

The best don't always rise to the top but merit isn't a lost cause

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The way forward begins with seeing things as they are, not as we wish them to be. (Pixabay)

Summary

- *Position needn't reflect competence and the world isn't what we may wish it to be. Yet, there are ways for societies, organizations and nations to not just foster meritocracy, but also minimize the damage caused by inept leadership.*

In any field—be it **business**, politics, administration, academia or civil society—there is an unspoken assumption that those at the highest echelons are there because they are suitable for those roles and are highly competent. This belief is so deeply ingrained that we rarely question it. Yet, a closer look reveals a different reality: the upper tiers of any field are not exclusively populated by the best and most suitable. Instead, they reflect a normal distribution—some are extraordinarily capable, many are middling and many are incompetent or **even dangerous**.

This phenomenon is not merely about individual failings; it is systemic. The traits that help someone rise to the top are not necessarily the same as those needed to **govern**, lead or manage effectively once they get there. Worse, the very structures that elevate people often reward qualities that have little to do with what these roles require.

The consequences of this mismatch are everywhere—in failing institutions, misguided policies and dysfunctional organizations. At times, this can put societies and the entire world at risk.

The *first* problem is that the traits and capacities required to ‘attain’ those top positions are often different from those needed to play the roles effectively. A politician may be a brilliant campaigner, capable of winning elections through charisma and rhetoric, but governance demands a commitment to the public interest, patience and an ability to navigate complexity—qualities that electoral politics doesn’t naturally select for.

Similarly, in business, a manager might climb the corporate ladder by excelling at short-term financial gains or salesperson-ship, only to falter when entrusted with organizational culture and long-term strategy.

The *second* issue is the role of chance. Luck—whether in the form of timing, connections or sheer randomness—plays an enormous part in success. Hard work matters, of course, but it is not enough. Many capable people never ascend because they lack the right opportunities, networks or support, while others rise due to circumstances they had little to do with. Worse, some rise through manipulation and sycophancy, and some by simply being in the right place at the right time.

The *third* and perhaps worst problem is an illusion: the ‘halo effect’ of position. Society often assumes that because someone has achieved prominence in one domain, their judgement must be infallible in others. A successful tech CEO is treated as an oracle on education policy; a celebrated artist is asked to weigh in on geopolitics. This misplaced reverence grants the elite an unearned authority, often with disastrous results.

We like to believe that our systems are meritocratic—that talent and effort alone determine who rises. But this is a comforting fiction. Merit exists, but it is only one factor among many. Networks, privilege, institutional biases and sheer randomness shape outcomes just as much, if not more. And yet the myth persists, reinforcing the idea that those at the top ‘deserve’ to be there.

The danger is not just that mediocrity thrives at the highest levels, but that it reshapes entire systems in its image. When inept individuals lead organizations, their flaws affect everything within them. Competent people leave, grow disillusioned, or adapt to the dysfunction. Over time, decline is assured.

What can be done?

The *first* step is to nurture scepticism. We must resist the reflexive deference given to those in power. People holding prestigious positions does not mean they know what they are doing. History is littered with examples of leaders who were celebrated in their time but later revealed to be inept or destructive. Healthy doubt—asking for evidence, challenging assumptions and making independent assessments—is a necessary corrective.

The *second* is humility. Those of us who find ourselves in positions of influence must recognize the limits of our own competence. The higher one climbs, the easier it is to mistake authority for wisdom. Leaders who acknowledge gaps in their knowledge and weaknesses in their traits are far more likely to seek diverse perspectives and make better decisions than those who think their success proves their infallibility.

Finally, we need systems that mitigate the risks of bad leadership. Robust checks and balances, deliberative decision-making and cultures that encourage engaging the minds and hearts of many can prevent the worst excesses of incompetent and unsuitable people at the top. No system is foolproof, but ones that have eternal vigilance, knowing that every day is a new battle, are less likely to be hijacked by the unworthy.

We live in an age where the failures of elites are impossible to ignore. Governments flounder, corporations implode and institutions lose public trust—not always because of external shocks, but because those at the helm were never as capable as we assumed. Recognizing this is not cynicism; it is realism.

The alternative is to keep pretending that position equals competence and wisdom—a delusion that only perpetuates dysfunction. The way forward begins with seeing things as they are, not as we wish them to be. Only then can we demand better, expect more and perhaps over time ensure that those who rise are truly those who deserve to. Else, we deserve what we get.

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