

SHIP'S LOG: 4-9-26
RECAP: THE USMNT'S JOURNEY TO THE 2026 WORLD CUP
(A TEAM LEADERSHIP FABLE)



Over the past 21 months I've written a series of 'fictional' articles on the exploits of the United States Men's National Soccer Team (USMNT) leading up to the 2026 World Cup. My purpose was to throw some 'levity' at a situation often described by soccer's pundits and talking heads as dire.

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INTRODUCTION -7/9/24

The Art & Science of Why the US Men's Soccer Team Lost Out in 2024 Copa America

From a distance, here's my take on why we lost out. Before I start, I must admit that I've listened to many soccer pundits on TV, YouTube, and the like describe their take on why it happened. Here, I was inspired by their rhetoric to write this post since there was really nothing new about their collective responses. As always, they defaulted to an argument where they blame either the coach or the players as individuals and/or the team – or both. Perhaps a deeper dive is warranted to get to the root cause.

As someone who spent many years working to develop leaders and teams, I must say this is hard work – and it takes time. This is especially true when it comes to team development! Yet, there seems to be little, if any, acknowledgement of this fact when it comes to the rhetoric.

I am also someone who grew up with the game of soccer, so I can relate to the sport in a way that hopefully adds some credibility. As a young boy growing up in the Rochester (NY) area in the early 1950s I was able to watch many ethnic teams compete every Sunday. Looking back, it was a unique experience watching local clubs like the Italian Americans, German Americans, and others compete as if they were playing in a World Cup. My father even played then for the Rochester Sports Club and played in one U.S. Open Cup competition. I vividly remember going to places like Edgerton Park to watch games. What struck me at that time was how passionate the players and their fans were, who had moved from their respective homelands and taken up residence in the Rochester area (after the end of the second World War). That included my father who came to the United States from Wales in 1947.

Today, people in the countries represented in 2024 Copa America – including their respective players/teams – remain as passionate about soccer as they did when I was a boy growing up in the 1950s. Soccer is deeply ingrained in their cultures. Some have even argued that they are more passionate about soccer than religion. That is not for me to say. But it is a part of their national character. As such, the 'beautiful game' brings hope to people living in these countries,

demonstrating that achievement (winning) is possible against all odds when people come together to work as a team. That ingredient, I would argue, is missing in U.S. Men's Soccer. Yes, soccer has grown tremendously in the United States. But that growth does not necessarily translate into the level of individual/team passion needed to win 2024 Copa America (or World Cups).

Passion – like motivation – is an energy that once seen or experienced, is perhaps the ultimate intangible in helping individuals and teams (and organizations) achieve results. It leads directly to commitment! It may be hard to describe – and replicate, but we all know it when we see it. If we believe that passion serves as a key differentiator in producing a winning U.S. Men's Soccer team, I find it frustrating when people generalize and talk about passion as if were a commodity. A player's passion is internally generated and highly personal. Period. And whether players' passion translates into the team's passion is another challenging question. It depends on the coaches' qualifications, the team's operating framework, team norms, team protocols and processes, and the like...all contributing factors that influence team passion (and development).

Soccer must become mainstream in this country like it is in many countries outside of the United States to ignite the level of player passion needed to win a cup. Unfortunately, that will take time. And it may not happen! Why? There may be too many competing sports in the United States to enable soccer to become ingrained in our multicultural country. And don't forget, we are fighting against history. That is, we live in a country that has promoted individual values (achievement) over team values. With values directly linked to behaviors, it will be challenging to expect things to change overnight. I hope I'm wrong.

It needs to be said again that team development in organizations is hard work, and it takes time. I believe the same holds true for developing sports teams, like soccer, that need to effectively collaborate to win. Initially, the process calls for developing and leveraging a collaborative mindset to support a team's ability to effectively apply their skillset(s) – both individually and as a team. Mindset development is critical – and it trumps skillset when it comes to winning! Here, I'm reminded of Portland Timber's coach, Phil Neville, in his post-game pressers, who likes to describe success in soccer as 80% mental and 20% tactical.

Developing a collaborative mindset requires individual and team discipline to apply team principles, along with essential competencies aligned with these principles. Principles like Focus On Team – Not Position, Seek-Out Skillful and Adaptable Players, and Coach Teams to Respond to Changing Conditions On Their Own, are just three out of several principles that must be in play for the team to demonstrate a collaborative mindset. Essential competencies like Drive/Energy, Functional/Technical Expertise, Results Orientation, Team Player and Team Management are five out of a series of competencies that individuals/teams must learn and apply to demonstrate a collaborative skillset.

