

SHIP'S LOG: 7-9-26
THE U.S. MEN'S NATIONAL SOCCER TEAM'S JOURNEY TO THE
2026 WORLD CUP
(A TEAM LEADERSHIP FABLE)



SHIP'S LOG: 7-9-26

Over the past 22 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 inspiration for writing this series came from the U.S. Men's Soccer Team's poor performance in 'Copa America' followed by the firing of their coach. ***Here I've used the metaphor of a ship to describe the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team - and chronicle their journey.*** My purpose was to throw some 'levity' at a situation often described by soccer's pundits and talking heads as dire. These articles can be downloaded - on my website: www.winsorjenkins.com/articles.

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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 Capitan, 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/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.



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

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

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’.

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* –

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).

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!

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.

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

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

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 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.

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).

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...

PART 10 – SHIP’S LOG: 4-18-26

‘All Hands On Deck’ for the U.S. Men’s National Soccer Team Heading into the 2026 World Cup!

With less than 60 days before the U.S. men’s national soccer team (i.e., ship) plays its first World Cup game on June 12, the call for ‘all hands-on deck’ has been unheeded with the departure of a key management figure who was the ship’s lead architect. Unfortunately, the timing for his departure could not be at a worse time. This is not to suggest that the ship is adrift at sea without control. The ship’s captain (i.e., head coach), crew (i.e., assistant coaches), and passengers (i.e., players) all remain onboard. However, external forces like ‘wind’ (i.e., passion) and ‘current’ (i.e., commitment) are at-play *now* more than ever before in controlling the ship’s speed, heading, and position.

When the ship started its journey back in the Fall of 2024 after losing in the 2024 Copa America that summer, firing the captain, and hiring a new captain, there was hope that the ship would be able to transition from a cruise ship to a battleship heading into the World Cup. At this point, it remains to be seen if this can be achieved.

As the ship moves forward over the next few weeks, it must avoid hitting underwater mines (i.e., injuries/casualties). Unfortunately, a casualty recently happened to one passenger. Note, with passengers continuing to play for their respective Club Teams across the globe, passengers are at risk! And the ship has two remaining ‘friendly’ matches to play against Senegal and Germany in late May and early June.

Although it would be nice to place buoys in the water to support the team’s journey and protect the ship’s frame (i.e., hull) from further damage, that will not happen as the ship passes through the ‘Strait of Hope’ before playing in the World Cup. There is also no way to set up a ‘convoy’ (i.e., group of ships traveling together) for added protection.

Once in the ‘deep end of the pond’ as they say, the team’s ship will be on its own, hopefully with ‘Colors’ flying and ‘Fans’ cheering!

PART 11 - SHIP's LOG: 5-6-26

Dire Straits Ahead for the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team Heading into the 2026 World Cup?

As we patiently wait for the 2026 World Cup to start, I'm reminded of my article, *The Art & Science of Why the U.S. Men's Soccer Team Lost Out in 2024 Copa America*, written July 9, 2024, on LinkedIn. In the article, I said that developing teams is hard work and it takes time. This is coming from someone who spent thirty-plus years working inside corporate America helping develop both leaders and workplace teams – and is also very familiar with the beautiful game!

Throughout the past 21 months I've written over a dozen articles covering the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team (USMNT) and its journey to the 2026 World Cup. I described this series of articles as a 'team leadership fable' intended to provide levity to a situation describe by some soccer pundits and talking heads as dire. My intent was to highlight the need for a 'process' orientation that comes with team development initiatives – including developing soccer teams. Unfortunately, there has been little, if any, acknowledgement of this recognition when it comes to ongoing rhetoric. Soccer's pundits continued to focus only on 'results' at the expense of process as the team wandered aimlessly across the sea over the past 18 months. Granted, time was of the essence when the team's ship left the port back in September 2024 with a new captain, crew, and passengers who had not been confirmed as players for the journey. Unfortunately, that did nothing to temper expectations regarding the team's ability to compete and win leading up to the World Cup.

I should mention too that the team's new coach has asked the public to 'trust the process' on many occasions since taking over. However, I am not sure if his understanding of process is the same as mine. From a distance, it appears that his ongoing tinkering with player selection, team organization, and tactics (i.e., X's & O's) represents his understanding of the term, process. For me that application is not inclusive enough! Process in the context of team development here needs to embrace aspects of the behavioral sciences (i.e., psychology, sociology) to be complete.

With that said, the 'process' orientation I refer to in my articles is sprinkled with a few key 'concepts' that can be developed and applied to support team collaboration development. Those of us who've worked in the leadership & organization development space will recognize these concepts as basic. Keep in mind that these are not all-inclusive to a process orientation.

