

***Special
Olympics***



How to Start Athlete Leadership

June 2025



**ATHLETE
LEADERSHIP**

Starting Athlete Leadership in your Special Olympics Program



What is Athlete Leadership?

If we want a more inclusive organization and accepting world, Special Olympics athletes must be allowed and encouraged to contribute in ways beyond the sports field. One of the most powerful ways we do this is through Athlete Leadership, which creates opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to develop and demonstrate their abilities in leadership roles both inside and outside the organization.

Athlete Leadership partners with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Special Olympics athlete leaders) to ensure they are set up to succeed in meaningful leadership roles. This is done by providing training in knowledge and skills, practical experience in roles of responsibility, and working with leaders without IDD to develop inclusive environments.

What is the importance of having Athlete Leadership?

Special Olympics was founded upon the principle that athletes hold the power to change the world through sport. But so often, Special Olympics athletes - people with IDD - don't have the power to change anything because people *without* IDD control most opportunities. Even in Special Olympics, our programming and opportunities for people with IDD involve staff, volunteers, and family members without IDD doing something *for* them. **Athlete Leadership teaches our athletes the knowledge and skills, while helping them find their personal confidence and leadership style so they can lead our programmatic work. Special Olympics was created *for* them, but it is about time that we move to an organization that is *led by* them. As staff, volunteers, or family members, our job is to support them.**

People support Special Olympics because of the athletes. When you invite an athlete to engage with others, that person has an incredible opportunity to hear directly from the population that they are looking to support. Our athletes know better than anyone how to tell their experiences and stories, so why not engage them as the first point of contact of the organization and let them lead the way?

Public speaking roles for Special Olympics athletes are important, but Athlete Leadership is much more than that. Athletes can contribute in many ways as officials, coaches, event evaluators, event planners, volunteers at events, Health Messengers, master of ceremonies, , facilitators for trainings, mentors of other athlete leaders, and much more.

Guiding principles of Athlete Leadership

There are three guiding principles for Athlete Leadership. These principles provide strategic direction and outline what components are needed to ensure athletes are leading the way.

1 Education and Awareness Building

2 Training

3 Leadership Positions



Principle 1 Education and Awareness Building



Unified Leadership education teaches people without IDD to develop inclusive mindsets and behaviors towards people with IDD.

In Unified Leadership, people without IDD learn how to:

- See the value of all people, especially those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- Recognize their own behavior that excludes others and work to change it.
- Have a better understanding of what it is like to work with people with intellectual disabilities.
- Create environments where people with intellectual disabilities can be successful.

Principle 2

Training athlete leaders using the Leadership & Skills Curriculum



The [Leadership & Skills curriculum for Athlete Leadership](#) is designed to provide athletes with leadership training as well as personal development that they can apply to leadership roles in their Program, community and workplace.

These courses come in a variety of formats, including: resources for Programs to lead trainings for their own athlete leaders, eLearning courses that athlete leaders can take on their own online, and self-led resources that guide athlete leaders through different lessons.

Antwerp Management School conducted a research study to determine the impact of our Leadership & Skills Curriculum. Here are some of the findings:

The Special Olympics Leadership & Skills Curriculum has a high impact on “self-determination (autonomy, belonging, competence), intrinsic motivation and thus the wellbeing of the participants.”

The Core Modules

The core modules of the curriculum are designed to provide athletes with the basic knowledge about leadership and what athlete leadership looks like in Special Olympics and their local program. These two courses are required and must be taken before other courses are taken.

Advanced Leadership Modules

The Advanced Leadership Skills section includes five modules that build on the basic skills covered in the Understanding Leadership module.

Special Olympics Roles

The Special Olympics Roles modules are designed to provide athletes with the necessary knowledge required to serve in a specific leadership role within Special Olympics.

Personal Development Handbooks

The Personal Development handbooks offer athletes an opportunity to learn new skills on their own that start easier and become progressively more difficult with each lesson. There are 5 different topics and 3 lessons within each topic. These lessons are available to any Special Olympics athlete to take at any time – no prior courses are required.

Workplace Readiness Modules

Workplace readiness training helps people develop the skills and behaviors needed to be successful in the workplace.

The Leadership & Skills Curriculum offers training for athlete leaders in the following roles:



The **SPECIAL OLYMPICS ROLES** modules are designed to provide athletes with an overview of what to expect from each of the leadership roles and learn knowledge and skills needed to be successful in that role.