Okay, so where does that leave us? All of this may sound like a lot to take in at one time. Perhaps. The good news is that team development can be learned! However, it takes players who can pass the ‘passion test’ and coaches who understand and apply the art & science of team development to ultimately achieve winning results. And of course, it takes fan interest and support.

PART 1 – SHIP’S LOG – 10/2/24

U.S. Men’s Soccer Team’s Ship Hits *Leadership* Iceberg

From afar, it appears that the U.S. Men’s Soccer team’s ship hit a *leadership* iceberg. Like the Titanic’s 1912 sinking after hitting an iceberg, there were several warnings that went unheeded. Fortunately, the team’s ship did not sink. We don’t know the extent of damage to the ship and the status of its passengers. However, the ship’s captain and crew are listed as casualties.

We all know the team’s results this past Summer were not good. Their ship sailed in June with a captain (i.e., head coach), crew (i.e., assistant coaches), and passengers (i.e., players) who failed to produce results in 2024 Copa America.

Once the ship lost our course on the bridge, it was obvious to many that the captain would be replaced. Without a real captain in place, the team’s results in a pair of ‘friendly’ games in early September were not good as well. The ship appeared rudderless, drifting in the open sea. That’s when the ship hit the iceberg.

While the ship is in drydock, a new captain and crew have been brought in to ‘right the ship’ we hope. We don’t know how long the ship will be in drydock. We don’t know who the passengers will be. We know when the ship sails again later this Fall. And we know the destination.

When repaired and back in the water, we hope our ship no longer looks and feels like a *cruise* ship. Passengers on cruise ships experience many comforts, for example. Our newly repaired ship and its new passengers will be subject to an itinerary that should be viewed as challenging yet invigorating. After all, for the passengers, this will be a once in a lifetime opportunity to set sail on a truly immersive experience representing the United States, at home, in the 2026 Soccer World Cup. Of course, the voyage must include winning to be successful.

Now, with the hiring of a new captain and crew, time is of the essence. With only 20 months to get the team in World Cup competitive form, the captain will have to initially select passengers who are truly passionate about their journey. Once selected, how he ‘wins them over’ to perform at a higher level is the big question. He must find ways to leverage relationships (relationship building) to achieve this task. Why? He really doesn’t have time to introduce many new tactics. He doesn’t have the luxury to work with players in a rhythm and regularity he’s accustomed to as in ‘club’

soccer. He doesn't have many games with high level teams leading up to the World Cup to test his players. That really leaves his *leadership* as the remaining card to be played.

This will be his greatest leadership challenge as the ship's new captain. Here, I can recall the words of the late, management scholar, Warren Bennis, who once said that leadership is about relationships. And if he had to give everything up except for one thing, it would *not* be relationships (and relationship building)!

Some say it takes a village to raise a child. I would say the same thing here. It takes a village – and community - to develop a team such as the U.S. Men's Soccer team. With community you have togetherness. And togetherness, like relationships, will go a long way to help turn the ship around. Of course, it takes passengers who are passionate about their passage on this ship. Without passion, the passengers and the team will find it difficult to express their emotions in an intelligent way on the field. And emotion is a big part of winning in soccer – especially at this level!

Once again, I'm reminded of Apple TV+'s Ted Lasso who was able to achieve community, togetherness, player passion, and results using relationship building. It can be done. “Believe to achieve” would be Ted's message.

'Good luck and bon voyage' to our ship's new Captain, crew, and his passengers who have been selected to go on this incredible journey!

PART 2 – SHIP'S LOG – 11/27/24

The Sky is Not Falling for the United States Men's Soccer Team

Back in September I wrote and posted the article, *U.S. Men's Soccer Team's Ship Hits Leadership Iceberg*. This article was described as a team leadership fable. I wrote it to add some levity to the team's predicament once they got booted out of the 2024 Copa America soccer tournament on their home pitch. At the time, I was concerned that some of soccer's pundits were overreacting. Perhaps not. Only time will tell, as we all like to say.

Now that the team's ship has sailed after being 'refurbished' in dry dock, they appear to be heading on a course with calm waters in front of them for the time being. They recently picked up a pair of wins with their new captain (i.e., coach) in place. This was shortly after splitting a pair of friendly games as the new captain was being introduced to the ship's surroundings and passengers (i.e., players).

It now appears that our refurbished ship no longer looks and feels like a 'cruise' ship, as I described it in my earlier post. Would I now describe it as a battleship? Not really. But it feels like many comforts that passengers typically experience on cruise ships have been removed – and replaced in the form of new and/or heightened expectations set by the captain and his crew.

