

Presentation Transcript

Topic: Is our current ecosystem effective in enabling the changes for society to accept and include Persons with disabilities/ Persons with intellectual disabilities in the same space? Are agencies doing enough to support to enable the cause?

Speaker: Captain Roger Loh, Special Olympic Singapore

Thank you, Johannes, for the nice introduction. I knew Johannes when he was nine years old, when he came up to me, when I was a coach in badminton for Special Olympics Singapore. And he was that tiny. Look at him now. That's what the movement actually give a person.

Very good morning to all of you. I'm Roger Loh, president of Special Olympics Singapore. I have served the organisation for nearly two decades. And, I'm humbled to be part of this meaningful movement to foster greater inclusivity in our society, through the power of sports.

This morning, I'd like to share a little bit more about our organisation and our perspective on promoting inclusive practices through the programmes and activities we run.

We are part of a global movement, founded in 1968 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver. The Special Olympics mission remains as vital today, reaching out to nearly 6 million athletes, and over 1 million volunteers worldwide. Special Olympics strives to create a better world by fostering and acceptance and inclusion of all people.

In the early days, Intellectually Disability (ID), then known as 'mental retardation' were shun by the public and labeled as not socially acceptable and effectively drove them to be house bound or left in institutions. The psychological effect of the R-word is also hurtful and destructive. What started off as a backyard camp for a small group of children with ID in the summer of 1962, took traction and flourished to a global movement to help identify and disseminate ways to prevent the cause of intellectual disabilities. Truly, no better way when sports is used as a medium to connect and unite PWIDs on a common platform.

As a result of believing in the true cause, Sports has made significant impact in their lives. In the early days, even parents were rather reluctant to be in public with their child due to the immense stigma.

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In Singapore, through partnering with special schools and daycare centres for Intellectual Disability. I would say that, then participation and progress was slow. But our pioneer volunteers were not giving up. At this juncture, I would like to give thanks to the founding members for their relentless perseverance, and patience in the advocacy.

Today, PWIDs are empowered to discover new strengths and abilities, skills and success. Our athletes find joy, confidence and fulfilment, on the playing field and in life.

Our work goes far beyond sports events. Through extensive programming in other important areas, such as health, education, and community building. Persons with Intellectual Disabilities benefit not only in physical, but social, mental, and confidence. In one such example, in athlete leadership development. The leadership and skills curriculum is designed to provide athletes with leadership training, as well as, personal and professional development that they can apply to leadership roles in their programme, community and workplace.

Through various workshops and social events, they learn to recognise and manage emotions to maintain relationship and effectively engage with others. The training and hands-on experience acquired has equipped them with tools and skills to better integrate into society. As a result, some have also gained meaningful employment in society. This is where true inclusion happens. And, we hope it will gain more traction and acceptance by mankind in Singapore and in the world.

When nobody gets left behind, everybody moves forward.

How do we build an inclusive society where everyone is accepted as an equal? To do this, we need to have a robust ecosystem and effort by all for true transformation to happen.

Our efforts alone are not powerful enough to drive big changes. We need to include every member in the society. We need inclusive collaborations with each and every key member in the society, to drive movements from ripples to big waves.

Here is an overview on who are the key drivers in this ecosystem. I'll start with the parents and family. Family Support is very vital and important. They are the key changemakers. In the school, the special education and mainstream schools provide the platform for them in the early childhood, and also the secondary days. Our coaches, educators and peers, very important, where they are the role models, the general public, the volunteers, Special Olympic strives on volunteers.

A lot of our volunteers are there for them. And most of our programmes are run by volunteers. And, so far, as the corporates are concerned, the corporates play a very big part in the support process with regard to giving the grants and also helping us run the whole programme. But if

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not for the government's infrastructure and master plan, that brings the whole ecosystem together, we may not be having a good system here. We are all interlinked, and one would not work without the other to support and drive the mission, hand in hand. Special Olympics Singapore aims to work with other NSA and charity organisation to better engage our key stakeholders.

Because, alone we can do so little, together, we can do so much.

Some creative examples of how SOSG engages the drivers in the ecosystem. One such example is how our Unified Sports leads to the annual Play Inclusive event, partnering SportCares and mainstream schools' students.

Unified Sports join people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team. And it aims to break down stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities in a really fun way. As the movement continues to grow, the joy of Unified Sports is bringing together people, to create deeper awareness and empathy.

For the third year running Special Olympics Singapore have partnered with SportCares, supported by the Ministry of Education, to organise the annual Play Inclusive competition. It is truly a unique platform that provides the opportunity for everyone to come together on the same playing fields and courts in the spirit of friendship and respect for diversity. If you attended yesterday's conference, you would have heard all about Play Inclusive, through my team, as well as SportCares.

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world and the way we live, work, and play. Interaction is greatly reduced, and with resilience and determination, we will find ways to continue to challenge the cause.

In summary, is our current ecosystem effective in enabling the changes for society to accept and include Persons with Disability, and Persons with Intellectual Disability in the same space?

Since the 2015, Disability Sports Master plan, I dare say that significant changes have taken place to create a thriving disability sports ecosystem. However, in the persons with intellectual disabilities sector, we struggle in the areas of public awareness and acceptance, to coexist in the same space. It is not in the area of hardware, or software, but rather "heartware". For total inclusion to happen, the whole ecosystem needs to be empowered. Perhaps, we should take stock of the 18-point recommendation of the master plan to review how effective it has been, and continue to make the necessary changes from there.

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Are agencies doing enough to support to enable the cause? We acknowledge the efforts of the long partnership of our corporate sponsors, and hope they will continue to journey with us. I would like to see more partnership, more corporate companies, large or small, to champion this cause, not only by donating their money, but to also promote this within their employees. It increases the rate of acceptance in society, especially important for students in mainstream schools to champion the Inclusive Sports and spread the cause and accelerate the road to acceptance and inclusion.

Change starts here. We can count on you. Thank you.