Let's start with the fact that successful World Cup soccer teams effectively collaborate to achieve winning results. How these teams got to this position is a challenging question. I argue that team collaboration can only be 'cultivated' over time – an expectation that often goes ignored. For example, the USMNT players cannot be expected to effectively collaborate at the flip of a switch as they transition from Club Soccer to the National Team. Why? In the case of the 2026 team, time and opportunity have been limited.

Competing against ‘unconscious competence’ is a real challenge the USMNT must take on to compete against other World Cup teams that collaborate effortlessly. Because players on these teams have been conditioned since childhood to promote and practice team-based values, their actions on the pitch are more intuitive – meaning less thinking (i.e., time) is needed to apply skills to move the ball, score a goal, and the like. At the end of the day, players play and teams win on the pitch with speed (i.e., individual and team actions)! In the USA, most of us have grown up favoring individual values over team-based values. This makes it less intuitive for USMNT players to shift from individual to team-based values to effectively collaborate. It’s a cultural thing...which is why we say that ‘culture typically eats strategy’ for lunch.

I argue that a ‘collaborative mindset’ is needed to effectively collaborate on teams – followed by a collaborative skillset. A collaborative mindset is a need-to-have player (and leader) quality. In my book, *Game of Teams*, I introduce several team principles that support the development of a collaborative mindset. These come from the game of soccer and represent a successful team’s behavior on the pitch. A few examples of team principles are: Charge the Team to Perform the Work, Coach Teams to Respond to Changing Conditions on Their Own, and Seek-out Skillful & Adaptable Players. Again, they can be learned – especially with the help of a coach.

Because mindset is such an important ingredient to a process orientation, it needs to be said that a high level of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is required. This enables both players and the team to be able to express their emotions in positive ways on the pitch. Why? Positive emotions support intelligent play – especially at this level of soccer – generating winning results.

The development of Emotional Intelligence equates to understanding ‘self-awareness’ at both the player and team level. Do players have positive underlying assumptions (i.e., Theory Y) about the potential of others on the team to add value? Do they possess team-based values to support team play? Are players passionate enough and committed? Are they motivated to make the necessary sacrifices at this level and in this environment to succeed as they transition from Club Teams to the National Team? These and remaining questions are central to developing EQ.

Developing a collaborative ‘skillset’ represents another challenging part of a process orientation to player and team development. In *Game of Teams*, I describe a series of organizational and job ‘competencies’ linked to team principles to support the development of a collaborative skillset. Examples include Relationship Building, Adaptability, Optimism, Drive & Energy, Learning Agility, and Functional/Technical Expertise. Again, all the competencies in the inventory can be learned.

It should be said here that Relationship Building is a key competency in this framework. Besides being directly linked to self-awareness and its development, it’s a way to leverage time to achieve the team’s objectives. We all know, for example, people – including coaches – whose success is totally dependent upon their relationship to transcend technique and deal with people on a

relationship basis to achieve results. It was my hope that the team's new coach would exercise Relationship Building to support the team's development – only because he was going to be short on time and opportunity to introduce tactical changes leading up to the World Cup.

With only a few weeks remaining before the ship's captain, crew, and passengers reconvene to prepare for the World Cup, realistic expectations need to be set. It's too late to embrace a process orientation as described in this short article. If the captain and his crew have already gone down this path, I apologize. Again, from a distance it's hard to know and see for sure what's happened behind the scenes. For me, a realistic expectation is to 'make good, better' as I said in an earlier article. Most of the U.S. Men's National Soccer Teams from past World Cups were good – not great! They played hard with grit, passion, and determination. At a minimum, this is what we should expect from the team. 'All hands-on deck' needs to be the captain's call even though this is not an emergency – as such – as some would suggest.

PART 12 - SHIP'S LOG: 5-29-26

Is Perception Reality for the USMNT Heading into the 2026 World Cup?

The 'stage is set' often implies that an event is about to take place or is inevitable. For the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team (USMNT), they are about to start play in the 2026 World Cup beginning on June 12. It appears all necessary preparations are complete, except for the team to play two 'friendly' games on May 31 against Senegal and on June 6 against Germany. The team's roster has finally been completed after a long wait. So, some believe the ship is ready to set sail.