With the team's recent results, it appears that he has won them over to perform at a higher level. I'm guessing he is leveraging his personal power over his positional power. Personal power means *relationship building*, which is a big part of the leadership card he must play to be successful. Why? Time and opportunity are against him! Again, here I'm reminded of the words of the late, great management scholar, Warren Bennis, who said that "leadership is about relationships – and relationship building. And if he had to give everything up except for one thing, it would not be relationship building!"

With all of this said, however, if I was 'coaching' the coach I would remind him to focus on selecting passengers for this voyage who are truly passionate about their passage on this ship – invigorated about the opportunity to sail on a truly immersive experience representing the United States, at home, in 2026. This is a once in a lifetime journey that will not be repeated over the course of their playing careers!

It goes without saying that, without passion, passengers on this ship will find it difficult to express their emotions in positive ways on the playing field. Positive emotions support intelligent team play – especially at this level – generating winning results in soccer.

Once the team's ship sails again in March, we will be better positioned to see how the captain, his crew, and the passengers are performing. The process for producing team results will be in place with players who are hopefully committed to representing the United States in a competitive way – and help build fan support leading up to World Cup in June 2026.

PART 3 – SHIP'S LOG 3/27/25

The Art & Science of Why the US Men's National Soccer Team Lost Out in the 2025 Nations League Cup

Here's my take on why we lost out in the 2025 CONCACAF Nations League Cup. Once again, I've listened to the soccer pundits on YouTube and other platforms to hear what they have to say about the team's poor performance. Most of their rhetoric is directed at players who consistently do not show up with the aggressiveness, grit, determination, urgency, imagination, creativity, and the like to support winning soccer at this level. Along with blaming the players, their critique is now directed at the newly appointed coach (for the first time) and the fans (who are not showing up...).

As I mentioned in my earlier article (LinkedIn post 7/9/24, The Art & Science of Why the US Men's National Soccer Team Lost Out in 2024 Copa America), I spent many years working in the leadership & team development space. I must say again that this is hard work – and it takes time! This is especially true when it comes to team development! Yet, again, there seems to be little, if any, acknowledgement of this fact when it comes to this latest round of rhetoric.

If I look at this most recent critique of the team, I will describe the sum of the team's negative behaviors in leadership/team development parlance, as a lack of emotional intelligence (EQ). This is both good news and bad news. The good news is that EQ can be learned. The bad news is that it takes time.

EQ (i.e., self-awareness and motivation) in the context of soccer is critical to team success. It's a key component along with players and teams who possess high IQ (technical skills). We know that it's required at this level of soccer to help teams compete. Without EQ, players on the team find it difficult to express their emotions in positive ways to support intelligent play on the field. A key component of EQ is motivation (intrinsic) which can foster and help sustain passion. Again, as I said in my earlier article, passion – like motivation – is an energy that once seen or experienced, is perhaps the ultimate intangible in helping individuals and teams (and organizations) achieve results. It leads directly to commitment. Keep in mind that a player's passion is internally generated and highly personal. Period. And whether players' passion translates into the team's passion is another challenging question. It depends on the coach, the team's operating framework, team norms, team protocols and processes, and the like...all contributing factors that influence team passion (and development).

All of this is no different in the workplace when it comes to leader development and / or team development. Note, IQ is often described as the 'hard' skills and EQ is described as the 'soft' skills. Ironically, soft skills are harder to learn than the hard skills!

It needs to be said again that team development in organizations is hard work and it takes time. The same holds true for developing soccer teams that only succeed when they effectively collaborate. This requires a collaborative mind-set and skillset. Developing and leveraging a collaborative mind-set falls under the EQ umbrella. Its development is critical – and it trumps skillset when it comes to winning! Again, I'm reminded of Portland Timber's coach, Phil Neville, in his post-game pressers, who likes to describe success in soccer as 80% mental and 20% tactical.

Developing a collaborative mind-set requires discipline to apply team principles, along with essential competencies aligned with these principles. Principles like Focus on Team – Not Position, Seek-Out Skillful and Adaptable Players, and Coach Teams to Respond to Changing Conditions On Their Own, are just three out of several principles that must be in play for the team to demonstrate a collaborative mind-set. Essential competencies like Drive/Energy, Functional/Technical Expertise, Results Orientation, and Team Player are four out of a series of competencies that individuals/teams must learn and apply to demonstrate a collaborative skillset.

Okay, so where does that leave us? I could go on, but you get the gist of where I'm going here. We know that this team, often described as the 'golden' generation, may be a misrepresentation. This

team possesses individual players with mid-level technical skills who struggle to play as a team, along with low EQ. The new coach may be too arrogant to effectively lead. And the fans have scattered.

