
The Meritocracy Myth

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James Truslow Adams is credited with coining the phrase "American Dream" in his 1931 book *Epic of America*. In that book Adams wrote that, “[t]he American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement...It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”

Social scientists maintain that the American Dream is central to that national ethos of the United States and its basic ideas seem to be deeply embedded in the way we think about a myriad of issues, including our notions about the best way to manage and lead people. One of its essential elements is the idea of “opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” which translates into our adoration of meritocracy – where rewards are based upon demonstrated performance – and our abhorrence of nepotism, cronyism, and other systems where rewards are based upon factors such as social position or political power. It seems a marvelous ideal and one destined to bring out the best in all of us, or at least to avoid rewarding those who have not earned it. We seem enamored with the idea of a system that provides just rewards for those who work and just consequences for those who do not.

Ironically, the first use of the word may have been pejorative. In his satirical book *Rise of the Meritocracy*, Michael Young describes a dystopian future in which one's social place is determined by intelligence and performance. In Young's view, such a social system ultimately leads to social revolution in which the masses overthrow an elite who, having gained power, status, and wealth through the meritocracy, pervert the system to maintain their privileged position.

At the same time, we know that all of us need a helping hand from time-to-time. We also know that some of those who appear to be underachievers are really bright, hardworking, ethical people who have been thwarted by circumstance.

Thomas Jefferson said that in America we hold as sacred two core values that are incompatible: equality and freedom. He noted that if you wanted to treat everyone equally you could never grant everyone maximum freedom, because freedom would allow some people to get ahead while others fall behind. This is so because some of this getting ahead and falling behind will be beyond people's control and so equality would be lost. Freedom can also create situations where some people have opportunities or resources or advantages that are not available to everyone else. Equality, on the other hand, might foster free-riders, fail to reward those who work hard, and encourage mediocrity. Jefferson cautioned that we have to sacrifice one of these values for the other. The price we pay for freedom is inequality or the price we pay for equality is restrictions.

I think the same thing is true of meritocracy in organizations. In principle, meritocracies sound great. But true meritocracy requires that everyone have the same opportunity to perform well so that we can be sure that any performance is due to their skill and effort. At the same time, meritocracy means that we have to treat people differently. Some people are going to get more than others which, by definition, gives them some advantage for the next round of performance. We like to think that a meritocracy is fair and just, but achieving that level of fairness seems to be beyond our ability.

A great sociologist, Robert Merton, coined the term the "Matthew Effect" that represents a potential dark side that might befoul meritocracies. The name comes from a verse in the Bible, Matthew 25:29 where it is written (RSV) that, "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." Merton noted that, in many situations, people are identified early on as stars and then a far greater share of resources are invested in those stars than in anyone else. These stars are purportedly identified because of their talent or effort, but Merton notes that the differences between the stars and others may not be meaningful. Nonetheless, the stars get far better treatment, far more opportunities, and far more second and third and fourth chances than almost anyone else. If you are a sports fan, you can think of first round draft choices that are examples of the Matthew effect. I can remember a recent quarterback, drafted by the Chicago Bears from the University of Florida, who is an example of the Matthew

Effect. Reports were that this player had all kinds of special help – trainers, coaches, performance gurus – that no other player received, yet he never performed well. At the same time a low round draft choice who did perform well on the field got benched or cut each time the team wanted to give the star yet another chance. The star was finally cut, but only after the team had invested an unequal, and some might say unfair, amount of resources in him.

Another potential problem of meritocracies is called the “41st chair problem.” It refers to the French Academy of Sciences during the Renaissance period that elected as members and immortals the 40 people who purportedly were the most distinguished members of French society. The 41st chair refers to those people who were never elected into the Academy, people like Descartes, Rousseau, Pascal, Molière, Flaubert, and Proust. History suggests that the contributions and greatness of the 40 chair holders are not significantly different from the occupants of the 41st chair, yet at the time of the Academy, election was viewed as the result of a meritocracy.

In many social institutions, including the one I live in – higher education – we embrace the idea of meritocracy. Each year at my wonderful university the incoming class of first year students is hailed as among America’s best and brightest. Each year we hear that this is the smartest class ever admitted, and point to ever increasing SAT scores and GPAs as evidence. It is true that we are blessed with fantastic students – smart people of

profound integrity. But recently, in the name of meritocracy, the university instituted a mandatory grade distribution. This means that some of our elite students must get lower grades. I doubt these differences in grades will reflect meaningful differences in learning, but I do know that a legion of research that strongly suggests this kind of meritocracy will like create lots of problems. Among these problems are diminishing well-being among our high-striving students, eroding collegiality among them as they compete for scarce “A” grades, and more of professors’ time spent trying to defend the grades they assigned rather than on helping our students learn¹.

¹ These are a very few of the studies that caution us about the efficacy of grades and forced grade distributions:

Covington, 2000, [Goal theory, motivation, and school achievement: An integrative review](#). *Annual Review of Psychology*. Vol 51, 171-200.

Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, [Motivational beliefs, values, and goals](#). *Annual Review of Psychology*. Vol 53(1), 109-132.

Illies, R., & Judge, T. A. 2005. Goal regulation across time: The effects of feedback and affect. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90: 453-467.

Isen, 2002, [Missing in action in the AIM: Positive affect's facilitation of cognitive flexibility, innovation, and problem solving](#). *Psychological Inquiry*. Vol 13(1), 57-65. (Scroll through the commentaries until you find Alice Isen's.)

Isen, 2000, [Some perspectives on positive affect and self-regulation](#). *Psychological Inquiry*. Vol 11(3), 184-187.

Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005, [The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect: Does Happiness Lead to Success?](#) *Psychological Bulletin*. Vol 131(6), 803-855.

Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006, [Classroom goal structure, student motivation, and academic achievement](#). *Annual Review of Psychology*. Vol 57, 487-503.

Meritocracies are things that we seem to both love and hate. We love it when we come out on top because we can believe our winning place was due to our talent and hard work. We hate it when we don't come out on top because we find it hard to accept that our losing place was due to our lack of talent or lack of hard work. It would be bad enough if the worst outcome of meritocracies was just unfair rewards. But when the well-being of people and communities suffers, costs we rarely trace back to our reward systems, then the damage could cut very deep.



enjoy work.