

SHIP'S LOG: 12-31-25

THE USMNT'S JOURNEY TO THE 2026 WORLD CUP

(A TEAM LEADERSHIP FABLE)



Over the past 18 months I've written a series of 'fictional' articles on the exploits of the United States Men's National Soccer Team (USMNT). My purpose was to throw some 'levity' at a situation often described by soccer's pundits as dire considering the upcoming 2026 World Cup.

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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.

Marketing the 2026 Men's Soccer World Cup Starts Here & Now!

Recently, I heard a leading soccer pundit mention the need to get people excited about the 2026 Men's Soccer World Cup. To paraphrase he said, "we need to prepare now – on and off the field...marketing the tournament to get people excited." This was said around the time it was announced a new coach was being hired soon to lead the team. And the United States, along with Canada and Mexico were hosting the event.

When I first heard this, I was slightly concerned. We just finished watching (and hosting) the 2024 Copa America tournament. People were also watching the European Championship (UEFA 2024) on TV, hosted by Germany, which overlapped that event. And the League's Cup was launched shortly thereafter on July 26 (through August 25), played in the United States between clubs from Major League Soccer and Liga MX (Mexico). Wow! That's a lot of soccer to take-in over the course of one summer. Had we reached the saturation point (leading into the NFL and College Football seasons, to boot)?

But you know, I believe he's right about the need to start the marketing process now. We are only twenty-two months away from the start of the 2026 Men's Soccer World Cup (on June 11 through July 19). Obviously, the hiring of a new 'international' coach should get United States fans excited in the short term and help jump-start the process to build fan support. After watching the 2024 Copa America, we will be challenged to match the fan support generated by teams from Columbia and Argentina, for example.

So, what does marketing look like in the context of the 2026 Men's Soccer World Cup? Back in the day when I was a college student, I was introduced to a marketing framework called the '4-P's' (otherwise known as, Product – Place – Price – Promotion). This was the formula (marketing mix) for introducing a new product or service. It seems clear to me that the first three 'Ps' in this framework are well established heading into the next World Cup. Soccer's World Cup represents the Product; the United States, Canada, and Mexico represent the Place; and Price is nonnegotiable. That leaves Promotion as the remaining 'P' in the mix to manage. But wait, what if we change the Product from Soccer's World Cup to United States men's soccer. What happens to the marketing mix (dynamics)? If the United States men's team is competitive, that should be a positive in the eyes of the United States fan-base – and should help to build fan support. If they are not competitive as perceived by the fans, perhaps fan support will not grow leading up the World Cup – leaving the fourth 'P' in limbo! Just something to think about since the United States men's team has limited time and opportunity to deal with changing perceptions, if needed. Hence the need to get a new and highly qualified coach hired asap.

If we are left with the fourth 'P' in the mix (Promotion), that gets us to the heart of the marketing matter. And this is where soccer's governing body in the United States needs to start investing their time and resources to convince the public that this sport offers

benefits (value) beyond pure entertainment for 4-5 weeks. As I have argued for in the past, the 'beautiful game' offers value-added benefits that can serve the needs of the business community, for example, in today's highly complex global world where teams and team-based applications continue to grow in the workplace. The game offers an opportunity for people, struggling to achieve results on teams in the workplace, to see how a team effectively collaborates to achieve success. Described as soccer's metaphor, I like to promote it to help people learn how to build a collaborative mind-set to effectively collaborate. It's that simple.

The idea of leveraging a sport (and its metaphor) to generate change in how people think and act is not new. Nelson Mandela, for example, was one who promoted sport (Rugby) to unite a nation (South Africa), replacing apartheid with democracy in South Africa. Great Britain popularized soccer back in the 1800s to prepare people to work as a team throughout their worldwide enterprise called the British Empire. And American football – and its metaphor – have been a big part of American culture since the early 1900s to describe business and leadership – reinforcing individual values & achievement, along with command & control leadership – over team values & achievement and collaborative leadership.

Okay, so where does that leave us – or should I say soccer's governing body? Obviously, it leaves them with a couple of choices. One response is to stay the course (whatever that looks like...), hoping for the best in the short term. The other is to start the process to market the game as a value-added benefit (with longer term implications) in support of the business community and its workforce who are at risk if we can't find ways to effectively collaborate. After all, globalization cannot survive without collaboration!

