

Probably one of the most annoying things I have to deal with in business is that people never question the status quo. It doesn't matter what business it is. I doesn't even matter if its something that applies to how I do things, that I have become set in my ways on. It is rare when people just ask questions or apply some critical analysis to the things right in front of them.

The NBA is the perfect example. So many things are the way they are, because thats the way they always have been. **I guess it was the old adage, "if it's not broke, don't not fix it". But not being broken, doesn't mean its optimal.** Yet, just the smallest bit of critical analysis can lead to changes. Fortunately, the NBA is evolving into an organization that will change. There is a new management style that has evolved over the past few years, which has lead to valid changes initiated by me and others which I think have benefited the league and our fans.

Here are a couple examples of things that used to be "conventional wisdom" in the NBA rule book that to the NBA's credit, when I brought it to their attention, were changed quickly and easily

1. Clear Path Foul

It used to be that when there was a clear path foul, (a defensive player grabs a player in front of him thereby preventing a probable layup) the offensive team was awarded 1 free throw and possession of the ball on the side. One day I decided to do some basic math. What was the percentage of a conversion on a layup. The play the defender was trying to prevent. What was the percent of conversion for a free throw from the average NBA player. And what was the conversion on the typical NBA possession.

I don't have the exact numbers here, but the following are pretty close: .70 for a free throw plus .45 x 2 points or .90 for a regular possesion, when added together gave a probably value to the posession of 1.6. The probability of making a break away layup with no one between you and the basket was 90pct or higher, x 2 points, or a possession value of 1.80. Which meant that under the rules, the advantage went to the defending team for grabbing the offensive player to stop a break away.

Once I offered this math to the league, the rule was changed to 2 free throws and the ball. Which gave the advantage to the offense with a value of .7 x 2 FTs plus .45 x 2pts for the possession or a total of 2.3 pts for the possession. The team that was fouled now received a significant benefit to reward their defensive effort.

Along the same lines of playing the advantage, for a long time the guideline for officials was to reward the offensive player if a defender created contact that didn't fully impact the offensive players Speed, Balance, Rythm and Quickness (SBRQ). In other words, give the guy with the ball the benefit of the doubt and don't take away their ability to score if the contact is marginal.

So a few years ago, Im watching the Pistons beat the Lakers in the Finals. I'm seeing Larry Brown's Pistons fully take advantage of the rules. It was impossible to stay in front of Kobe. He could get anywhere he wanted on the court. The Pistons knew it as well. So every time he tried to get to the basket, they would body up and bump him. The officials did just as they were supposed to. Since Kobe had the advantage on the defender, they didn't call a foul. However that little bump slowed Kobe down just enough that it gave Ben Wallace a split second more to on a pre rotation to the Paint, to be in a better position to defend the basket. Kobe still scored, but not quite as often as he may have otherwise.

At that point it dawned on me that the concept of playing the advantage in a one on one matchup had nothing to do with which TEAM gained the advantage. After all, its the team that scores the most points that wins. Detroit had a brilliant strategy and was playing it to perfection. After the finals, I sat down with the league and discussed with them the difference between player and team advantage. The discussion lead to changing the rules so that perimeter contact was called far more often

The point of the story is two fold:

1. To make it clear that not everything I do in the NBA results in or from a fine:)
2. That sometimes even the most fully engrained rules or processes should have critical analysis applied to them. Just because something isn't broken doesn't mean a business can't benefit by looking to do something different. Strong organizations encourage the change and great employees always are looking to find ways to take even the basics and make them better