



The Myth of Meritocracies

By Barbara Annis

When is fairness not fair? When well-intended business leaders build meritocracies where the talented—regardless of their gender—are promoted based on their abilities and achievements. Sounds ironic, but in many ways, the measures of performance in most organizations today unconsciously ensure a glass ceiling remains firmly in place.

It's become a warm and comfortable security blanket for leaders who can point to their merit-based programs and safely say that they're being impartial to gender, although, in reality, their construct of fairness truly isn't fair. Their blind spot is in not seeing the built-in inequalities in measuring performance.

Seeking comfort in sameness, organizations look for specific types of behavior from their leaders—behaviors that just happen to align more closely with the nature of men and their style of leadership than that of women. Whether in decision-making, managing projects, closing deals, or leading teams, women will often get to the same results, and often improve the outcomes, using a different path than men. Yet, in most meritocracies, sameness thinking is valued and rewarded over difference thinking.

Even more to the point, when organizations say they are fair in their hiring and promotion, it means that they look for a very specific set of behaviors and attitudes that most often align with the male model that already exists. Anyone can advance if they demonstrate the desired behaviors and attitudes, which unwittingly favors men (or women that fit the male mold). As a result, fewer women as a percentage climb to the top where the male model is often firmly in place.

Two of the most visible places we see this scenario played out are in the high-tech and financial services industries. And it's no surprise that both are still showing a paucity of women in top positions. In high-tech companies, software engineers and developers who are most valued—and therefore who climb the ranks—are those who are extremely fast in their communication style, incredibly analytical, and have an ability to tear down any idea or anyone who demonstrates a flaw in their thinking. Similarly, in the financial services industry, aggressiveness and hard charging behavior is highly rewarded.

Many women with equal intelligence and an incredible ability to think through complex problems and make well-informed decisions will often hold back in environments like these—and not be viewed as high potentials because of it. Men generally don't see the problem because they're "naturally" comfortable functioning within the male paradigm for conducting business.

As a result, many capable women have difficulty climbing the organizational ladder. And the few women that do manage to fit in and survive simply adopt and reinforce the existing male model of behavior.

Without question, promotion based on achievement and ability is the right philosophy. In addition to ensuring an organization stays true to its growth plan and attains its annual objectives, a meritocracy helps shape a truly diverse, engaged, and inclusive workforce. It can also help male leaders overcome the perception of gender bias in sponsoring and promoting only those who remind them of themselves. Yet many organizational meritocracies are simply gender-blind and the purportedly objective criteria on which employees in the workplace are judged stem from this male model.

Imagine for a moment that the roles are reversed. Pretend that the prevailing business model was developed by women for women. Now imagine men being invited to participate in a meritocracy based on the metrics of a traditional female model. Men would feel forced to play a part oftentimes diametrically opposed to the way they would naturally prefer to engage in business. Not allowed to act on instinct, men would feel as if they were working with their hands tied behind their backs. They would feel undervalued for exhibiting behavior that doesn't measure up to the standards set by the female-designed organization.

Some might argue that the business world is by-and-large competitive, and who could disagree with the desire to attract and promote the "right" behaviors that best succeed in this competitive world. But the world is changing and expectations of leaders to be more inclusive, create engaged workforces, and seek win-win solutions to knotty problems is growing. In our emerging world, women not only tend to lead quite well, but they are often better than men on average in many of the evolving expectations of leaders.

When is fairness not fair? When the natural talents and skills of women are not being recognized and fully utilized as the meritocracy seeks to force fit them into a male mold. In order for a meritocracy to work effectively, the metrics must be based on how men *and* women uniquely think and act. Differences need be valued in order for meritocracies to be truly performance-based and reflected in evaluations, promotions, and compensation.