



In order for athlete leaders to prepare for and undertake meaningful positions of influence and leadership on and off the playing field, it is imperative that they have a partner in their quest to become the best athlete leader they can be. That partner is a mentor.

The dictionary defines mentor as:

- Someone wise and trusted; counselor; supporter; advisor; guide
- A coach; teacher; tutor; instructor; trainer
- Someone who gives help and advice over a period of time to help a person learn a role or job.
- Someone who gives coaching or special training in a particular subject, for an event or for an exam.

For our prospective and newly recruited athlete leaders, a mentor becomes the lynchpin of athlete leadership and opens the door to new horizons for that athlete that neither the athlete, nor the mentor, nor the family may have ever imagined.

For the mentor to take on the role of sage advisor, they must want to take on the responsibility of self-education about the mission, goal, and philosophy of Special Olympics in addition to the purpose, goal and basic concepts of athlete leadership. Using these basics, the mentor journeys with the athlete through observations, experiences, the Athlete Leadership Programs, and practical application of newly developed leadership skills. In essence, the mentor experiences the evolution of an athlete leader.

Building leadership skills is a partnership between an athlete and a mentor and one of the most rewarding experiences ever! Being a mentor is much like being a sports coach. The coach starts with the skill level of the athlete and builds skill upon skill using a variety of strategies to do so. Mentors do the same thing, but they are also being ever mindful of the skills, interests and passions of the athlete leader so they may help them find their niche in athlete leadership programs. A mentor like a sports coach, teaches, instructs and tutors up to a point. When it is time for the athlete to run the race, serve the ball, or make a pitch, it is up to the athlete to do it by themselves. When an athlete is ready for a volunteer experience, ready to write their first speech, ready to hold their first Town Hall or Input Council meeting, we must be ready to let them.

The athlete leadership program is looking for volunteers who are willing to invest the time to fully expand the athletes' universe of knowledge, self-exploration, and practical experiences in leadership. After helping the athlete master each skill level, they should be willing to reduce and adapt their involvement and guidance and allow the athlete to be more independent in this new phase of their leadership ability. It's called empowerment!

As new challenges or skills sets are introduced to an athlete, the mentor will instruct, guide or advise and then gradually reduce assistance. There is no one magic time frame for an athlete's acquisition of knowledge and leadership skills. Every athlete is different in their rate of learning and assimilating experiences into their repertoire of skills and self-confidence.

Mentors roles are multi-dimensional and may include, but are not exclusive to, the following:

- Commit to being a short-term mentor(s) to assist the athlete's initial learning a desired new role if the mentor's expertise or experience does not meet the need of the athlete at that time such as becoming a coach or an official.
- Adapt to new role from being a helper, speech coach, facilitator, advisor, confidant, teacher, and friend to what is needed.
- Work one-on-one during each workshop and monitors follow up tasks.
- Ensure there are adequate opportunities for practicum experiences.
- Commit to a partnership in making the athlete leadership experiences and roles as meaningful as possible.
- Advocate at all times.
- Ensure the athlete knows about training opportunities within and outside of Special Olympics.

Traits of good mentors never diminish but grow with experience. Listed are some of the most important traits any mentor should have:

- Learns everything one can about the athlete.
- Allows athletes time to formulate answers to questions, may ask additional questions using guided discovery and does not answer for them.
- Always gives encouragement.
- Values athletes' opinions and preferences. Always asks the questions why or how to check each athlete's level of understanding.
- Helps athletes stay on task.
- Provides constructive feedback.
- Provides support as needed.
- Listens – people want to know what the athlete thinks, not what the mentor thinks.
- Allows the athlete to express self – gives help only if the athlete is unable.
- Gradually diminishes assistance as athlete leader becomes more proficient in skills and capable in one or more roles.
- Represents Special Olympics professionally.

Levels of Assistance in Sample Scenarios

As athletes travel through their leadership experiences and knowledge-based courses, it is often a challenge for mentors to determine what level of assistance each athlete needs. The best rule of thumb is to stretch the limits of what you think are the boundaries of the athlete's skills before you assume they don't understand. Refrain from falling into the teacher mode when you could be in a helper/mentor role. Below are three different scenarios that mentors will face with their athlete leader that may give some insight into modeling the correct mentor behavior.