All of this may sound like a lot to take in at one time. Perhaps. The good news is that team development can be learned! However, it takes players who can pass the ‘passion test’ and coaches who understand and apply the art & science of player & team development to ultimately achieve winning results. And of course, it takes time. (If interested in reading my previous article(s), go to www.winsorjenkins.com/blog).

PART 4 – SHIP’S LOG – 9/10/25

***MISSION IMPOSSIBLE* for the U.S. Men’s National Soccer Team! Not So Fast My Friends?**

Last Fall, I started writing about the men’s soccer team after they were booted out of 2024 Copa America – and their head coach was fired. Two articles in this short series were written as fiction using a ‘ship’ metaphor to throw some levity at the situation. If interested, you can read these articles on my blog: www.winsorjenkins.com/blog

- U.S. Men’s Soccer Team’s Ship Hits Leadership Iceberg (Part 1)
- The Sky is Not Falling for the U.S. Men’s Soccer Team (Part 2)

In this article (Part 3), I pick up the ship’s journey after suffering through some trying times...losing in the Nations League and Gold Cup tournaments this past Spring/Summer. With only 8 months left before the World Cup starts in mid-June, the Captain and his Crew (i.e., Players) are sailing into unknown waters *and* weather that will challenge their journey.

With their recent performances in the ‘September Window’ there appears to be a flicker of hope for the team as they sail into calmer seas until the next Window in October. With a Captain who continues to navigate the ship with a Crew that may or may not be emotionally secure and intact, only time will tell if they can sail with the uncertainties of a life at sea.

With time being of the essence, the leadership challenge for the Captain will be steering the ship and crew through these emotional states. Will he and his Players be able to pass the ‘passion’ test, enabling them to progress on their journey? It starts with belief, leading to will and motivation. Obviously, the ship is no longer rudderless, yet the compass may be faulty.

Will the Captain be able to leverage relationships and relationship building to produce positive results? That has always been the question leading up to this tournament, since time and opportunity are against him! As I’ve said before (to paraphrase the late, great management

scholar, Warren Bennis), “leadership is about relationships. If I had to give everything up except for one thing, it would not be relationships - and relationship building!”

As the ship sails into the sunset and lays anchor heading into the October Window, we (i.e., fanbase) are left with the hope that it will be situated to avoid generating holes in the hull.

PART 5 – SHIPS LOG – 11/24/25

MISSION POSSIBLE for the U.S. Men’s Soccer Team in 2026!

In closing out 2025 I’m offering Part 4 in the fictional saga of the USMNT’s journey to produce a competitive soccer team in preparation for the 2026 World Cup. As you may recall, in this leadership fable, I used a ‘ship’ metaphor to throw some levity at what appeared to be a dire situation after being eliminated from 2024 Copa America.

- U.S. Men’s Soccer Team’s Ship Hits Leadership Iceberg (Part 1)
- The Sky is Not Falling for the U.S. Men’s Soccer Team (Part 2)
- MISSION IMPOSSIBLE for the U.S. Men’s Soccer Team! Not so fast, my friends (Part 3)

In this article (Part 4), I pick up the ship’s journey after completing the October and November windows, tying one game and winning the last three out of four games played. Going into these two windows, there appeared to be a flicker of hope for the team based on results in the September window with a loss and a win – producing the start of a five-game unbeaten run! The ship had been sailing in calmer seas leading up to these windows. ‘El Capitan’ appeared to be in control of the ship, the crew (assistant coaches), and passengers (players) for the first time since taking over the helm. The ship is no longer rudderless, and the captain’s navigational skills have produced positive results. The passengers appear to be more passionate about their journey, emotionally intact, and committed.

Time and opportunity remain as critical issues for the ship heading into 2026. With only six months and a few friendly games remaining to prepare the team, the captain must continue to leverage ‘relationship building’ to produce passengers who play with a ‘mindset’ that avoids generating holes in the ship’s hull. Developing ‘mindset over skillset’ has always been the captain’s key challenge since he came onboard. Why? Because of time constraints, our captain has been limited in player interactions and has not been able to introduce much on the tactical/skill building side of things. With mindset in place, it leads to passengers (players) to effectively collaborate, functioning interdependently, harnessing the power of their connections on the pitch. Developing a collaborative mindset calls for applying several team principles, listed in no order and in-play all the time:

Focus on Team – Not Position: Addresses the need to focus on results produced when all positions effectively interact on the business field.

Understand That Everyone Can Play: Recognizes that technology is the great enabler allowing people everywhere – to play...to collaborate....in business.