Hiring the United States Men's Soccer Coach Starts Here!

Apple TV's Ted Lasso was a great leader! Although his soccer IQ was very low, his leadership EQ was very high. *And that's how he won the day.* As one of my good friends who works in the leadership & talent development arena would say, "he was accessible, authentic, relatable, approachable, personable, purpose driven with a moral compass, and much more. And it would be a good series for a leadership development course!" I would also add that he demonstrated a real ability to connect and establish relationships with people (i.e., the public, press, fanbase, etc.), not just players on the team. All of this defines leaders like Ted Lasso who possess high leader EQ, otherwise known as Emotional Intelligence.

Having said that, if I was searching for a new United States men's soccer coach, I would look for someone with high leader EQ, along with high soccer IQ. But, if I had to give something up here, I would *not* compromise on high leader EQ. Make sense? Here's why.

The United States men's national team has a very short window to come together in a way that makes them 'World Cup' competitive. Because we're talking about a national team and not a club team, the new coach will have a limited amount of interaction with the players between now (or when hired and gets his feet on the ground) and the start of the World Cup on June 11, 2026! He will not be able to introduce too much on the tactical side of the game to the team. That is, he will have to keep things basic and play what soccer pundits call a direct style. It may not be very exciting to watch, but that's the reality of the situation. This means, the need for a new coach with a high soccer IQ will not necessarily be required. Perhaps the opportunity to hire an assistant coach(s) with high soccer IQ – and delegate the 'tactical' work is an answer. It certainly worked for Ted Lasso. Keep in mind, good leaders staff to offset their weaknesses and know how to effectively delegate!

This gets us back to hiring a new coach with high leader EQ. Like Ted Lasso, he will need to leverage Emotional Intelligence to get the most out of players on the team and win the day. Here, I would fall back on the work of author, Daniel Goleman and his team, who have been leaders in developing an emotional intelligence model for 'learning to lead' with emotional intelligence.¹ His model describes several competencies for developing self-awareness and leader EQ. Self-Confidence, Empathy, Optimism, and Teamwork & Collaboration are just a few competencies in his EQ model. *Here, I would argue that Ted Lasso's character in the series demonstrated competence in applying all the competencies in Goleman's model to succeed!* (Perhaps the people who wrote and produced this series followed Goleman's model. Just saying...) Note, Goleman and others

¹ See, *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee. Boston, MA 2002, Harvard Publishing.

have made it abundantly clear that managers who don't succeed typically lack self-awareness – a necessary *underpinning* for developing and realizing high leader EQ! His work and model are widely used throughout the world by organizations, consultants, and coaches specializing in leadership & team development and coaching.

At the end of the day, I hope our new coach understands that his initial leadership challenge is not to technique players to death, but to lead with emotional intelligence. That way, he can build relationships that serve the best interests of the team leading up to the 2026 Soccer World Cup.

Coaching the United States Men's Soccer Coach Starts Here!
(A Team Leadership Fable – Part 1)

So, you heard I've been hired to coach the new U.S. Men's Soccer coach. I was selected after meeting with him last week. Soccer's governing body told me two weeks ago they wanted to hire a coach who could hit the ground running since time was of the essence. They also told me that he has high soccer IQ but low leader EQ (emotional intelligence)! I'm curious to learn what low leader EQ looks like for him. How does he interact with people, for example?

I'm excited to take-on this challenge, but it sounds rather ominous to say the least. Looks like I've got my work cut out to help him build his leader EQ. Reminds me of Apple TV's Ted Lasso, along with his coaches and players who were introduced to therapist, Dr. Sharon Fieldstone, in season two. Her key challenge was taking on Ted and dealing with his issues, not really knowing anything about him except for his uber positive personality.

Coaching the new coach means dealing with the pressure to succeed since it's a public figure that people and the media follow closely. You can bet they will closely scrutinize his actions. Unlike Dr Sharon, however, who had to deal with each client's history, my key challenge will be focused on identifying and eliminating 'blind spots' that surface in the coach's behavior, interfering with his effectiveness to perform as the team's new coach and leader. Again, the endgame here is to build his *self-awareness* leading to high leader EQ.

