47	35	6	<i>Eliminated, Conference Semifinals</i>	<i>Bob Myers appointed General Manager; Draymond Green joins Warriors</i>
2013-14	<i>Mark Jackson</i>	51	31	6	<i>Eliminated, First Round</i>	<i>Andre Iguodala joins Warriors</i>
2014-15	<i>Steve Kerr</i>	67	15	1	<i>NBA Champions</i>	<i>Steve Kerr joins Warriors, Steph Curry voted NBA MVP</i>
2015-16	<i>Steve Kerr</i>	73	9	1	<i>NBA Runner Up</i>	<i>Kerr misses first 43 games of season due to complications from back surgery while Luke Walton serves as interim head coach; Warriors set single season mark for best record with 73 wins and 9 losses; Steve Kerr awarded NBA Coach of the Year; Steph Curry voted NBA MVP; Team squanders 3 games to 1 lead in NBA Finals and loses series in 7 games</i>
2016-17	<i>Steve Kerr</i>	67	15	1	<i>NBA Champions</i>	<i>Kevin Durant joins Warriors; Kerr misses 12 playoff games due to complications from back surgery while Mike Brown serves as interim head coach and leads team to 12 wins and 0 losses</i>
2017-2018	<i>Steve Kerr</i>	58	24	2	<i>NBA Champions</i>	<i>Warriors repeat as NBA Champions</i>
2018-19	<i>Steve Kerr</i>	57	25	1	<i>NBA Runner Up</i>	<i>Team loses to Toronto 4 games to 2 in NBA Finals; Franchise worth an estimated \$3.5 billion</i>
2019-20	<i>Steve Kerr</i>	15	50	15	NA	<i>Kevin Durant and Andre Iguodala leave Warriors; Klay Thompson misses entire season due to injury; Steph Curry misses over 50 games due to injury</i>

Source: Casewriter research (www.nba.com, www.basketball-reference.com, and www.espn.com).

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