The list below is not an exhaustive list of all possible roles within Special Olympics; some Regions or Programs have developed different roles or trainings on their own, which is fine. However, here you will find the ones that have been developed by Special Olympics, Inc..

Athlete Representatives

- Athlete Representatives are athletes who give ideas and opinions on behalf of other athletes.
- They help set policy, guidelines, make recommendations to make sure things are better.
- They give new ideas, and then, when appropriate, put those new ideas into practice to improve local programming.

Sport Leader

Sport Leaders are experienced Special Olympics athletes who are trained as coaches, officials, and other sport leadership roles. They hold a major role in supporting other athletes to achieve their maximum potential.

These are the training courses available for Sports Leaders:

- **Fitness Captains**

Fitness Captains work closely with their coaches to ensure health and fitness is a key component of the sports experience. The purpose of this course is to provide Fitness Captains the required skills and knowledge that will allow them to lead their sports team in activities related to fitness and healthy lifestyle.

- **Sport Assistant**

This course is designed to prepare Special Olympics athletes to coach other Special Olympics athletes. When finished with this course, athlete leaders will have learned about the key responsibilities and skills of a Sport Assistant and should feel ready to begin coaching a team, initially in assisting the coaching staff with their responsibilities and duties, not as head coach right away.

Event Leader

- The role of an Event Leader is to participate in the planning, promotion, and implementation process of Special Olympics events.
- In this training, participants will learn several types of leadership roles they can do before, during, and after events. Depending on their skills, experience, and interests, they will decide how they want to be involved in Special Olympics events.

Health Messenger

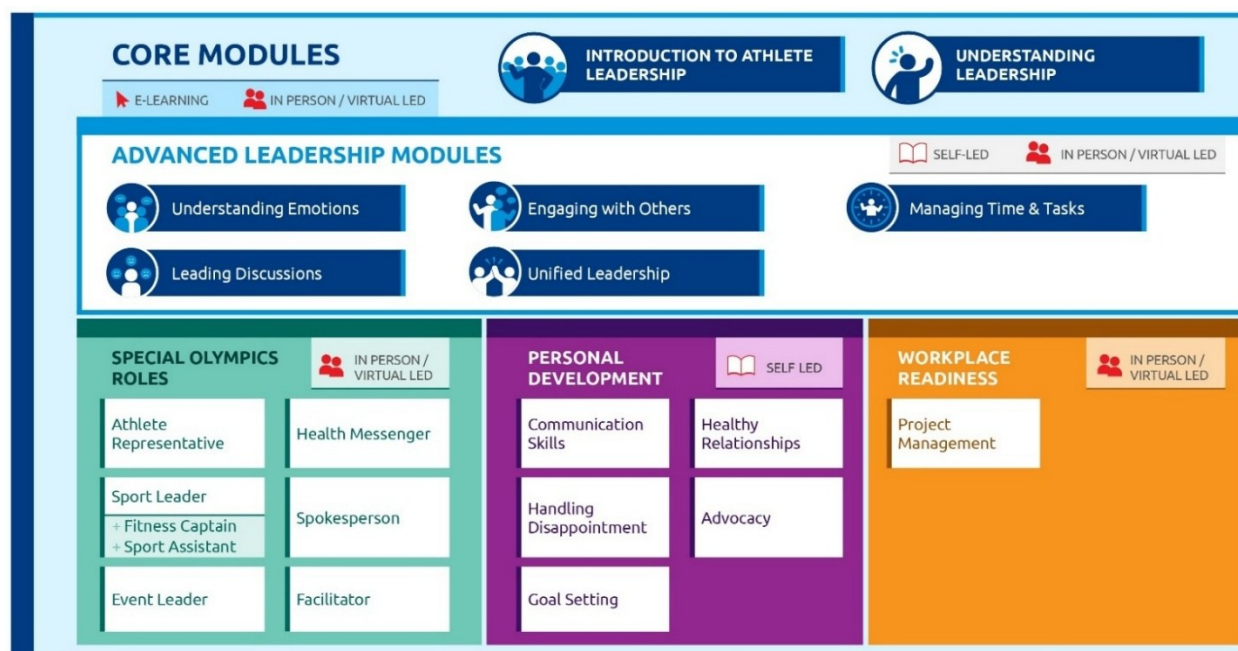
The resources can be used to train Special Olympics athletes to become official Health Messengers, which are athlete leaders who are health educators, advocates, and role models within their Special Olympics communities and the community at-large.