So, what exactly is a blind spot, you ask? Simply put, I describe it as a behavior others see (or perceive) about our coach, but he doesn't. Because he does not, his blind spot interferes with his performance. It could be anything he is not aware of, impacting his work (and life). Even an overuse of a strength!

Typically, 'leadership' blind-spots show up in the form of interpersonal competencies. Examples include, Active Listening, Self-Objectivity, Empathy, Relationship Building, Sensitivity, Assertiveness, and Conflict Management, just to name a few. Most likely this is where I expect most of my work with our coach to end up when it's all said and done.

My plan is to work with our coach using several established and trusted models and tools to create a baseline. The feedback here will expedite our work together. Note, as much as I prefer to leverage and lead with relationship-building to gain a client's trust early in a coaching engagement, I will be limited in doing so in this assignment because of time constraints.

To get us started, I will have our new coach complete a Myers-Brigg Type Indicator (MBTI) survey to help establish his profile. The result will provide insights to understand his 'natural' preferences (i.e., personality) when it comes to communicating, taking in

information, making decisions, and organizing work. Oftentimes, one's natural preferences can become a blind spot. Say, for example, his profile described him as someone who prefers introversion. This could affect his communications with people (e.g., verbal cues, mannerisms, and how he relates to others). Understanding his personality and how it affects how he behaves is all part of building his self-awareness and emotional intelligence as a coach and leader.

At the same time, I will introduce our coach to the Polaris® Competency Model. It's a model developed by colleague, Bruce Griffiths², who I've worked with for twenty-plus years. He is President, Organizational Systems International (www.orgsysint.com). Polaris has a 30-year track record. It's a very user-friendly model with 41 competencies that can be customized to meet my coach's needs. I will have our coach do a 'card-sort' exercise using all 41 competencies in the model. Cards are sorted into three levels: exceptional, proficient, and needs development. This is a good way for him to describe his perceived strengths and weakness – or developmental opportunities as he takes on his new role as team coach and leader. Again, this will help establish his performance baseline.

Next, I will share Daniel Goleman's EQ Model³ with our coach, using it as a map to describe what it takes to develop high leader EQ. Goleman's Model describes four domains or clusters: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Note, self-awareness is an *underpinning* for developing and realizing high leader EQ. Also note, each domain has several competencies that can be used to identify blind-spots and developmental opportunities – many of which overlap with the Polaris competencies.

Perhaps another option to consider early in this process is to do a 'leader transition' meeting with the coach's direct reports. If we do this, I may elect to bring in Bruce Griffiths and his team to facilitate this offsite meeting, designed to accelerate the coach's transition into the organization. Something to think about once we see my client's initial response to the coaching process.

Enough said for now. Tomorrow's the big day when we start the coaching process. My hope is that he 'runs with the ball' and wholeheartedly embraces our work together.

² Bruce Griffiths is a recognized thought leader in the leadership and talent development arena. He is the coauthor of two books, *Competencies at Work* and *Redefining Competency Based Education*.

³ See, *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman. Bantam. 2005.

Coaching the United States Men's Soccer Coach Starts Here! (PART 2) **(A Team Leadership Fable)**

Whoever said that big names bring big egos was spot on (in hiring)! Fortunately, this is not the case so far in 'coaching the coach' whose ego appears to be in-check.

We're just getting into week two of my coaching assignment. So far, so good. My client has been receptive to the idea of establishing a performance baseline, used to help build his *self-awareness* so he can develop and realize high emotional intelligence (EQ) as the team's new coach. He understands too that achieving this is a derivative of doing many things right.

Two established and trusted tools I used to help jump-start his coaching process have been completed: a Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) survey and a Card-Sort exercise using competencies from the Polaris® Competency Model.⁴ As mentioned in my previous post, the MBTI survey is used to describe my client's personality. The Card-Sort exercise is a way for him to practice self-reflection and identify perceived strengths and weakness. My plan calls for us to review his results when we meet tomorrow.

After completing the MBTI survey, he's described as someone with an ISTJ personality profile. Basically, this means he prefers introversion over extroversion to get his energy (from within), sensing over intuition to gather information, thinking over feeling to make decisions, and structure (i.e., planning) over keeping things open ended in his work and life. When we meet, however, I will need to convince him that there is much more to understand here and will do so over time in our future coaching sessions. Until then, his results, once confirmed, are more of a benefit to me as his coach. Make sense?