Unfortunately, the ship's captain (coach) recently left a few passengers (players) stranded on the rocks when he failed to effectively communicate to announce the ship's departure. For a captain and crew (coaches) who set out to change team culture in a positive way, they just got hit by a torpedo. His recent actions to avoid face to face or phone contact with passengers who did not make the journey, can be construed as an act of treason (betrayal of trust) that did not sit well with people including many soccer pundits. The idea that his actions will lead to mutiny is unlikely. However, most likely, team culture changed to the negative. Obviously, this is not good since we know that culture typically eats strategy for lunch!

When I first started writing this 'leadership fable' about the Ship's journey to the World Cup back in August 2024 after losing in Copa America and firing the coach, I suggested that the hiring of a new coach should be a 'Ted Lasso' like figure who demonstrated high leader emotional intelligence (EQ). This is not to say that the new coach would be someone with a low soccer IQ like Ted. But, if we had to give something up here, I would not compromise on high leader EQ. Why? At the end of the day, his job as a leader was not to technique players to death, but to lead with emotional intelligence – using Relationship Building as the key competency to get the team positioned to win. The lack of time and opportunity to do more with the team's development would be a challenge he could mitigate by leveraging relationships and relationship building.

As much as I enjoyed the Ted Lasso series on Apple TV and used it as a learning platform to describe what effective 'leadership' looks like, I found it difficult to understand the leadership actions of the Ship's captain over the course of his tenure with the team. Although I am not qualified to question or challenge his strategy, tactics, and the like (i.e., technical aspects), I do feel like I can talk about his leadership qualities – or lack thereof. In fact, if Apple TV was looking to produce a new series to highlight the captain's poor leadership qualities, I may be able to help!

For me, the lack of respect that the Ship's captain demonstrated by emailing players with the negative news about their status on the team was the tipping point to conclude that the Ship's captain does not know how to lead – or is not comfortable in a leader role. Effective leaders, for example, understand that the job is relational – not transactional. The late leadership guru,

Warren Bennis, made this point many years ago when he said that, if he had to give everything up except for one thing when it came to leadership, he would not give up relationship building.

Leadership is also about ‘guts’ and having the courage to have difficult conversations. It comes with the territory. If a leader can’t effectively discharge this duty, they should not be in a leader role! Again, it comes back to honoring relationships and building trust not only with current players but across the team’s ‘entire’ soccer community.

I said many times in previous articles that the USMNT needs players who are passionate *and* committed to playing in the tournament. *They also need a coach who is committed to performing a leadership role.* This includes understanding that a process orientation – in the context of the team’s leadership – needs to embrace aspects of the behavioral sciences (i.e., psychology, sociology, etc.) to be complete.

As someone who worked in Corporate America for over thirty-five years and saw many people fail to make the transition to a leader role, the team’s Ship appears to be leaderless heading into the 2026 World Cup. Typically, people who fail to make this transition lack *self-awareness*. From a distance, this may be the case for the Ship’s captain. Self-awareness is a necessary underpinning of both social awareness and self-management – and it leads to relational management – which may be his blind-spot. Coming across as arrogant and condescending at times and showing little cultural awareness or intelligence may also be blind spots. Again, in comparison, I think about Ted Lasso as an effective leader who possessed a high level of self-awareness and was able and willing to do the things our Ship’s captain fails to do.

At the end of the day, it’s important to recognize that others’ perception of your leadership role is more important than your perception of your leadership role.

PART 13 - SHIP'S LOG: 6-11-26

I Have a Feeling “We’re Not in Kansas Anymore” as the USMNT Starts Play in the 2026 World Cup

With the team splitting a pair of friendly games this past week, the stage has now been set to start play in the 2026 World Cup. As the ship (team) sets sail into uncharted territory, questions linger. For example, will the ship be able to navigate unexpected seascapes even though it's sailing in friendly waters? The pressure to win under these conditions will be huge.

Beyond dealing with X/O's, has the team's preparation for this journey been completed? Do passengers (players) possess a 'mindset' that enables them to function 'interdependently' and effectively collaborate? Are 'relationships' across the team strong enough to weather storms on the open seas? Has the ship's captain (coach) and crew (assistant coaches) done enough with the ship's passenger (players) for them to leverage feelings and emotions in a positive way? This includes, of course, selecting passengers who are passionate and committed to sailing on this journey.

There is an opportunity for the ship to capture synergies associated with this voyage. To win, it requires players who adapt to changing conditions, assimilate new information on the run, and apply multiple skills – all in real time! I suspect that team 'culture' will come into play as a gamechanger. Here I described culture as an explosive device ('mine') lying beneath the surface of the water that carries the ability to destroy or at least undermine the team's performance if detonated when triggered by pressure, for example.