Spokesperson

The purpose of the Athlete Spokesperson course is to train athletes in leadership skills that will allow them to be spokespeople for the Special Olympics community and movement. Athlete leaders are also trained to share their stories through different means (verbally, traditional media, social media, etc.).

Facilitator

This training will help build the perspective, skill, and confidence of athlete leaders to be facilitators in training sessions, meetings, and other occasions when their role is to help participants engage in the conversations, connect with each other, and share experiences. Athletes teaching other athletes as facilitators of Leadership & Skills Curriculum sessions and athletes teaching people without IDD the importance and power of Unified Leadership are two outcomes of the facilitator course.



Principle 3 Leadership Roles for Athlete Leaders



It is important that people without IDD acknowledge that athletes have a choice in how and where they lead in Special Olympics. This is their organization, and staff and volunteers are here to support them. But for them to succeed, they need to be trained in the specific roles that they choose to pursue.

There are several leadership roles for athlete leaders in local Programs and at an international level. In local Programs athlete leaders can contribute as a member of their **Athlete Leadership Council**, **member of the Board of Directors**, as an **event coordinator**, **volunteer**, **spokesperson**, **Health Messenger**, **sport assistant**, **sport official**, and more!

At an international level they can be part of their **Regional Athlete Leadership Council (RALC)**, **Sargent Shriver Global Messenger (SSGM)**, **Global Athlete Leadership Council (GALC)**, **Special Olympics International Board of Directors**, and in the planning, execution and evaluation of international sport competitions.

What do I need to start Athlete Leadership?



Reach out to your Special Olympics Regional Office

Each regional office is equipped with staff that can guide and support you in the process of starting Athlete Leadership programming. They also offer ongoing support as your Athlete Leadership programming grows.

Connecting with your regional office will help you learn from other SO Programs past experiences and avoid making the same mistakes.

Athlete Leadership has existed for the past 30 years, there is a wealth of knowledge and experience you can pull from.



Identify athletes who want to become athlete leaders

Promote Athlete Leadership programming with coaches, families, volunteers. Ask coaches or Special Olympics staff/volunteers to recommend athletes that they think would be good leaders, or ask other Special Olympics athletes who might be interested. A personal recommendation from a coach or fellow athlete goes a long way in helping the athlete believe they can do this kind of work.



Identify mentors for the athlete leaders

It is an optional role, but one that is highly recommended, a mentor can be a volunteer or a coach. Their role is to assist the athlete when they ask for support. The role of the mentor is to provide personalized support to the athlete leader, but ultimately their job is to let the athlete shine!

[You will find resources to train mentors here.](#)



Staff and SO Program leadership must have inclusive mindsets and behaviors

Prepare your Program on changing the mindset to provide meaningful leadership opportunities to athlete leaders by training staff, board members, and volunteers in [Unified Leadership training sessions](#). Unified Leadership was created for people *without* IDD, so that we can work together to remove what is often the greatest barrier that people with IDD face in their communities and workplaces—the negative attitudes and behaviors of people without IDD that lead to low expectations, underestimation, and exclusion.

When a Program has a meaningful role for the Athlete Leader on their Board of Directors, including the Athlete Leader in all meetings and giving space to contribute and make decisions, it is a good start to develop Athlete Leadership through the program.

Training athletes in the Leadership & Skills Curriculum will amount to nothing if the people in the Program are uninterested in hearing what their athletes have to say or are unwilling to cede ownership of programming. It is imperative that all staff, board members, and volunteers go through the full Unified Leadership lineup of courses so they can identify ways to include athlete leaders in their day-to-day work.



Start an Athlete Leadership Council

The Athlete Leadership Council is a structure where athletes:

- Report to other athletes and Program leaders information relevant to Special Olympics.
- Voice their opinions about important issues related to Special Olympics.
- Develop, plan, and implement projects.
- Serve as a liaison in different areas of the organization providing support and expertise.
- Gain leadership training and experience.

Having an Athlete Leadership Council provides athletes opportunities to share leadership skills, serve as volunteers, provide valuable input to the operation of Special Olympics and be role models for other athletes. Having athletes involved in meaningful ways conveys how

much we respect and value them as an integral part of our organization. It also gives Program leaders valuable insight into what interests and motivates athletes in the Program. This insight will help achieve programmatic goals and develop actions that will attract new athletes and retain existing athletes

For more guidance on how to start Athlete Leadership Councils, click [here](#).