With the Polaris Card-Sort exercise, he was asked to list 41 competencies across three categories: Exceptional, Proficient, and Needs Improvement. My primary focus here is on those competencies listed under Needs Improvement to identify potential blind spots. Those competencies are Adaptability, Communicativeness, Delegation, Influence, Problem Solving & Decision Making, Relationship Building, and Risk Taking

Although competencies listed as Exceptional (i.e., strengths) are not a concern now, we need to keep in mind that a strength can become a weakness, if overused. This was the case with Apple TV+'s, Ted Lasso, whose friendly nature and uber positive personality interfered with his judgement at times – especially when it came down to personal decision making.

⁴ See, Organizational Systems International (www.orgsysint.com) to learn more about the Polaris Competency Model and the Card-Sort Exercise.

Again, once we talk and confirm that those competencies ‘needing improvement’ are correct, we can take the next step(s). This includes targeting developmental actions he can take in the near term.

Without running the risk of getting ahead of the process, I suspect there may also be a need to work with him to develop a collaborative mind-set to support his team’s collaboration efforts. Note, I only mention this because he listed *Influence* and *Adaptability* as two competencies needing improvement. Both are essential to support team collaboration! For example, embedded in the competency, *Influence*, is the ability to adapt his leadership style to direct players (i.e., crack the whip as several players have declared recently!) or collaborate and empower players as the situation requires. Embedded in the competency, *Adaptability*, is the ability to change his behavior when appropriate to achieve the organization’s objectives. Because he and his team have limited time before the 2026 World Cup to fully develop their competitive form, most likely he will have to change any number of things (e.g., behaviors) he’s used in the past to achieve success – including tactics – to meet the team and/or organization’s objectives in the short term.

One more exercise for our coach to complete tomorrow as part of establishing his performance baseline pertains to checking his underlying assumptions. Here, I use a framework introduced by Douglas McGregor called, Theory X-Theory Y.⁵ His framework deals with underlying assumptions people bring to the table and how they influence the task of managing people. Theory Y assumptions are described as positive assumptions about people and Theory X assumptions are described as negative assumptions. *Believing* in the potential of people to get the job done (Theory Y) is required by our new coach to succeed. Why? They are the source of values – and eventually behaviors according to Edgar Schein, a world-renowned expert⁶ So, this link is critical to understand how our new coach interacts with people in the organization and players. This is especially true in the case of winning over players on the team. As Ted Lasso reminded us, one must *believe to achieve!*

⁵ See, *Human Side of Enterprise* (1960).

⁶ See, *Organization Culture and Leadership* (2010).

Coaching the United States Men's Soccer Coach Starts Here!

(A Team Leadership Fable – Part 3)

Wrapping up week three now with coaching the coach. We're on a mission to build his self-awareness. The endgame is to achieve high leader EQ (emotional intelligence), enabling him to fully function as the team's coach. Keep in mind, he came to this opportunity with high soccer IQ and low leader EQ.

For our coach, building self-awareness starts by understanding how his underlying assumptions, values and personality affect his behavior – and eventually the team's performance. Here, I'm reminded of an 'iceberg' graphic introduced by colleague, Bruce Griffiths,⁷ many years ago. He uses it as a metaphor to help people understand the visible and hidden parts of a competency. I've used it numerous times in my leadership and coaching work. As you can see below, underlying assumptions, values, and personality lie below the surface of the water, all hidden components. Behavior sits above the surface, visible for all of us to see.



Note, all three of these components are part of our coach's newly established performance baseline. This graphic provides a concise way (i.e., visual) to help him connect the dots and get comfortable with 'internal' relationships he needs to understand and manage. It should also help gain his added buy-in to the process we've started. Make sense?

After meeting with our coach today, we have established that: (1) he has Theory Y, positive assumptions about people; (2) he has a Myers-Briggs personality profile described as ISTJ; and, (3) he has six competencies listed as needs improvement; Adaptability, Communicativeness, Delegation, Influence, Relationship Building, and Risk Taking (all possible blind spots).

