CHALLENGING THE MERIT PRINCIPLE

Is your workplace a genuine meritocracy?

Step 1: Processes and criteria

How are performance-based pay & rewards distributed?

Who is responsible for setting up the processes and criteria?

How transparent are they?

Step 2: Outcomes

What rewards are given to employees?

Who is responsible for checking to make sure these decisions are driven by merit?

Who gets to see the analysis of the data?

Step 3: Audiences

Who is ultimately responsible for and who knows about the processes, criteria and outcomes?

Who decides who is allowed to design and implement any changes that will help to develop (and maintain) a genuinely meritocratic workplace culture?

An appealing construct

The notion of a merit-based approach to achieving greater gender balance has considerable face level appeal, especially in countries such as Australia, the US or the UK, where there is long-standing public support for egalitarian values and the principle of a fair go for all. The thinking behind the merit principle is that, if all individuals and all groups are given the same opportunities and are treated in just the same way, then those who are the best qualified and the most suitable will automatically progress.

When groups of Australians, for example, are surveyed, there is generally very strong support for the merit principle and for organisations to operate as meritocracies. This comment is typical, "It's important that gender and merit are considered together. It's counter-productive if some people are seen to get ahead not because of their own merits. Merit needs to be preserved in any selection or promotion process. Then if a job goes to a woman or a member of a minority group, everyone will know they deserve it because our organisation is a meritocracy."

An ironic history

Where does this term come from? The British sociologist Michael Young coined it in his satirical novel 'The Rise of the Meritocracy' first published in 1958. The book describes a dystopian society in a future United Kingdom where the elite groups justify holding power by arguing that their superior position is merited. Ironically, the term meritocracy has been adopted with none of the negative connotations Young intended it to have. In fact, before he died in 2002, he expressed his disappointment that the term he'd created had been so widely embraced but so poorly understood

Merit principle often misunderstood

In practice, ensuring merit is far more complex than is generally understood. One issue of interest to researchers is that common differences in opportunity among groups in society and how people are perceived more broadly tend to be reflected (and indeed reproduced) in the workplace. This means it can be challenging to ensure there is a genuine 'level playing field' where merit can be applied in any reliable way. Stereotypical expectations and assumptions, together with common human biases, can operate to undermine even well-designed merit based systems. These effects can be unintentional but nevertheless powerful.

The risk of imaginary meritocracies!

As noted, in Western societies, there is a pervasive worldview in which social rewards are assumed to reflect individual merit and hard work. People can 'make it' regardless of their background. The media

and popular culture make much of examples of individuals whose life stories embody and reinforce this ethos. In an organisation, if 'how things are done round here', is believed to reflect these meritocratic principles, how do people interpret seeing so few women and members of minority groups in senior roles? A number of research groups in Canada and the US investigated this question.

One study found that when groups of subjects saw an organisation as functioning along merit principles, then the examples they were given of biased treatment were not explained as discrimination but as individual deficiencies, for example in talent or ambition. The conclusion was that most of us wish to believe in merit and this causes us not to see structural barriers and bias for what they are. In such situations, women may interpret their lack of success as their own fault and be less inclined to challenge or take action, for example on pay gaps. It seems beliefs about merit influence the extent to which we notice obstacles to gender balance progress and, therefore, whether we are motivated to remove them. This distinction holds for both women and men.

The paradox of meritocracy

Experimental studies also show that when an organisation is referred to as a meritocracy, individuals in managerial positions will tend to favour male employees over equally qualified female ones and give them larger rewards. It seems that calling the organisation a meritocracy and imagining that it is, creates 'moral credentialing'. People feel the public commitment to merit and the organisation's policies justify them in making non-egalitarian decisions: they don't feel any individual accountability or responsibility to monitor their behaviour and so they discriminate.

In one study, an experiment was set up involving 400 people with managerial experience. They had to make decisions about promotion, rewards and bonuses. In the first condition, participants were told they worked in a meritocratic organisation where rewards were distributed equitably. In the second condition, participants were told their organisation stressed managerial autonomy and accountability. In the first condition, managers favoured males over qualified females, while in the second condition women fared much better. The explanation seems to be that we are less vigilant about our individual actions when we believe that the system will manage fairness for us and that our own choices won't be interpreted as biased because "we're all committed to merit round here."

The positive conclusion from recent studies is that we *can* build meritocratic organisations but it needs accountability, transparency and robust analytics. In the side box, you'll find some questions to consider!