

*For leaders ready to close the gap between the meritocracy they believe in and the one they are actually building.*

### LEADER'S CHECKLIST

#### **Publish criteria for stretch and high-visibility assignments.**

Use joint evaluation to reduce bias. When criteria are explicit and shared before decisions are made, familiarity has less room to masquerade as readiness.

#### **Track access quarterly.**

Who presents to senior leaders? Who leads high-stakes initiatives? Who has P&L; responsibility? Look for patterns before they become entrenched.

#### **Sponsor, not just mentor.**

Tie sponsorship to actual advancement outcomes. Mentors give advice. Sponsors open doors, advocate in rooms the employee is not in, and put their reputation behind someone's readiness.

#### **Rotate visibility intentionally.**

Counter proximity bias in hybrid environments by making opportunity distribution visible and trackable. If the same people always get the stage, examine why.

#### **Audit for pedigree shortcuts.**

Challenge assumptions that equate fit with familiarity or prestige. Ask for evidence of capability rather than signals of similarity.

#### **Ask the uncomfortable questions.**

Who has not had this opportunity yet? Whose potential have we not fully tested? Where might familiarity be guiding us more than intention?

### CRAFT GUARDRAILS

#### **Name the mechanism, not the villain.**

The paradox of meritocracy shows bias often worsens when evaluators assume their process is already objective. The problem is systemic, not personal. Name the pattern, not the person.

#### **Make the invisible visible.**

Informal systems replicate themselves. Track who gets which opportunities. What is not measured will not change.

### **Separate potential from proximity.**

Ask for evidence of capability, not familiarity. The most visible person in the room is not always the most ready person for the role.

### **Equity is not about guaranteeing outcomes.**

It is about ensuring opportunity is not unintentionally reserved for the already visible. When access broadens, organizations consistently discover capability that was always there.

## **REFLECTION PROMPTS**

### **If your top talent list looks the same every year, what is it actually measuring?**

Performance, or exposure? Spend ten minutes mapping who got the most developmental access this year before you finalize any promotion slate.

### **Who opened a door for you early in your career?**

Think about what that made possible. Then ask whose door you could open this year.

### **Where might familiarity be guiding your decisions more than you realize?**

This is not a question about intent. It is a question about pattern.

## **SOURCES AND FURTHER READING**

- McKinsey & Company — Women in the Workplace, The Broken Rung
- MIT Media Lab — The Paradox of Meritocracy Research
- MDPI — Sponsorship, Mentorship, and Advancement Equity
- Harvard Business Review — Making Your Stretch Assignments More Equitable
- MIT Sloan Management Review — Fit, Pedigree, and Talent Misconceptions
- APA — Structured Evaluation and Bias Reduction in Promotion Decisions