Embrace Diversity: Represents the prerequisite for partnering in global business...and serves as a springboard for establishing trust... Diversity brings strength to teams.

Rely On Each Other: Reinforces the team orientation...minimizes the silo mindset...recognizing a “mutual” dependency between people...promoting genuine collaboration.

Promote Both Individual & Team Values: Deals with managing both values in a never-ending cycle to help ensure that the process for producing team results is working.

Seek-Out Skillful, Adaptable Players: Promotes the need for flexibility for managing change...requires people and teams who can quickly assimilate and use new skills, information and the like...and recognizes that multiple skills are needed to play the game of business.

Charge the Team to Perform the Work: Recognizes the self-directed nature of the team charged with performing the work; recognizes the team’s performance during the game (business) is left up to the team;

Empower Players to Win: Speaks to the commitment to develop all employees, to provide continuous feedback - all to help position people to make better decisions.

Coach Teams to Respond to Changing Conditions on Their Own: Reinforces the application of a real team, self-directed, operating on a real-time basis...responding to changing conditions.

Develop Partners on The Field: Recognizes that all players on the business field are viewed as leaders...views every opportunity as a leadership development step.

Achieve Cross-Cultural Agility: Calls for leveraging relationships in business to achieve results...transcending technique in dealing with people across cultures.

Team principles can be learned and are foundational in developing a mindset that promotes team collaboration.

Once again, as the ship sails into the sunset and lays anchor heading into the next window (March 2026) leading up to the 2026 World Cup, we (i.e., fanbase) are left with hope for a safe journey.

PART 6 - SHIP’S LOG: 3-18-26

***Culture Typically Eats Strategy for Lunch!* How Will This Play-out for the U.S. Men’s National Soccer Team in the 2026 World Cup?**

As the U.S. men’s national soccer team’s ship prepares to leave the dock to play a pair of friendly matches in late March, the countdown for the team to complete final preparations for the upcoming World Cup in July has begun. There are only 109 days left before the team plays its first game on June 12. Note, the team’s ship will dock in Los Angeles and play its first three games on the West Coast to start the tournament.

The ship appears to be positioned to finalize preparations with the two friendly matches coming up on March 28 and March 31. The captain and his crew (coaches) will have to wrap up their selection of passengers (players) for the friendlies who are truly passionate about their journey heading into the friendlies. Once completed, there is little the captain and his crew can do heading into the World Cup except to play the 'leadership' card. This has always been the captain's biggest challenge since coming onboard. That's because he never had the luxury of working with passengers in a rhythm and regularity he's accustomed to as in 'club' soccer.

Like Ted Lasso who came into a new job with limited time and played the relationship card to achieve team results, the captain's leadership card must focus on 'relationship building' to support the development of the team's 'culture' and achieve community, togetherness, and passenger *and* team passion. In Ted's case we really don't know how he acquired the knowledge to deal with people on a relationship basis. I suspect it came from his upbringing along with trial & error on the job while coaching American football at some level. To say he possessed high emotional intelligence (EQ) would be spot-on! His personality (i.e., friendly nature) certainly played a huge part in the equation...with an ego that was in-check. He had great instincts for dealing with people. Unfortunately, we don't really know much about our captain's makeup and personality to be able to pull off a 'Ted Lasso' like performance.

As I said in an earlier article, 'team development' is hard work and it takes time! Unless you're someone like Ted Lasso, the captain and his crew will need to learn and understand team culture and how it works to avoid *torpedoing* their ship leading up to the World Cup. Perhaps they already know how. Again, we really don't know. Soccer's pundits don't appear to know this and/or have failed to acknowledge this fact over the past eighteen months! They continue to press for winning results as a key measure of team success versus demonstrating a process orientation. This may be their game plan to help generate fan support which appears to be an issue leading up to the tournament.

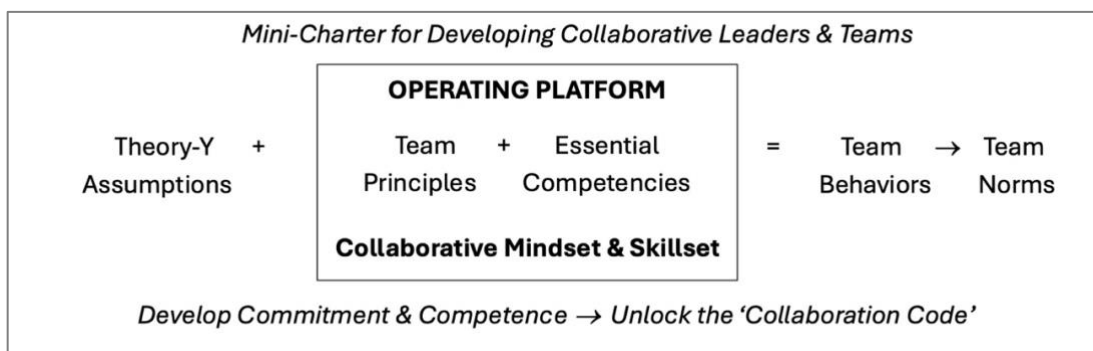
Why is culture critical, you ask? Because culture is "something that eats strategy for lunch," the late, management guru, [Peter Drucker](#), once stated. I believe he was the first one to make this statement back in the 1950's. Having worked at senior levels in corporate America for 30+ years, I can testify to his claim. Time and time again, I saw culture at the organization, group, and team levels defeat strategy. This was always a hard lesson to learn. It turned out to be a gamechanger.

