

Mark Cuban, Elon Musk and the Question of Diversity Hiring in the NBA

In a previous article, I referenced the X interaction between Mark Cuban, the billionaire owner of the Dallas Mavericks basketball team, and Elon Musk, the richest man in the world. Their interaction focused on the subject of diversity, equity and inclusion and hiring practices, leading to a very sharp barb by Musk. (More on that shortly.)

Here, I want to get into more depth, asking: 1) Did Cuban's post in support of DEI actually disprove the point he was making? And 2) Is it time for the NBA to make a real effort to bring more white players into the game, since it is so heavily dominated by Black players? (Spoiler alert: The first question is quite serious; the second is quite sarcastic.)

To his credit, Cuban ended his lengthy post by saying, "I wrote this on @x because I knew very well that almost everyone on here would disagree with me. I don't virtue signal [which he had been accused of doing]. I want people to challenge my positions. I want to have engaging discussions that help me learn."

That's a commendable attitude, and one that I share as well.

In this case, let me fulfill Mr. Cuban's request and challenge his position.

He wrote:

DEI does not mean you don't [sic] hire on merit. Of course you hire based on merit

Diversity – means you expand the possible pool of candidates

as widely as you can. Once you have identified the candidates, you HIRE THE PERSON YOU BELIEVE IS THE BEST.

What makes the whole 'what about the players' comment ridiculous is that it's [sic] presumes that all positions are hired based on some quantitative rather than subjective version of merit. They aren't

Even choosing the best basketball player is very much a guess. Which is why the best players weren't always the first pick in the draft and some go undrafted

The reality is that most positions hired in a company don't have a quantitative metric you can use to hire someone.

How do you pick the best barista, sales assistant, marketing or salesperson, etc.

More often than not it's an educated guess.

But that's the whole point. You do your best to hire the person best suited for the job, and if your racial or ethnic biases preclude you from doing that, then you must overcome those and make the best hire.

So, if DEI simply helped expand the pool of potential workers, that would be great. But when it imposes a system that forces you to hire someone who is not as well-qualified as someone else, you now engage in a process that is both discriminatory and destructive.

That's why Cuban actually refutes himself by referencing the NBA draft.

Of course it is true that "the best players weren't always the first pick in the draft and some go undrafted."

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But that has nothing to do with DEI.

To the contrary, DEI is not a factor at all when it comes to drafting players.

That's why Cuban's post drew the sharp comeback of Musk, saying, "Cool, so when should we expect to see a short white/Asian women [sic] on the Mavs?"

The fact is that there is not a single professional sports team that filters its draft picks through the requirements (or guidelines) of DEI. To do so would be financial suicide.

Instead, through a rigorous process of analysis, the team seeks to answer one simple question: Which available player best suits the goals of our team?

It's possible that the franchise might ask, "Which player will make us the most money?"

But normally, since having a winning team is the best formula for making the most money, a team might bypass Player A because Player B is a better fit for the team.

So, the very example that Cuban cites, namely the NBA draft, completely undermines his position—unless, of course, Cuban and his staff sit down together and say, "We have too many Black players. We need more whites!"

And that leads to my sarcastic question as to whether the NBA needs more diversity.

At present, despite some of the game's premier players being white (in particular Nikola Jokić, whom many believe is the best player in the league right now, and Luka Dončić, who is not far behind Jokic, and is on Cuban's own team), roughly 75-80% of the players are Black.

Accordingly, as explained by AI Claude, “the majority (roughly 3/4) of current NBA players are Black or African American, highlighting the overrepresentation of that demographic group compared to the broader US at large. The exact percentage floats year to year but has been fairly stable in that 75-80% range over the past 10+ years.”

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“NBA, it's time to implement DEI in the draft, recruiting a lot more white players and Latino players and Asian players and even Native American players. Time to address the imbalance! What are you waiting for?”

The situation is not much better in the NFL, where roughly 70% of the players are Black.

“This smacks of discrimination! This is patently unfair! This is racist! And how dare the NFL and NBA claim to be so woke. To the contrary, these leagues are in the Stone Age!”

This, of course, is nonsense, and the whole point of my sarcasm is to underscore the obvious: Players are drafted, and then players get to play in real time because they are the best at their positions. Period. If there is someone who can do your job better, you are out of a job.

If Black American athletes dominate the NBA and NFL, it's because they're the best at what they do—not because someone decided that the league needed to be less white.

In fact, the reason we have seen more and more elite Black quarterbacks in the NFL in recent years—to cite one example—is because discrimination against Black quarterbacks has been largely removed.

In the past, certain positions, such as quarterback or center,

were considered “thinking” positions. And since there was a tacit (or explicit) thought that Black athletes might be more physically gifted but less intellectually gifted, they weren’t recruited for the “thinking” positions as much as white athletes. With that stigma largely removed (or, in many circles, entirely removed), the playing field has been leveled.

This, then, illustrates where addressing discriminatory prejudices is essential. But when it comes to quotas and DEI standards that cause organizations to hire less than the very best, it is a train wreck.

That’s why Mark Cuban, along with a host of other left-leaning sports team owners, would never dream of imposing DEI where it matters most: putting together a winning team.

Not a chance.{eoa}

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Dr. Michael Brown () is the host of the nationally syndicated *The Line of Fire* radio show. He is the author of over 40 books, including “Can You be Gay and Christian?”; “Our Hands are Stained with Blood”; and “Seizing the Moment: How to Fuel the Fires of Revival.” You can connect with him on Facebook, X or YouTube.