Identify the athlete who sits in your SO Program Board of Directors

The Board of Directors of an Accredited Program shall be responsible under the Program's by-laws or other organizational documents for overseeing the conduct of the Program's affairs.

As part of this requirement, every Accredited Program's Board of Directors/Program Committee shall, within their Board or Committee structure, include at least one:

- Sports expert;
- Expert in the field of intellectual disabilities;
- Special Olympics athlete, who shall have received training on Board/Program Committee participation;
- Family relation of a Special Olympics athlete.

Athletes that are board members represent the voice and perspective of athletes in their SO Program. They must have the same rights and privileges as other voting Board members, including full voting rights as well as the same term as other members. Athletes should play a meaningful and integral role and should not be chosen only to satisfy the accreditation requirement.

For meaningful involvement as a board member, it is important to consider the following:

- If the athlete benefits from having a mentor for his board related work, work with them to find a suitable mentor.
- The athlete must receive materials prior to board meetings so they can come prepared and ready to participate. The materials should be in an easy-to-read format and should come with enough time for the athlete to prepare.
- Work with the athlete who serves on the board and have them join or sit in the Athlete Leadership Council meetings. This is the best way for them to gather perspective and ensure they are representing athletes' different perspectives and opinions and not just their own.

For more guidance of the role athletes have as a board member, click [here](#).



Training

Now that you have athletes identified you can start delivering training to help them build on their skills and leadership. Remember we have the [Leadership & Skills curriculum for Athlete Leadership](#) that is designed to provide athletes with leadership training as well as personal development that they can apply to leadership roles in their Program, community and workplace.

Start by delivering the two core modules. After that, check with the athlete leaders on what roles they are interested in having in Special Olympics.

[Here](#) is guidance on how to utilize the curriculum modules, depending on the roles they are interested in.



Leadership Positions

Since leadership position can be available across the whole SO Program, its recommended you make a list of the roles you are ready to offer the athletes. You must take into consideration that not only they will be trained for the role, but also that the supports will be in place as they grow into the roles and learn.

Remember, there are several leadership roles for athlete leaders in SO Programs. Athlete leaders can contribute as a member of their **Athlete Leadership Council**, **member of the Board of Directors**, **as an event coordinator**, **volunteer**, **spokesperson**, **Health Messenger**, **sport assistant**, **sport official**, and more!

Stages of Athlete Leadership Programming

The **Program Quality Standards (PQS)** are a tool to help Programs develop and increase quality of programmatic areas and overall operations. They help Programs identify what to focus on to provide athletes with the highest quality programming in many different aspects of our movement (health, schools, leadership, sports, etc.).

How should Program Quality Standards be used?

- **Self-Assessment**

The primary use of the PQS is to self-assess, find ways to improve, and increase quality.

- **Roadmap**

PQS should be used when developing annual operational plans and longer-term strategic plans. If a Program is developing a new plan, PQS can help identify what should be included. If a Program is in the middle of a strategic plan, PQS can help focus on improvements that fit within the current strategy. There is never a wrong time to start using PQS to help set goals.

- **Track progress and celebrate success**

Achieving new standards means the Program is growing and improving! These are measurable results. Use PQS to recognize and celebrate advancement and growth in your Program.

Athlete Leadership Program Quality Standards:

Area of strategic plan	STAGE 1	>>	STAGE 2	>>	STAGE 3
Athlete Leadership Training	Program delivers 2 Athlete Leadership core training modules.		Program delivers 1 advanced leadership course and Special Olympics role training.		Program partners with external organizations to provide specific training to the Athlete Leaders.
Athlete Leadership Roles	Program has athletes trained and serving in meaningful leadership roles (e.g. Spokesperson, Coach, Health Messenger).		Program has athletes in intern or unpaid staff positions implementing programming, and uses trained athlete leaders in programmatic areas, events, and activities.		Program has an athlete as paid staff. Trained athlete leaders train other athlete leaders and educate Program constituents.
Athlete Leadership Structures	Program has an Athlete Leadership Council actively providing input to Program leaders and Program decision making.		Program has Athlete Leadership Council that plays a meaningful role in Program decision-making as well as implementing its own projects.		All committees, planning and implementation activities have athletes fully included as members or leaders of committees.