1. Developing and Implementing an Athlete Input Council (AIC)
 - Allow athletes to choose the criteria of membership based on guidelines.
 - Allow athletes to develop their own agenda items with an assortment of ideas suggested by the mentor or facilitator but not written by the facilitator and given to the athlete leaders.
 - Teach athletes how to research topics that include policy issues and rules, not do it for them.
 - Help athletes learn to respectfully speak out in opposition to what program leaders are advocating based upon their research and how athletes feel about the topics.
 - Only observe, not participate in AIC meetings; a facilitator is recruited to offer assistance to the chairperson.
2. Becoming a volunteer in an athlete-chosen experience
 - Suggest roles aligned with athlete's skill level after researching options together.
 - Assist the athlete to complete and submit a volunteer inventory, application and background check if necessary; do not complete it for them.
 - Allow the volunteer supervisor to explain the roles, tasks, rules and activities associated with the experience. The mentor's role is practicing and pacing the athlete not taking over his/her role.
3. Developing athlete speeches/presentations before, during and after having taken Athlete Speaker Workshop/Athletes Using Power Point.
 - Athletes should be able to practice the factual information they have learned (facts about SO, the mission, unique qualities of SO, parts of a speech, selling points of target markets) in a fun atmosphere using several different methods. Don't practice like a drill sergeant, but use associations, pictures, verbal cues, or analogies that fit the athlete's level of understanding while infusing repetition as you go. Learning should be fun not stressful.
 - Develop checklists with athletes that will help develop mental and physical readiness such as do I look appropriate to where I am going, what is the room like, who is taking me, what do I bring? Helping athletes learn independence and readiness is the mentor's role. One responsibility for the athlete will be reviewing the items on the checklist each time to ensure they are ready for the event.
 - Allow athletes to put the contents of the speech in their own words, the way they would say it. Mentors or speech coaches are merely scribes to write down those facts, selling points and the call to action that the athlete wants to use. Patience and time are a virtue in this process.

4. Attending Conferences and meetings with athlete leaders
 - Allow them to ask others questions during discussions and presentations.
 - Allow them time to converse with other athletes on subjects; don't interrupt, but listen.
 - Provide opportunities for networking without you, which fosters more independence.
 - Allow them to use their new found knowledge and expertise you have helped them acquire.

Mentors, like coaches, are one of the most challenging volunteers to recruit and are probably the most under-recruited within Special Olympics. Many times, coaches are already overloaded with tasks, and parents may not be the best source for being a mentor due to the normal parent-child relationship. Coaches and parents are called into action because no one else can be found on short notice, and they don't want athletes to miss out.

We can avoid this mismatch by recruiting online, on social media and emailing current volunteers and sharing the job description and the satisfaction the role of mentor brings. There are not many other roles within Special Olympics where there is a tremendous opportunity to interact with athletes without having to possess sports skills! We do a disservice to parents and coaches when they have to give up their positions because of time constraints or because the parent-child relationship is too strained. The athlete suffers if s/he has no one to partner with for coursework and possibly other opportunities. Programs should develop a pool of mentors ready to be matched with new athletes as soon as they are identified.

The Role of Mentors when Traveling with Athletes

There are two phases in this process

1. The Preparation Phase:
 - This includes mentor-assisted activities such as researching issues and/or clarifying materials sent by the lead, interviewing other athletes to get feedback on issues, and coming to conclusions on feedback issues.
 - Review the agenda and timeline associated with the agenda for time of meals, free time, networking time, even how long it will take for appropriate clothes changes for the various activities.
 - Write down all questions associated with the agenda, issues, or travel. Research and record answers. Review with the athlete leader.
 - Develop checklists for ground transportation, primary transportation, and packing information.

Here is a sample checklist that covers, but is not limited to, the above information:

- ✓ Knowledge of and review of schedule
- ✓ Packing list (including what to take, what not to take, and what to carry on)
- ✓ Travel attire
- ✓ iPad or laptop (if desired)
- ✓ 1 flash drive for speeches/important notes and other documents (if desired)
- ✓ Early arrival to airport/airport and bag check (if travelling out of province)
- ✓ On-time departure
- ✓ Emergency cell numbers
- ✓ Keep/manage airline tickets if needed
- ✓ Keep/help manage athlete's personal money if needed
- ✓ Medication packaging and/ or instructions
- ✓ Medical Insurance information

2. The Travel and On-site Phase

This may or may not be performed by the mentor. Travel may be a challenge for a mentor. If the mentor has adequately prepared the athlete, an escort (another screen volunteer or family member) can assist the athlete in traveling to and from the meeting destination and participate fully in the meeting. Preparation is the key, and implementation is based on preparation. The mentor should take pride in knowing that their athlete leader is ready. This phase may include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Ensure both escort and athlete have all checklists, ticket information, ground transportation, directions and hotel information and was jointly reviewed by all (athlete, mentor, escort and family if desired) with them.
- Review agenda and materials *with the athlete to answer any last-minute questions*.
- *Be prepared to deal with transportation emergencies*; ensure the meeting emergency phone number is on each of the checklists.
- Ensure the athlete leader arrives on time for all meals, meetings and events and is properly attired.
- Information prior to the meeting will specify whether or not some of the social functions and meals are open to the escorts. When invited to functions and meals, escorts will not necessarily be seated with their athletes depending on the function and the program. Athletes may be given roles or duties to perform. The escort should always be the quiet partner and ensure the athlete is the one who people are listening to and entertained by.
- Ensure medications are taken as prescribed. A mentor or escort will monitor that medications are taken as prescribed based in information in the medical or from the caregiver/parent.

Generic Qualifications for Mentors Prior to becoming a Mentor

- Must have an up to date Criminal Records Check with Vulnerable Sector Screening and be a registered member, in good standing, of a Special Olympics Club.
- Must have a valid driver's license.
- Must have car insurance and be in good standing.

Specific qualifications for mentors prior to being paired with an athlete leader include:

- Has reviewed the "*Beyond the Vision*" presentation with accompanying *video*.
- Must agree to attend courses from the Athlete Leadership Training Series with athlete leader.
- Agrees to be a mentor to one athlete leader.