



UNIFIED LEADERSHIP



Untapped Potential

The world today is full of volatility, anger, fear of difference and pressures that divide people. Truly inclusive leadership offers hope and solutions to overcome these divisions. 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 reality, however, the gifts and abilities of people with ID are routinely underestimated and undervalued, and they are often unable to achieve their potential. Special Olympics is committed to continuously developing a deeper understanding of the barriers faced by people with ID. Research has shown that:

- People with ID report that “lack of skills created difficulties for them, which further reduced their confidence and motivation.”
- When corporate employees were asked about diversity and inclusion, “very few mentioned physical diversity, and no one mentioned intellectual diversity.”
- People with ID experience chronically low levels of employment, averaging 19% in the US, reflecting the attitudes, behaviors and low expectations of people without disabilities.

Simply expecting people with ID to “fit in” is not the answer. The thoughts and actions of leaders without disabilities – often the greatest challenge faced by people with ID – need to change. In an effort to shape, drive and sustain that change, Special Olympics has developed the Unified Leadership approach.



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 so they value, include and enable the skills and leadership of people with ID

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

value
include
enable

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

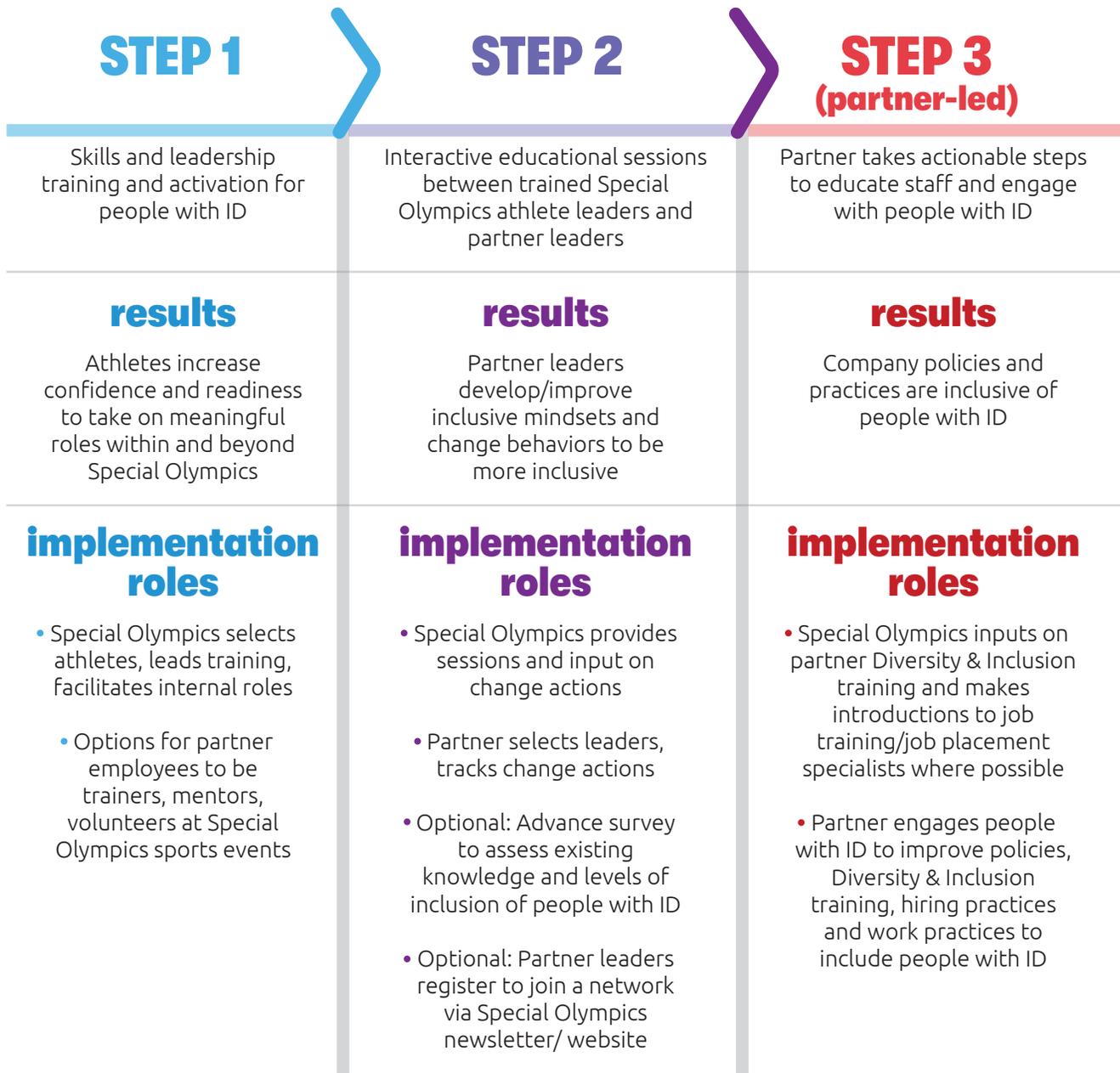
Unified Leadership works because it turns the norm on its head – people with ID are the teachers, inspiring everyone towards a new perspective on what is possible through truly inclusive leadership.



How is the approach implemented?

The Unified Leadership approach can be applied by anyone in a leadership role, from sports coaches to business leaders. Within Special Olympics, it starts with building the capacity of people with ID through leadership learned in sport: skills like discipline and teamwork, and opportunities such as team captaincy. This provides a foundation for additional leadership and learning opportunities in health, education and youth programming, and for development of athlete leaders who learn and utilize new leadership skills.

Special Olympics provides opportunities for leaders in partner organizations to learn about Unified Leadership and implement the approach through the following steps:



Partners benefit from education sessions with athlete leaders who speak candidly about the barriers they have experienced. Through these sessions and additional engagement, for example at community-based Special Olympics sports events, leaders without disabilities are inspired to think about their own behaviors, assumptions and practices. This self-reflection motivates them to re-assess their concept of the “norm” and to create organizational cultures and environments that are inclusive of people with ID.



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, such as organizing sports events or fundraising. These roles boost the self-worth of people with ID, and help Special Olympics to improve its services and show what a truly inclusive organization looks like.

Beyond Special Olympics, leaders without a disability experience a powerful mindset change. The opportunity to listen, interact with and learn from the achievements, grit and resilience of people with ID leads to a new, deeper understanding of inclusive leadership: relationships matter, everyone has value, vulnerabilities are accepted and those who are different are given a chance to lead. In this way, we create communities where people with ID are productive and respected, the ultimate goal of Special Olympics.

The Unified Leadership approach does not stop at inclusion of people with ID. It leads to inclusion of all diverse groups in communities and in the workplace. Companies and organizations benefit through increased creativity, open-mindedness and empathetic leadership that reconciles and celebrates all differences. Organizations that develop an inclusive culture are also more likely to innovate, achieve better business outcomes and meet or exceed financial targets.



Nurturing Differences – A unique opportunity

Despite advances in diversity and inclusion, people with ID remain marginalized, their full potential unrealized. They are often ill-prepared to engage in the community and the workplace, and the leaders of those environments are equally ill-prepared to adapt and truly include those who are different.

Special Olympics tackles exclusion at the most local level. We offer governments, organizations and companies a unique opportunity to do the same by partnering to support training and activation opportunities that nurture the talents of people with ID and empower them to:

be ready for roles within and beyond sport by learning new skills

engage with communities and workplaces

educate leaders with disabilities on how to be truly inclusive

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



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