Because 'players play but teams win' in soccer – especially in World Cup Soccer games, the team's coach must find ways to leverage the 'collective' to compete and win just as the Women's National Soccer team has done over the years – and the U.S. Men's and Women's Hockey teams have done in the recent past. My expectation for the team here is to 'make good, better' and get back to playing with the grit and grind of numerous 'good' teams from past World Cups.

Going into this tournament we know that many teams have more talented players with stronger soccer cultures. And they can play soccer more intuitively. Those are three very strong advantages that can be mitigated or offset (in part) with the support of a passionate fan base. After all, that's what produces a home field advantage in sports, which we've all seen and experienced how that works out.

At the end of day, I believe that the 'beautiful game' is just that because it provides 'hope' to people and cultures, demonstrating that achievement against all odds is possible when people effectively collaborate!

Enjoy the 2026 World Cup.

PART 14 – SHIP’S LOG: 6-30-26

‘Rinse & Repeat’ is the Command for the U.S. Men’s National Soccer Team

With the team winning the Group Stage last week, the stage is set to play in the Round of 32, described as the ‘knockout’ round on July 1. The winner plays on – the loser is eliminated.

As our team’s Ship sails into deeper waters, the Ship’s captain (coach) and crew (assistant coaches) are currently preparing passengers (players) to complete this portion of their journey. The Ship is well positioned to navigate these waters with the support of their highly visible and supportive fanbase. Like buoys designed to guide marine navigation, the U.S. fanbase serves as a tipping point to secure a winning outcome.

What’s changed for the team as it enters this phase of the competition – and what matters most – is the team’s *mindset*. No longer is the team concerned about making it out of the group. Now it’s about *believing* they can achieve results in the next game by leveraging the collective as they did in the Group Stage – especially in games where they had a full complement of players on the pitch. Again, mindset trumps skillset in these conditions. Do players possess a mindset that enables them to function ‘interdependently’ and effectively collaborate? Applying team principles like rely on each other, adapt to changing conditions on their own, and assimilate new information on the run – all in real time – are key to winning!!

Because ‘players play but teams win’ in soccer, the team’s coach must find ways to leverage the ‘collective’ to compete and win just as the Women’s National Soccer team has done over the years – and the U.S. Men’s and Women’s Hockey teams have done in the recent past. My expectation for the team here is to ‘make good, better’ and play with the grit and grind of numerous ‘good’ teams from past World Cups.

As I said in my 6/12/26 article, (*I Have a Strong Feeling We’re Not in Kansas Anymore as the U.S. Team Starts Play in the 2026 World Cup*), going into this tournament we know that many teams have more talented players with stronger soccer cultures. And they can play soccer more intuitively. Those advantages can be mitigated with a collaborative mindset, coupled with a passionate fan base that provides a home field advantage.

Rinse & Repeat is the captain’s command heading into the ‘next’ game!

PART 15 – SHIP’S LOG: 7-5-26

‘Mindset trumps Skillset’ for the U.S. Men’s National Soccer Team

With the team winning their game in the Round of 32, the stage is set to play in the Round of 16 on July 6. Again, this is a ‘knockout’ round. The winner plays on – the loser is eliminated.

As our team’s Ship continues its journey into deeper waters, the team’s passengers (players) must leverage the collective to achieve results. This requires a collaborative mindset that enables the team to function ‘interdependently’ on the pitch. Applying team principles like rely on each other, adapt to changing conditions on their own, and assimilate new information on the run – all in real time – are key to playing with a collaborative mindset.

Because ‘players play but teams win’ in soccer, mindset *trumps* skillset. Skillset obviously remains important, but it will not be the deciding factor in the game. We know that our passengers are talented, so it’s not a lack of individual skills that will cause our ship to sink. We know too that many teams have stronger soccer cultures. However, now we are playing at home in front of highly visible and supportive fans to provide a competitive advantage.

The Ship’s captain (coach) and crew (assistant coaches) have done well to support the team’s development of a collaborative mindset. It appears he’s been able to leverage *relationship building* – an essential *leadership* competency – to establish a performance-based culture and right the ship. Our ship no longer looks and feels like a Cruise ship. It’s emerged as a Battleship!

Again, it needs to be said that team development in organizations *and* sports is hard work. It takes time! As someone who spent many years pursuing leader and team development initiatives in organizations, I was highly surprised when there was little, if any, acknowledgement of this fact coming from soccer’s pundits when our new captain was hired.

I’ve often said that the ‘beautiful game’ brings *hope* to people, demonstrating that achievement is possible against all odds when people come together and collaborate as a team. The transformative power of soccer to engage the hearts and minds of people everywhere is real. Cape Verde’s performance in the FIFA World Cup 2026 is a prime example!

