



Athlete Leadership Overview





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.

“Athlete Leadership is life-changing. It can change the way you see things and how you communicate with others -- to have the courage to stand for others and be on the front lines. It creates leaders.” – Nyasha Derera, Chair, Global Athlete Congress



Guiding Principles

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



PRINCIPLE 1

The first principle is **Education and Awareness Building** utilizing the [Unified Leadership](#) approach to develop leaders. Building from sport, Unified Leadership teaches leaders (both those with AND without IDD) that we all have a responsibility to develop diverse leaders. Unified Leadership teaches everyone of all abilities to value and learn from each other, and to inspire change to create environments where people with IDD succeed in meaningful jobs and roles.

Not only are we fulfilling our mission by providing opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities but having athletes in leadership roles improves their lives, helps us as an organization by having more athlete leaders in place to help carry out the day-to-day work of Special Olympics, and demonstrates to the world that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities can and should hold meaningful leadership positions. It's not just the right thing to do, it's good business!

PRINCIPLE 2

It is important that all non-Special Olympics athletes acknowledge that athletes have a choice in how and where they lead in Special Olympics. This is their program, staff and volunteers are here to support them. But for them to succeed, they need to be trained in the areas that they choose to pursue.



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

The curriculum consists of two core modules and a series of additional modules designed to prepare athletes for leadership opportunities inside and outside Special Olympics. Athletes will begin by completing *Introduction to Athlete Leadership* and *Understanding Leadership* and can continue their leadership development journey with five Advanced Leadership, Special Olympics Roles and Personal and Professional Development modules.

PRINCIPLE 3

Special Olympics athletes hold the power to change the world through sport; that is the organization's founding principle. But so often, programming and opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are approached through the lens of **us** (staff, volunteers, families, society) **doing something for them** (people with IDD). Athlete Leadership teaches our athletes to gain the knowledge and confidence to lead programmatic work. This is their organization – we are here to support them.

There are various levels or ways to engage with Special Olympics athletes. We want to ensure all leaders of the movement, especially those without IDD, are exploring ways to empower athletes to lead and contribute.



It's not going to happen overnight – for anyone; it is a progression. But together, we can realize the potential and power of transitioning from a movement **for** athletes, to **with** athletes, to **led by** athletes.