I think it's fair to say that most of us don't really understand the term, culture. Back in the day, people described culture "as the way things are done around here." In the context of this story, I describe culture as a *torpedo* that carries the ability to destroy or at least undermine the team's performance if left unintended to by the captain. With that said, let's look 'inside' this explosive warhead that, if launched, that can cause harm to the team's ship.

Most of us tend to oversimplify culture’s meaning and application, describing it as something ‘soft’ versus ‘hard’ (i.e., I know it when I see it). I fall back on the words of renown culture expert, [Edgar Schein](#),¹ who described culture as a “pattern of assumptions (i.e., beliefs) created by a group as it deals with its problems.” According to Schein, they serve as the core to shape values and eventually, influence behaviors. For that reason, the importance of underlying assumptions cannot be underestimated – especially in the context of team development and collaboration on the pitch.

When we extend Douglas McGregor’s Theory-X & Theory-Y Model² to our understanding of culture, it’s critical to apply Theory-Y or ‘positive’ underlying assumptions. For example, does the captain, crew, and passengers on the ship believe that their shipmates have the potential to add value? Again, this is critical to achieving success since Theory-Y assumptions are directly linked to team values. Left unattended, the captain, crew, and passengers may show up with Theory-X or negative assumptions about the potential of shipmates to add value and end up *torpedoing* the ship.

In my book, *Game of Teams*, I’ve laid out a pathway that can be used by the captain of *any* ship to support the development of a ship’s team culture. Described as a ‘Mini-Charter’ this framework is illustrated below.



Again, Theory-Y assumptions are embedded at the front end of the framework – followed by an Operating Platform. A brief description of the Operating Platform is described below for the captain, crew, and passengers to learn and apply.

The **Operating Platform** is the combination of **Team Principles** with **Essential Competencies**. The Principles support the development of a ‘collaborative mindset’ and the Competencies support the development of a ‘collaborative skillset’.

¹ Schein, Edgar. 1986. *Organization Culture and Leadership* (Jossey Bass).

² McGregor, Douglas. 1960. *The Human Side of Enterprise*. (McGraw Hill Book Company, Inc.)

It's important here to mention that, "developing an alternative (i.e., collaborative) mindset must be learned. It can't be simply inserted as new software."³ This advice comes from management thought leader, physicist, and author, [Danah Zohar](#). She goes on to say that, "it's a very realistic alternative to learn and apply – especially with the help of a ('external') coach." So, for the captain, crew, and passengers, you may have some work to do. If so, this framework will help.

Team Principles help shape both individual and team decisions regarding Essential Competencies and ultimately behaviors to support team performance. Team Principles like Focus On Team – Not Position, Seek-Out Skillful & Adaptable Players, and Coach Teams to Respond to Changing Conditions on Their Own, are just three out of several principles that must *all* be in-play for passengers on the ship to demonstrate a collaborative mindset. The principles come from the game of soccer, and they mirror a successful soccer team's behaviors and actions on the pitch.

Essential Competencies aligned with the principles support the development of a collaborative skillset. Drive & Energy (i.e., Passion) Adaptability (or Agility), Communicativeness, Empathy, Learning Agility, and Relationship Building are a few of the competencies in the Operating Platform's inventory. The competencies in this platform originated from the Polaris® Competency Model.⁴ The model's creator, [Bruce Griffiths](#), describes a competency as the "combination of knowledge, skills, and motivations needed for a given role" – in this case soccer players (at the professional/international level).

