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Client Story

Creating Inclusive Leadership at Special Olympics

The approach to leadership at Special Olympics focuses on driving personal and cultural change.

The learning and development strategy for Special Olympics staff is designed to help leaders develop an inclusive mindset and use skills and practical tools to strengthen their ability to achieve inclusion globally. The strategy also emphasizes building leadership skills in athletes so that they will have the opportunity to become future leaders within the movement, their communities and workplace.

“We’ve been teaching SLII®, Building Trust, and Self Leadership from Blanchard at Special Olympics for many years to provide our leaders with basic foundational leadership skills,” said Svetlana Fenichel, director, leadership, and organizational development at Special Olympics. “Our ultimate goal is to unleash the leadership potential in people of all abilities. All Blanchard content we work with is designed with inclusion, diversity, and equity in mind, so it aligns with our goals perfectly.”



Svetlana Fenichel



Natalie Newell

To support that goal and extend it even further into the movement, Special Olympics partnered with Blanchard to provide leadership training at the recent 2023 Global Athlete Congress. The Global Athlete Congress is a platform for athlete leaders from all seven Special Olympics regions to develop their leadership skills as they take on leadership roles in their Special Olympics country Programs, their local communities, and their workplaces. The Congress theme Leading Together reflects the goal of creating a society in which people with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), both inside and outside the Special Olympics movement, will lead together in all aspects of society.

The athlete leaders (athletes with IDD) who attend the Global Athlete Congress play a key role in representing the athletes in their regions by providing feedback, guidance, and proposing ideas to the Special Olympics International Board of Directors. They work in their own communities to recruit athletes and to partner with teachers and families to teach the benefits that Special Olympics can offer to people with IDD. This form of advocacy to build awareness and educate people requires leadership skills. “We were excited to be able to partner with Blanchard to offer leadership training to our athlete leaders at the Global Athlete Congress,” says Fenichel. “They put together an engaging program that was very well received.”

To kick off the training, Blanchard solutions architect Peter Brent delivered a keynote address to introduce the concept of limiting beliefs. He explained how people both with and without IDD can allow limiting beliefs to sidetrack them from achieving their goals—but, by shifting their mindset and learning new skills, they can overcome those limiting beliefs. The message of the keynote helped prepare attendees at the conference for a deeper dive into the learning through a workshop featuring the Student Self Leadership program from Blanchard. The program teaches participants how to challenge assumed constraints, be more proactive, and understand their points of power.

During the workshop, athlete leaders and their mentors learned how to identify their own power and start to take control of their own success. “Participants learned how to challenge their limiting beliefs and recognize when those beliefs might be holding them back,” says Fenichel. “Then they learned how to overcome those beliefs to become more successful. Armed with the skills in this workshop, people become empowered. As one athlete put it: ‘Goodbye comfort zone and hello opportunities and development.’ It was thrilling to see them embrace the new concepts.”

The results of a satisfaction survey indicated that 95 percent of participants rated the workshop as excellent or good. It was the highest rating of the Global Athlete Congress sessions.

Elevating the Needs of People with IDD

“It’s important to point out that people with IDD are often excluded from leadership training,” says Natalie Newell, manager of workplace readiness and inclusion. “There is a preconceived idea about who can and who can’t be a leader. People with IDD can be overlooked, and that places them in a marginalized group. At the Special Olympics, we focus on developing the leadership capabilities of all people—people with and without IDD. Partnering with Blanchard to offer the Student Self Leadership training at the Global Athlete Congress helped us provide training to a group of people who don’t always have access to leadership training. The people we trained will use their new skills back in their communities to continue to share the message of inclusive leadership.”

Fenichel agrees. “Our athlete leaders are the ones who are teaching bravery and accountability out there in the world. They are building more inclusive societies. We just taught them some skills to help make their job a little easier.”

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A Closer Look at Self Leadership

Blanchard's Self Leadership program teaches a mindset and skillset to help people take control of their future success. There are three components to the mindset and three skills to practice to become a self leader. The mindset and skills are taught in both Self Leadership and Student Self Leadership.

The Mindset of a Self Leader

The first component of a self leadership mindset is the ability to challenge assumed constraints. An assumed constraint is a belief based on past experience that limits new experiences. For example, when he challenged the conventional wisdom—the assumed constraint—that severe physical disabilities would limit his career, Stephen Hawking went on to become one of the most celebrated physicists in history.

The second component of a self leadership mindset is the ability to activate points of power, namely:

- Position power—having a position of authority to allocate budget and make personnel decisions
- Task power—the ability to influence how a job or task is executed
- Personal power—having personal characteristics that provide an edge when pursuing goals
- Relationship power—being connected or friendly with people who have power
- Knowledge power—experience and expertise

The third component of a self leadership mindset is the ability to be proactive. Self leaders don't always wait to be told what to do—they hold themselves accountable for getting what they need to succeed. They think for themselves and make suggestions for improving things in their department and in their role.

The Skills of a Self Leader

The first component of a self leadership skillset is the ability to set goals. Self leaders take the lead to make sure the goals are specific, motivating, attainable, relevant, and trackable. If a goal lacks specificity, they seek clarification. If a goal is not attainable or relevant, they negotiate to make it more fair, within their control, and tied to the company's metrics.

This second component of a self leadership skillset requires that people learn to diagnose their own development level—their current level of competence and commitment for achieving a goal or task. If people believe they don't have the tools, skills, and competence to do a specific task or solve a specific problem, they need to ask for direction—someone to show them how. If people doubt themselves and are wavering on their commitment to do the job, they need to ask for support—someone to listen and help facilitate their problem solving.

The third component of a self leadership skillset is the ability to get a leadership style that matches their needs. After diagnosing their competence and commitment on a particular goal, self leaders need to proactively ask for the direction (guidance and clarification) and support (listening and problem solving) they need to make progress on the goal. For effective self leaders, a leader is anyone who can provide them with the direction and support they need when they need it.

(Excerpt from *Developing Self Leaders: A Competitive Advantage for Organizations* ©2023 Blanchard)