Believe to achieve is the message going into Monday’s game against Belgium!

PART 16 – SHIP’S LOG: 7-9-26

The Art & Science of Why the U.S. Men’s Soccer Team Lost Out in FIFA World Cup 2026

After winning their game in the Round of 32 in San Francisco, the team’s Ship sailed north to Seattle looking more like a battleship versus a cruise ship. The Ship’s captain (coach) and crew (assistant coaches) had worked hard to get the Ship’s passengers (players) safely across dangerous waters leading up to this game. Unfortunately, the team lost the battle (game) in Seattle and the war (World Cup) in dramatic fashion.

To say that the Ship sank may be an overreaction to the team’s poor performance. However, water did breach the hull, so the ship lost its buoyancy as passengers failed to play with a collaborative mindset and protect the integrity (leverage the collective) of the vessel. ‘All for one – and one for all’ had to be captain’s command to passengers before attempting to navigate a complex situation. Did the captain’s words go unheeded? If not, why did passengers fail to cope with adversity and unexpected challenges like they did in the ‘Round of 32’ game where they played a man down for thirty-five minutes – and won! Coping under these conditions is mandatory for the Ship to survive a battle of this magnitude. At the end of the day, players play but teams win in soccer with mindset trumping skillset!

With the way players performed in this game I would describe their defeat more as an emotional issue (EQ), meaning they failed to handle the pressure early on when hit hard by a rocket. Down by one goal, they played sloppy, scared, and appeared to be intimidated by a team more motivated to prove they had something to play for. The team’s inability to ‘respond to changing conditions on their own’ was evident as their opponent aggressively attacked the Ship. Overwhelmed, they failed to limit their mistakes giving up two more goals, conceding the match with thirty-plus minutes remaining! This was way more time than Argentina needed to beat Egypt, where they scored 3 goals in the final twelve minutes to come from behind and win 3-2. Overall, the team’s lack of composure – and leadership – on the pitch was in-play throughout the match.

To say that the Ship was hijacked in open seas would be accurate as well. Passengers failed to play with purpose, play with any rhythm when they had the ball, and play with grit. My expectations for the team in the World Cup were to make good, better. That’s it! Most of the USA’s teams over the past 20 years played with grit in a blue-collar way, focused on leveraging their athleticism to support the ‘collective’ on the pitch. These teams also had players who were ‘street smart’ using their intuition, gut-feelings, and real-world intelligence, for example, to help survive! Unfortunately, these characteristics were missing in this game.

At the beginning of this saga, I was concerned about not having players who were passionate about taking the journey of a lifetime. I was also concerned about a new coach who had limited time and opportunity to right the ship. Because of this situation, it left him with ‘relationship

building’ as the only essential leadership competency (card) he could play to establish a performance-based team culture – a task he appeared to complete. With the former issue, the team’s lack of character and leadership on the pitch demonstrated, in part, a lack of emotional intelligence (EQ). EQ (self-awareness and motivation) in the context of soccer is critical to team play and success. We know it’s required at this level to help players express emotions in positive ways to support intelligent play on the pitch. For the coach, however, dealing with player EQ in this situation was problematic at best. This would require added time and a deeper dive into a player’s makeup, most likely requiring outside help in the form of a leadership coach, for example.

The good news is that developing a collaborative mindset can be learned. It requires discipline to learn and apply team principles like: Seek-Out Skillful & Adaptable Players, Coach Teams to Respond to Changing Conditions on Their Own and Charge the Team to Perform the Work. These are just three of several principles that must be applied to demonstrate a collaborative mindset. Coupled with the principles are Essential Competencies like: Drive/Energy, Results Orientation, Team Player, and Relationship Building. They (and others) are aligned with the principles to demonstrate a collaborative skillset. Combined with the principles, they provide a ‘*team operating platform*’⁸ to support passengers on the next Ship who dream of winning a World Cup.

As I said in my first article, team development is hard work. It takes time! As someone who spent many years pursuing leader and team development initiatives in the workplace, I was highly surprised when there was little, if any, acknowledgement of this fact coming from soccer’s pundits when our new captain was initially hired.

All of this may sound like a lot to take in at one time. Perhaps. We now have time to prepare for the next World Cup in 2030. Again, at a minimum, it will take players who can pass the ‘passion test’ and a coach(s) who understands the ‘art & science’ of player & team development.

Bon voyage.

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 e-book and paperback.

⁸ To learn more about the *Team Operating Platform*, check out either one of my books, *The Collaborator* or *Game of Teams*.