Note, that **Relationship Building** is the number one competency in the platform! This is important to note since the captain and crew will continue to have limited face-to-face interactions with passengers. *This places a premium on Relationship Building to build team culture versus tactics and strategy!*

Armed with Theory-Y Assumptions and the Operating Platform, the team is well positioned to crack the 'collaboration-code' and produce behaviors to support team performance. This includes developing **Team Norms** (i.e., ground rules). Team Norms – like *psychological safety* – are critical for making a team really work.⁵ Empathy and Communications were found to be key competencies for creating psychological safety.⁶ These were competencies that Ted Lasso exhibited. Both are included in the Operating Platform, and they also help to support the development of the team's *emotional intelligence (EQ)*. It should be said that a players's ability to express emotions in a positive way on the field is a big part of winning in soccer *at this level!*

³ Zohar, Danah. 2009. An Alternative Sports Metaphor for Understanding Teamwork as Complex: Soccer. Retrieved from Journal, Emergent Publications.com

⁴ Polaris Competency Model is a product of Organization Systems International (OSI).

⁵ See Google Study: *Project Aristotle*. 2012.

⁶ See Google Study: *Project Aristotle*. 2012.

In wrapping up this article, it's fair to say that the captain and crew have taken steps to address the team's culture and its development leading up to these friendlies in late March. The ship no longer feels like a *cruise* ship with passengers experiencing many comforts. Although it's not the battleship we were all hoping to see, it feels like the captain has clarified passenger performance expectations. The team has generated some success in recent games with competitive performances. And, passenger selection is finally coming to a close...hopefully with passengers who are truly passionate about their voyage. What remains is the opportunity for the captain and his crew to leverage 'relationship building' with passengers to achieve community and generate team passion in the hope of producing a culture that can succeed in a highly competitive environment.

PART 7 - SHIP'S LOG: 3-25-26

Competing Against 'Unconscious Competence' in the 2026 Men's Soccer World Cup: How Will this Play-out for the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team?

As the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team prepares to compete in the upcoming World Cup, they will be challenged to win against teams that perform individual *and* team skills effortlessly and automatically without conscious thought on the pitch. Described as 'unconscious' competence⁷ this may represent the team's missing link to winning at this level!

Because 'players play, but teams win' in soccer, I would add that this is more challenging for the U.S. Men's team when applying team skills versus individual skills on the pitch. In both applications we're talking about skills that are intuitive. That is, if players on the team must think about how to apply skills in each moment on the pitch, it's too late! They've lost the opportunity to move the ball on the field, score a goal, and the like!

With that said, it's fair to say that the team has progressed and played at a level described as 'conscious competent' – performing both individual and team-based skills with a high focus in recent games (since the Fall, 2025). Unfortunately, this level will not help the team advance through the World Cup.

For the U.S. Men's team, the application of team skills at this level requires team-based values to support a 'mindset' focused on team collaboration. In my books (*The Collaborator and Game of Teams*), I've talked about the importance of developing a 'collaborative mindset' and how that must be learned versus simply inserting it as new software. Because most of us in the USA have

⁷**The Four Stages of Competence** learning model was developed by Noel Birch in the 1970s. The stages are: **(1) Unconscious Incompetence** (not knowing what you don't know); **(2) Conscious Incompetence** (realizing a skill gap); **(3) Conscious Competence** (performing the skill with a high focus); and **(4) Unconscious Competence** (performing the skill automatically).

been conditioned to promote individual values at the expense of team values at work, in school, etc., it's difficult to change mindsets at the flip of a switch and perform effortlessly and thoughtfully without conscious thought.

This also gets us back to understanding culture not only at the organizational/team level, but at the international level. For the U.S. Men's team, we know that 'team' culture typically eats strategy for lunch. At the international level, countries like Spain leverage their 'national' culture to promote teamwork. This makes it possible for people growing up with the game of soccer to embrace teamwork's values in a way that produces players who demonstrate 'unconscious competence' in the World Cup.

PART 8 - SHIP'S LOG: 3-30-26

Players Play, But Teams Win in World Cup Soccer: What's Next for the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team Leading Up to the 2026 World Cup?

As the ship (team) left port heading east, the weather conditions were good. Before starting their voyage, the captain (Coach), crew (Assistant Coaches), and passengers (Players) were feeling good about recent results and expectations heading into their two friendlies coming up on March 28 and March 31. They had performed well in four of their last five games, although it should be said that their opponents were playing with 'alternative' lineups made up of many players who were not first team players. Because they already qualified for the World Cup, these teams had no need to play first team players. Nonetheless, the team was optimistic; they believed they were good.

Once in open seas and heading to face their first opponent on March 28, craft advisories were issued with potentially dangerous hazards reported for inexperienced operators. Choppy conditions were now forecasted with the absence of a few key players due to injury. At the helm, the captain adjusted the ship's bearings to position the ship to win. Unfortunately, after maintaining control of their vessel in the first half of the game, the ship performed in a rudderless manner in the second half, making too many mistakes, lacking execution when they had possession of the ball, and playing poor defense. To say that the ship was torpedoed would be an understatement as they gave up 4 goals in the second half!

