IF YOU THINK YOUR ORGANIZATION IS A MERITOCRACY, IT'S PROBABLY HURTING YOUR DIVERSITY EFFORTS (PART 1)

All of us like to believe that we work in a meritocracy where strong performers are catapulted to the top. What could be fairer? People who do good work and put in long hours are rewarded. People who don't, well, they end up where they probably should be. It's the American way; it's the immigrant way; it's survival of the fittest. It's an idea that is fundamental to business itself. Except that it isn't true…

Most of us do not work in a meritocracy. Our misguided belief that we do, however, prevents us from taking the necessary steps to ensure the best performers get ahead and undermines diversity and inclusion efforts.

Why aren't our workplaces meritocracies? Ability, hard work, and a good character are key ingredients for success in any organization, and the people at the top most likely excelled at all three. But for most, these alone did not get them there, particularly if they're part of the dominant and/or majority group(s) in an organization. The people who have reached the top likely were assisted by in-group favoritism which causes us to perceive achievements of people in our own group as the result of superior innate qualities. On the flip side, the achievements of people outside of our group are viewed as the result of luck or external circumstances, and they likely benefited from not having the same obstacles others have faced including:

- lack of access to assignments and opportunities that promote professional development and increase visibility;
- fewer mentors and sponsors;
- cognitive resources spent covering and trying to fit in with the majority culture;
- repeatedly having to prove one's competence;
- lack of recognition of achievements;
- absence of role models;
- biased evaluations;
- more tenuous social connections; and
- overt and implicit bias.

Here's how thinking you work in a meritocracy makes it less likely that you'll ever do so.

Studies show people who think they are objective are more likely to be biased in their decision making. When we assume our perceptions are fair and accurate, we don't examine our views or actions and are unaware if we are influenced by biases. Taking this to the organizational level magnifies the effect. Organizations that view themselves as meritocracies deny they have an equal opportunity problem and will see less urgency in implementing effective

diversity and inclusion initiatives. Some people in such organizations have complained that diversity programs discriminate against the majority which has led to them actively resisting change efforts.

There are more reasons why that thinking your organization is a meritocracy can undermine your diversity efforts. For one, it shifts the responsibility for the lack of diversity from the organization and its leaders to those who have been traditionally under-represented. If merit alone determines advancement, then those who are trying to advance just need to work harder. Never mind that for more than three decades, the standard advice to women and employees of color has been to work hard, and the top echelons of business have barely changed in composition. Another reason is it actually strengthens the status quo. Ignoring the fact that some get ahead more easily than others reinforces stereotypes that people in under-represented groups are less competent than those in the majority.

Recognizing how believing an organization is a meritocracy adversely affects diversity and inclusion efforts is the first step. In Part 2 of this Action Step, we will provide measures individuals and organizations can take to dispel the notion of meritocracy, and make way for meaningful advancement on diversity and inclusion priorities.