At this point in coaching the coach, I feel good about his responsiveness to the coaching and eagerness to learn. *His self-awareness is starting to grow!* Moving forward, there are a couple of items for us to review to continue building self-awareness. The first deals with the competency, *Influence*, that he identified as needing improvement – mentioned in my

⁷ Bruce Griffiths is President, Organizational Systems International (www.orgsysint.com) in San Diego, CA.

last post (9/4/24). Here, he needs to understand that flexibility in his leadership style is needed to effectively influence players on the team. The idea that a single style such as ‘directing’ can be applied in all situations is not effective. This will require him to learn and develop a new skill to execute leadership flexibility. Time permitting, there is a program he can attend. Otherwise, I can step out of my coaching role and teach him since I’m a certified facilitator in the program.

Okay, that leaves us with gaining his understanding of why *Relationship Building* (a competency needing improvement) is so important to his success and like *Influence*, critical to achieving high leader EQ! This gets us back to Daniel Goleman’s EQ Model,⁸ introduced in an earlier Post (8/29/24), where both competencies show up under the ‘Relationship Management’ domain. Competence in this domain enables him to achieve high leader EQ. Perhaps the ultimate challenge in Goleman’s model, getting there is a derivative of doing many things right. As someone described as a quiet Introvert, he will need to find ways to move beyond his comfort zone to extend himself to others. More on that later.

Because of the limited amount of time left for our coach to get his team in World Cup competitive form, placing an emphasis on *Relationship Building* will be demanding. Yet, he and the team will be at risk if he can’t find ways to leverage relationships (and relationship building) to win over players. This may be his greatest *leadership* challenge as the team’s new coach. At the end of the day, I’m reminded of Apple TV+’s Ted Lasso who was able to leverage relationship building to win over players, the press, and the fans to succeed. I’m also reminded of the late leadership scholar, Warren Bennis, who back in the day, 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 relationships (and relationship building).”

⁸ See, *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence* (2002).

U.S. Men's Soccer Team's Ship Hits *Leadership* Iceberg **(A Team Leadership Fable)**

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!

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.

Spurred On By the 2025 United States Men's National Soccer Team – or Not!

If you agree that 2025's version of the United States Men's National Team (USMNT) does not have the competence (i.e., talent) commitment, passion, or coaching to be fully competitive in preparation for the upcoming 2026 men's World Cup, you are in good company. With a minimum of 6-8 first-tier players so far electing to pass on the opportunity in the summer of 2025 to prepare for next summer's World Cup, US Soccer is left with little time and opportunity to 'right the ship' in a positive way.

When I started writing and posting about the USMNT last summer following the team's abrupt departure from the Copa America tournament (hosted in the United States)⁹ I did not see this predicament coming. Yet, at the time, I made the argument that the team's passion was nil. Unfortunately, that has not changed heading into this summer. And I do not see it changing in the summer of 2026...even with the World Cup being hosted in the USA (Canada and Mexico)!

If we believe that passion serves as a key differentiator in producing a competitive and winning team, we must also agree that passion cannot be produced at the flip of a switch. So, soccer's pundits may need a reality check.... Because a player's passion is internally generated and highly personal, it only shows up on the field of play as an 'energy' to support the team's performance.

I would also suggest that passion for the sport of soccer and passion for one's country are two separate things and challenges that must be married to generate winning results. From a distance, I'm guessing that players who opted out of this summer's competition are very passionate about the game of soccer. After all, most of them play the game at the highest level in Europe and are well paid. Yet, when it comes to passing the 'passion test' for the USMNT, there is a separation that needs to be reconciled for the team to effectively perform and produce winning results.

What fuels the kind of passion needed to effectively compete and win in the global game of soccer? Competing players and teams in this summer's competition are typically very passionate about soccer and their respective countries. Soccer is deeply ingrained in their cultures (unlike in the USA) and is part of their national character. Globally, it's viewed as the 'beautiful' game, bringing hope to people and cultures, demonstrating that achievement against all odds is possible when people collaborate. That ingredient appears to be missing in the USMNT's camp.

