



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 IDD (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, SO staff and Athlete Leader



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.



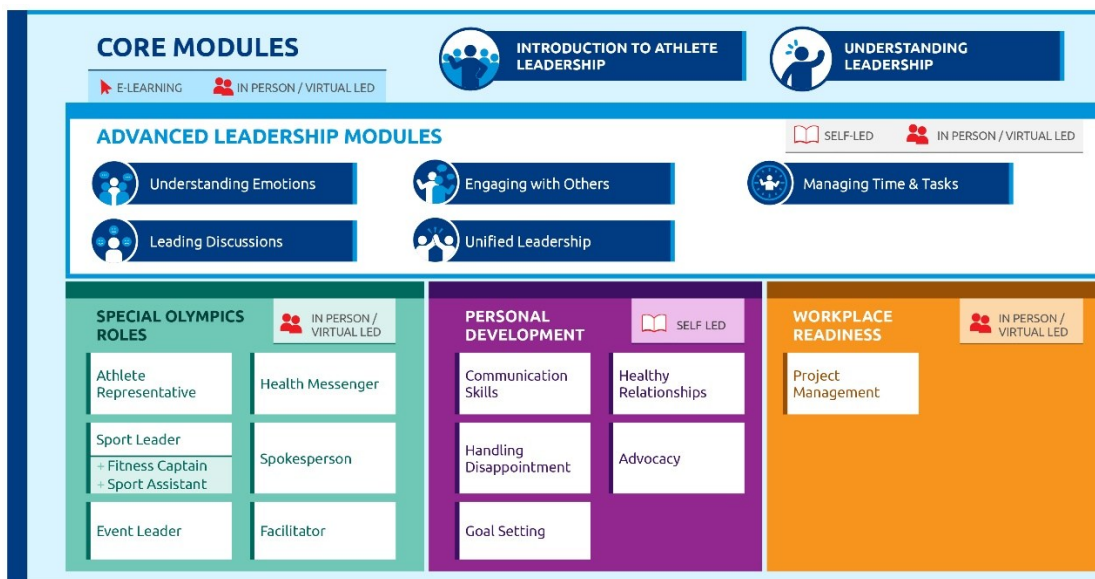
PRINCIPLE 1: Education and Awareness

The first principle is Education and Awareness Building utilizing the [Unified Leadership](#) two-part education series to develop leaders.

Co-developed and co-delivered by people with and without IDD, Special Olympics Unified Leadership sessions leverage more than 55 years of experience cultivating inclusion in sport to deliver game-changing strategies that prepare people without IDD to transform their communities and workplaces to be more inclusive, so that people with IDD have opportunities to make meaningful contributions and thrive. Special Olympics believes that people without IDD have the power to unlock opportunities for people with IDD to experience real and meaningful inclusion in their communities and workplaces. That is why Unified Leadership was created to educate people without IDD, giving them the tools to remove these barriers so people with IDD can thrive.

PRINCIPLE 2: Training

To empower athlete leaders to forge their own path and pursue their personal goals, Special Olympics ensures they have access to key tools and skills to succeed through training opportunities. The [Leadership & Skills curriculum for Athlete Leadership](#) is designed to provide people with IDD with leadership, personal and professional development training so they are better equipped to hold leadership roles in their Special Olympics 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 Modules, Special Olympics Roles, Personal Development and Workplace Readiness Modules.

PRINCIPLE 3: Leadership Positions

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.