

Please don't let me be misunderstood

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"The road to hell is paved with good intentions" was a saying I heard quite a few times while growing up, as another childhood wheeze bit the dust. I returned to it while reading Michal Sandel's recent book 'The Tyranny of Merit', in which he takes a very critical look at the notion of meritocracy.

On the face of it meritocracy is a well-intentioned attempt to ensure that how well anyone does isn't a consequence of where they are in the social order. In theory everyone progresses on the basis of their skills and talents and how hard they work.

However, there is a danger in a meritocratic society that those that succeed can become convinced it is all down to their own efforts, with little owing to chance, educational opportunities or parental ambition. As a consequence whatever rewards come their way, can be justified because, in the words of the advert, they are worth it.

The flip side of this is that those who don't succeed are made to feel it is down to their inadequacies and feel looked down upon and humiliated. They are told that their route to salvation is to retrain or work harder to be more competitive, where the competition can often be on the other side of the globe. These competitive pressures also constrain what they earn and make employment more precarious.

As a result many meritocratic societies have witnessed a widening inequality of both opportunity and outcome and a seizing up of social mobility. Sandel distinguishes between equality of consumption (on which income redistribution schemes and other top down policy initiatives to address inequality tend to focus on) and equality of production, which receives less attention, this relates to how included in society people feel and whether they have work which gives them a sense of purpose and self-esteem.

We all have a need to be needed. If people don't feel they are making a meaningful contribution this can lead to disenchantment, which can manifest itself in many ways, including:

- A dislike and distrust of those perceived as elites who set the rules of the game or experts appearing to tell them how to live their lives
- An increase in deaths of despair, as people seek solace in drink or drugs or feel their life is not worth living
- A questioning of political and economic systems
- A growth in populism and support for politicians who feel their pain, identify scapegoats to blame, and offer simplistic solutions

The disconnect between those who prosper and those who suffer in a meritocracy becomes a vicious cycle with increasing levels of hubris and humiliation and a widening gap and loss of trust between the different end of the spectrum.

The increase in inequality and the breakdown in trust and any sense of an underlying social contract impacts directly on wellbeing of all sections of society in many different ways as has been amply demonstrated by Wilkinson and Pickett.

Loss of trust can also have a significant economic impact (as a recent paper from Diane Coyle and others has shown). Less trusting societies tend to be less productive, in part because resources have to be diverted into contract compliance mechanisms etc. This may be exacerbated as supply chains are disaggregated between different companies, requiring contracts for transactions at every stage of the process.

The unintended consequences of a meritocratic system would appear to have widespread implications. At a more micro level mediators are well aware of the problems of well-intentioned actions going awry. How often do conflicts begin when something doesn't go according to plan and this sets off a vicious spiral of accusation and blame as others misinterpret or misunderstand intentions and confirmation bias and attribution error kick in to intensify matters. Resolving the conflict will often begin with a better understanding of the original intentions behind the action that sparked to dispute. As the song puts it: "I'm just a soul whose intentions are good - please don't let me be misunderstood"

Mediation's role in the resolution of conflict is becoming increasingly well understood, perhaps less well recognised is the contribution mediators can play in the prevention of conflict. This was emphasised in a recent Civil Mediation Council (CMC) report - "Mediation must be viewed as a process of facilitation....not just a process which is only suitable once the parties are in or have threatened litigation." The focus of this sort of facilitation could include:

- building trust and strengthening relationships in a joint venture by deepening understanding of different perspectives, needs and intentions
- developing a shared language and glossary of terms to reduce misunderstandings
- reality testing proposals to see what could go wrong and guard against it - helping teams collectively don De Bono's 'black hat' to conduct a pre-mortem

Careful due diligence of this sort could pay significant dividends in preventing significant emergency expenditure down the line. This can apply at a macro, system wide level and at a more micro project level.