Untapped Potential

People with intellectual disabilities (ID), epitomized by the athletes of Special Olympics, teach everyone the true value of inclusion and have the potential to shape a new understanding of what it means to contribute and lead in today’s world.

Despite significant advances in recent years, the skills and experiences of people with ID can still be utilized and valued more within Special Olympics. They are often unable to achieve their leadership potential because of the attitudes, behaviors and low expectations of people without disabilities, and still have few meaningful opportunities to show what they can do. In order to overcome this barrier, the thoughts and actions of leaders without disabilities – often the greatest challenge faced by people with ID – need to change. This requires a new approach to leadership development and a sustained shift in behavior.

What is the Unified Leadership approach?

Building from sport, Unified Leadership teaches leaders of all abilities to value and learn from each other and create environments where people with ID succeed in meaningful jobs and roles. It consists of two parts:

1. Building the capacity of people with ID to achieve their full potential through developing leadership skills within and beyond sports
2. Educating leaders without disabilities to value, include and enable the skills and leadership of people with ID

Focusing on leaders without disabilities is critical. The key to unlocking real change in organizations and local communities is when leaders without disabilities:

- See people with ID as contributors, leaders, people to learn from
- Adapt behaviors and processes to create environments where people with ID succeed in meaningful roles and jobs
- Let go – share or transfer power to people with ID and let them lead

Special Olympics athlete leaders will co-lead or independently lead education of leaders without disabilities, using their experiences to inspire everyone towards a new perspective on potential, leadership and inclusion.
How are we implementing the approach?

The Unified Leadership approach is relevant to anyone who plays a leadership role, from sports coaches, mentors and families to grassroots, Program and external leaders. It is not a standalone “program” – it is an approach that is being integrated into all of our existing programmatic areas of work at all leadership levels.

Unified Leadership starts with building the capacity of people with ID through leadership learned from sport: skills such as discipline and teamwork, and opportunities such as team captaincy. These sports-based skills provide the foundation for ongoing leadership by athletes, who learn new athlete leadership skills via an updated curriculum. The final step is ensuring meaningful roles and opportunities for people with ID within Special Olympics sport, health, schools and youth programming, and as Program leaders.

In keeping with the approach, all Special Olympics leaders without disabilities will be educated about Unified Leadership, so that they understand their role in creating meaningful leadership opportunities for athletes. Unified Leadership education is being integrated into key large-scale Special Olympics training programs, for example sports coach training and governance training for Program Boards. In some cases, leaders with and without ID learn together in an inclusive setting, such as Youth Leadership Summits or the Leadership Academy.

Special Olympics partners can also benefit from education sessions with Athlete Leaders who talk about the barriers they have experienced, and from opportunities to engage directly with Unified Leadership in practice, for example at community-based Special Olympics sports events. This empowers external leaders without disabilities to think about how to improve their own behaviors, practices and workplaces, adapt from the “norm”, and include people with ID in their organizations.

What outcomes does the Unified Leadership approach achieve?

Within Special Olympics, the Unified Leadership approach is aimed at ensuring meaningful roles and jobs for athletes, a key target in the 2021 – 2024 Special Olympics Global Strategic Plan. These roles boost the self-worth of people with ID, enable them to exercise their UNCRPD rights and encourage them to use their voice, helping Special Olympics improve its activities and show what a truly inclusive organization looks like.

Beyond Special Olympics, leaders without a disability experience a powerful mindset change from having the opportunity to listen, interact with and learn from the achievements, grit and resilience of athletes.
In this way, we create communities where people with ID are able to be productive and respected, the ultimate goal of Special Olympics. The Unified Leadership approach can also help with inclusion of all diverse groups in communities and in the workplace. Partner companies and organizations benefit through increased creativity, open-mindedness and empathetic leadership that reconciles and celebrates all differences.

Is the Unified Leadership approach an employment program?

In addition to ensuring people with ID develop skills that enhance their lives, Special Olympics promotes the Unified Leadership approach externally, educating leaders in partner organizations to better understand how to increase inclusivity and benefit from diversity.

While these activities help build capacity and readiness in people with and without ID, they do not include “employment” services such as job specific training or job placement. In many parts of the world these are provided by third parties who specialize in those services. Programs are encouraged to partner with these organizations where possible. If specialist third parties do not exist, organizations interested in hiring people with ID will need to lead job-specific training and placement while Special Olympics Programs focus on providing leadership & skills training as well as experience for athlete leaders.

In summary, Special Olympics’ mission does not extend to solving the chronic issue of low employment of people with ID; however, we can encourage organizations and businesses to include people with ID, using our reach and influence to highlight the benefits of diversity and inclusion for everyone.

To find out more about Unified Leadership, contact Olga Yakimakho at oyakimakho@specialolympics.org