Meet the Athlete Leaders

On the [Meet the Athlete Leaders website](#) you can learn some incredible stories of athlete leaders across the world. **Here are two amazing stories:**

Antrone “Juice” Williams

*Special Olympics Ohio
(SO North America)*



After months of hard work, Antrone “Juice” Williams received his Non-Medical Independent Transportation Provider license, something he takes great pride in. To Williams’s knowledge, he is the first Special Olympics athlete to receive this certification. Through his new role, he believes he’s making a tangible impact within the disability community.

William’s life spiraled in a direction he wasn’t expecting when he had a medical scare in 2012. Seemingly healthy leading up to this event, Williams had a massive stroke on September 26th, 2012. And just like that, he found himself with a new normal.

Following the stroke, he was in a medically induced coma. During this time, he could hear everything people said, and comprehend his surroundings, but because he was in a coma he was unable to communicate. It was like he could repeat everything said to him in his mind but was not able to verbalize it or get anyone’s attention.

After coming out of the coma, Williams had to relearn how to walk, talk and run. However, despite the obstacles he faced, he kept a positive mindset and outlook for the future.

While he had already been a [Special Olympics Ohio](#) athlete for many years, competing in basketball, bowling and golf, it was after his stroke that he realized the true power of Special Olympics. He credits the organization and his mentor, Eric Johnson, who he met in 2021, with helping him overcome some of the darkest times in his life.

His journey back to “normal life” has not been without bumps along the way, but Williams has crafted a new normal, finding his place as a Special Olympics athlete leader. He’s served on his local Athlete Input Council and had the opportunity to travel for public speaking engagements. **“It means a lot because I’m making a huge impact, not just in my community but throughout the national community,”** Williams says about his role as an athlete leader.

Those opportunities and the leadership skills learned through Special Olympics led Williams to want to make an even bigger impact on the disability community.

“I know many of my fellow Special Olympics struggle with finances, some don’t have a good parent, or anything like that to help them along the way, and there are so many that are not getting good healthcare,” Williams says with a lot of passion. **“That’s why I wanted to advocate for and support my peers as much as possible.”**

Mujahid Al-Sarhani

*Special Olympics Oman
(SO Middle East / North Africa)*



Mujahid joined Special Olympics Oman 7 years ago. He trains and competes in tennis. He defines himself as a leader and can express himself fluently by talking about issues related to him and to other people with IDD. He likes to spread and reinforce the unified sport concept at schools. Outside sport, Mujahid is a member of the local Athlete Leadership Council, he is an assistant tennis coach and Tennis Federation Sport Official. He is the football team captain, and he likes to speak about healthy eating to his friends. He received an award for the best media person in his school. He has been self-dependent and self-employed as a supplier for building materials for 2 years now. He has a college degree in documentation. Additionally, for the past 7 months, Mujahid assisted in managing a company that deals with air conditioning equipment maintenance. Among the different tasks he coordinated customers' needs, employees' timing and been involved in marketing tasks.

In a forward-looking and inspiring meeting, Her Excellency Laila bint Ahmed bin Awad Al-Najjar, Omani Minister of Social Development met with Mujahid Al-Sarhani, SO MENA's Sargent Shriver Global Messenger (SSGM) in 2025?, to discuss bold plans for promoting inclusion and sports development across the region. Mujahid, a passionate advocate for change, shared his visionary goals to empower youth with and

without IDD to lead initiatives that inspire meaningful societal progress. Central to his vision is the idea that true development must be rooted in inclusivity, making it the keystone of a more comprehensive and equitable future.

In the meeting, Mujahid emphasized the transformative power of sports as a catalyst for societal change. He highlighted the importance of expanding initiatives that uplift individuals with IDD in key areas such as education, health, sports, and employment. Mujahid advocated for their full inclusion in all facets of community life, stressing that empowering people with IDD through leadership development is essential. His vision is to use sports as a unifying force that strengthens communities and promotes core human values like respect, collaboration, and equality.

In his continued dedication to Special Olympics and sustainable development, **Mujahid introduced innovative projects aimed at deepening the inclusion of individuals with IDD across all sectors of society.** These initiatives are designed to unlock their full potential, giving them the opportunity to reshape their roles and contributions toward building a more inclusive and empowered future. With his strong commitment and visionary leadership, Mujahid is leading the way in driving real change that will leave a lasting impact on communities throughout the region.



For more information on Athlete Leadership click [here](#)

Or scan the code:



Or reach out to Cristina Rodriguez at crodriguez@specialolympics.com