



Following the Lead of the Paralympics in the Workplace

The Paralympics is an event where something very special happens on the sports fields. There are many lessons businesses can learn from these events to build a more inclusive and high performing organizations.

While watching the alpine skiing event at Sochi 2014 Paralympic Winter Games in March, it was impossible to not be amazed at the athleticism and determination of the skiers. That is true of any Olympic event because the participants are the best of the best, but at Paralympics there is always a caveat. They are the best of the best of the disabled, and that is ironic because there was nothing “not able” about the athletes.

The Paralympics would seem to prove the disability activists right. People are not disabled by their disability but by how they are accommodated by society. The Paralympics accommodates impairments, and the result is a stunning display of competitive spirit, physical effort, intensive training and incredible skill.

The message for businesses is clear: There is top talent that is disabled who are excluded from full participation in the workforce only because of a failure of accommodation.

The 2014 Paralympic games had a record global viewing audience, indicating people are finally ... finally ... beginning to recognize that accommodating people with impairments does not make them less competitive or talented. It just makes them “accommodated.” The variety of impairments found on the alpine skiing slope proves that people can deliver a top performance when accommodation fits the need. There were visually impaired skiers (they have a guide), paralyzed skiers (they use a mono-ski with seat) and skiers using prosthetics (the prosthetics are the accommodation).

What is most striking is that the Paralympic skiers compete against each other using various accommodations, and no one complains. No one says the sitting skiers have an advantage because they are sitting or the visually impaired skiers have an advantage because they have a guide. The sitting paraplegic biathlon skier competes with the visually impaired biathlon skier who has a guide. All biathlon skiers shoot from a prone position, meaning those who have trouble getting down on the ground and back up must find new methods for overcoming physical limitations. All athletes get down on the ground to shoot and all get back up without help. Cross-country sit-skiers who are paralyzed and standing skiers with missing arms or prosthetic legs compete on the same course.

Businesses can learn much from the Paralympics and its organizers. The Russian government and Paralympic Organizing Committee had to do advance planning to ensure the Sochi roads, housing, transportation, public facilities, and sporting arenas and courses were barrier-free. One-thousand



days before the start of the Paralympic games the organizing committee launched an accessibility map which pinpointed easily accessible sports locations for the impaired to encourage participation.

If businesses are serious about giving all people equal opportunities to join their workforces, they need to do their own advance planning to ensure facilities, parking lots, work spaces and so on are accessible. The business “accessibility map” is the talent management process that shows how diverse people of all colors, genders, and impairments can bring their skills and capabilities to the organization.

One of the inspiring consequences of Russia hosting the Paralympic Games is that they became a catalyst for change within Russia. The emphasis on creating a barrier-free environment in Sochi laid the foundation for looking at the rest of Russia. The games inspired a new Russian government barrier-free law and a host of projects and initiatives to address the needs of the impaired.

Every business that accommodates without prejudice becomes a benchmark against which other companies can measure. It is good to have a strong policy that prohibits discrimination, but there are more ways to discriminate than with words or actions. When unable to reach a work location or unable to participate in meetings due to lack of accommodation, there is discrimination by default. Managers should seriously question their real intent and then find ways to accommodate the talented disabled. One starting point is accommodating technology like software for the hearing and visually impaired and Web-based meetings that enable attendance from any location.

The social theory of disability argues that impairments should not be viewed as personal tragedies; rather they should be understood from the extent of the disconnect between an impaired person and their environment. This philosophy is favored in the United Kingdom and Scandinavian countries. For example, a person with an amputated leg is not disabled when sitting in a meeting with co-workers or a hearing impaired person is not disabled while using a tablet computer to remotely access business marketing programs.

After the Paralympic Games were over, Amy Purdy became a contestant on the popular U.S. show “Dancing with the Stars.” Amy lost both legs below the knee at the age of 19 due to bacterial meningitis. At the age of 34, the snowboarder won a bronze medal at the Sochi Paralympic Winter Games. One of the judges pointed out that she would not be judged differently. Amy and her dance partner placed second after she delivered weeks of remarkable performances while wearing various prosthetic feet that accommodated required dance movements.

The message for businesses is that people need a first opportunity to get the second one. In a more inclusive and accommodating business environment, the statistics would be quite different. In the U.S., a person with an impairment is twice as likely to be unemployed as those who have no impairment. Statistics Canada reports that 10.4 percent of the disabled were employed in 2006 compared to 6.8 percent of the non-disabled. A 2013 data study by Cornell University found that in Europe approximately 47 percent of working age people with disabilities are employed compared to 72 percent without disabilities.



A business should ask itself: Are we defining disability by the impairment or by an unwillingness to accommodate without prejudice? Are the human resources policies, the talent management process, the corporate culture and the facilities creating an environment where impaired people are viewed as “not able?”

Labeling people always seems to lead to exclusion. Managers who fear that hiring the disabled because they will cost more in terms of support resources or believe they will be unproductive are only harming their organizations by excluding members who truly belong in a top talent pool. All they need is that first opportunity.