Where we go to generate the kind of passion needed to effectively compete in soccer at the 'international' level is the question of the hour. We live in a multi-cultural country where

⁹ See, *The Art & Science of Why the USMNT Lost Out in 2024 Copa America*, on my blog...www.winsorjenkins.com/blog.

our culture has not been leveraged to help generate this level of passion. This may never happen in the USA. We are also fighting history. That is, we live in a country that has promoted individual values and achievement over team values and achievement. This makes the 'beautiful' game less attractive for generating the emotional attachment required to support passion's development. And without emotional buy-in we are fighting an uphill battle.

Even though soccer in the USA has seen tremendous growth over the past twenty years, I'm guessing that most people value soccer as a form of recreation and/or entertainment. Hence, the growth in youth and amateur soccer – along with the recent business investment and growth in both men's and women's professional teams in the USA. The United Soccer League (USL) and the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) are prime examples.

Extending soccer's reach beyond this baseline may only come when soccer really becomes mainstream in the USA. The good news...at the Club Level, this appears to be happening on a selective basis where teams like the Portland Timbers and Portland Thorns have leveraged the game of soccer to build 'community' and generate the passion on and off the field to succeed.

The ‘Inside – Out’ Journey to Develop Passionate Soccer Fans for the USMNT

This Sunday, the US men’s national soccer team (USMNT) is playing in the final for the 2025 Gold Cup. Win or lose, the challenge to develop passionate fans to support the men’s team leading up to the 2026 World Cup remains the same.

The opportunity to accomplish this task is not easy. It requires that people in the USA, who typically operate as individuals, embrace values that collectivist cultures embrace. I call these team values. For example, according to the GLOBE Leadership Studies, 70% of the world’s workforce is collectivist versus individualistic. I believe this makes it easier for people in these cultures to embrace and be passionate about soccer. The game brings them hope, demonstrating that achievement against all odds is possible when people effectively collaborate, as in soccer. This makes the ‘beautiful game’ more attractive for generating the emotional attachment and passion to support their respective national teams. It’s part of their national character.

There is an opportunity to start the process for developing passion for the men’s team leading up to the 2026 World Cup. Certainly, it will take time. This requires flipping the script. So, instead of the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) expecting to generate fan passion exclusively from the outside (i.e., via the team’s winning ways on the soccer field), fan passion can be generated via reimagining how the game of soccer adds value as a model to help workplace teams and their leaders, for example, effectively collaborate. We know that teams and team-based applications continue to grow in the USA workplace (and globally). We know that collaborative leadership and team collaboration are both critical for generating positive results. And we know that a collaborative mindset and skillset are needed – all of which are provided via soccer’s model in the form of an operating platform. Here, the operating platform is made up of several team principles that come from the game of soccer – along with a series of essential competencies aligned with the principles. But we also know that functioning ‘interdependently’ in an individualistic culture like ours to effectively collaborate may not be in our DNA! At least not naturally.

Changing how people perceive value typically comes down to show me the money! For me, it’s obvious that management innovation is needed in the form of new models to support workplace leader and team development initiatives leading to more productive team performance. This is especially true today in our global world where teams and team-based application are growing. Why not embrace a global sport to support a global business world!

Perhaps the upcoming 2026 men’s soccer World Cup will serve as the tipping point for people to embrace soccer from the inside out! Once that happens, soccer’s fanbase will be secured.

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.

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

After the men's national soccer team was eliminated from 2024 Copa America – and their head coach was fired, I started writing a series of articles to kick around some thoughts regarding team development and coaching. If interested, you can read these articles (and others listed below) on my blog: www.winsorjenkins.com/blog

- The Art & Science of Why the U.S. Men's Soccer Team Lost Out in 2024 Copa America
- Marketing the 2026 Men's Soccer World Cup Starts Here & Now!
- Hiring the U.S. Men's Soccer Coach Starts Here!

Along the way, I wrote a series of 'fictional' articles on my role as a coach of the U.S. Men's Team Coach.

- Coaching the U.S. Men's Soccer Coach Starts Here – (A Team Leadership Fable, Part 1)
- Coaching the U.S. Men's Soccer Coach Starts Here – (A Team Leadership Fable, Part 2)
- Coaching the U.S. Men's Soccer Coach Starts Here – (A Team Leadership Fable, Part 3)

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) who can effectively collaborate, function interdependently, and harness 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.