To also say that the ship was hijacked in open seas due to easterly swells would be accurate. Passengers failed to play with purpose, play with any rhythm when they had the ball, and play with grit. The captain (and crew) did not figure things out for the passengers in a pragmatic way during the game, leaving the ship exposed to gale force winds. In retrospect, it looks like they ended up playing the eleven best players to start the match versus playing the best 'collective' on the ship. Here, they need to be reminded that, *in soccer players play, but teams win!* It's a simple game

comprised of 11 committed and passionate players who perform best as a ‘collective’ to effectively collaborate on the pitch.

There are many lessons to learn from this first match. One that comes to mind deals with the lack of response on the part of the team and coach to respond to changing conditions on the field once they scored the first goal in the match. After that, their opponent made changes in their team play and responded in positive ways to score five goals in the last sixty-minutes of the match to win, 5 – 2. This plays into one in a series of team principles laid out in my books, *The Collaborator and Game of Teams: Coach Teams to Respond to Changing Conditions on Their Own*. These principles support the development of a collaborative mindset needed to effectively collaborate as a team on the pitch.

Alarms have been sounded by many of soccer’s pundits. The coach needs to get pragmatic, they can’t beat elite teams, and players need to ‘up’ the level of their game, are a few of their comments. To which I say, it’s too late to prepare for the next elite opponent coming up on March 31. At this point in time all teams competing in the Cup have moved into World Cup mode, which is now only 73 days away for the U.S. Men’s National Soccer Team.

PART 9 - SHIP’S LOG: 4- 4-26

‘Make Good Better’ is the Key Challenge for the U.S. Men’s National Soccer Team in the 2026 World Cup?

With only a few months left before the start of the World Cup, the team must focus on making good, better! It’s not a case of going from good to great or arguing that good is the enemy of great, to echo the words of Jim Collins, author of the bestselling business book, *Good To Great*.

This is not to say that we should lower expectations for the U.S. Men’s team. Rather, we need a reality check. Using the team’s past performance as a predictor of future performance, this is all we have left to leverage in hopes that the team can produce competitive performances starting in June.

The team has two remaining games to play before they start their World Cup journey on June 12. On May 31 they play Senegal and on June 6 they play Germany. Going into these games the team will have their final roster in place for the first time! These games provide a final tuneup for the team; an opportunity to calibrate the team’s structure in hopes of establishing a performance baseline in the World Cup. As I wrote in my last article, *Players Play, But Teams Win in World Cup Soccer*, the U.S. Men’s team needs to find a way to leverage the ‘collective’ on the pitch. That is the only way they can effectively compete – and win!

If we look at some of the ‘good’ U.S. Men’s teams from the past when players like Clint Dempsey, Tim Howard, Landon Donovan, and others played in World Cup tournaments, their team(s) exhibited a ‘grind and grit’ mindset and skillset focused on team collaboration that made them hard to beat. Did they have the best players in the world or the best coach(s)? No. But they were able to take a weakness and turn it into a strength when they leveraged the collective to compete against superior teams.

With the 2026 World Cup hosted by the USA, Canada, and Mexico, expectations have been high for the team to demonstrate success and win in the tournament. Everyone wants this tournament to be the ‘tipping point’ for the game of soccer in the USA. Unfortunately, now ‘success’ appears to be limited to surviving in what is called the Group Stage, where three out of the top four teams advance to the next round. Note that winning the Group Stage at one point was an expectation expressed by most of soccer’s pundits and talking heads based on the team’s solid performances leading up to the ‘March’ Window. However, with the team losing their two friendly games in the March window and the coach’s ongoing tinkering with lineups, structure, and tactics at this late stage in their journey, there remains less hope for team success.

We all want to see success for the U.S. Men’s Soccer team like it’s been experienced by the U.S. Women’s Soccer teams and the U.S. Men’s and Women’s Hockey teams who recently won Gold Medals in the Olympics. Without going through a full-blown review and analysis of those teams, their team cultures, and their team’s coaches, for example, it is hard to compare the current situation for the U.S. Men’s Soccer team – except to say that those teams appeared to have leveraged the ‘collective’ to compete and win!

Fingers crossed...

Winsor Jenkins is a 3x Award-Winning Author of *The Collaborator: Discover Soccer as a Metaphor for Global Business Leadership – and Game of Teams: Discover How to Become a Collaborative Leader*. His books are available on Amazon in both e-book and paperback.