

Narratives review - Catherine O'Connell

When I first read "***Narratives: The Stories That Hold Women Back at Work***," I was struck by a mix of emotions—anger, frustration, and empathy. It was disheartening to hear how deeply ingrained biases and stereotypes can affect women's careers. Yet, I also felt empowered by the insights provided by the author, knowing that awareness is the first step towards change.

The topics covered in the book are incredibly relevant in today's professional environment. The chapters addressing issues like women being perceived as "unable to work together", "speaking too much" or that "we can't find women to fill leadership roles", shed light on pervasive stereotypes that continue to hinder women's progress in the workplace. Since I hear this last comment more than I'd like to, I'm concentrating on that myth and share ideas on the importance of actively challenging biased hiring and promotion practices.

One actionable step I'm considering from the book is **establishing mentorship programs** specifically tailored to support women in advancing their careers and to enable them to become senior managers and board members. Providing them with guidance, support, and opportunities for skill development is my way of busting the myth by actions that help address the gap in leadership representation by equipping women with the tools and confidence needed to pursue higher-level positions. Providing mentorship, training programs, and leadership development opportunities tailored to the needs of women can help cultivate a pipeline of qualified candidates ready to step into leadership roles when the opportunity arises.

Additionally, I am **advocating for diverse hiring candidate slate, transparent succession processes and diverse interview panels**, and actively seeking out qualified female candidates for leadership roles - these I believe can help counteract biases in the selection process illustrated by the myths in the Narratives book. By ensuring that hiring decisions are made by a diverse group of individuals and actively seeking out talent from underrepresented groups, including women, organizations can foster a more inclusive and equitable workplace. Creating clear pathways for career advancement, with transparent criteria and opportunities for skill development is vital. These I believe can help mitigate the perception that there are no qualified women to fill leadership positions.

Overall, the book has inspired me to take these proactive steps within my own circles to challenge existing narratives and create a more inclusive environment where women have equal opportunities to excel and advance into leadership positions.

Board roles

Let me add three additional points regarding board positions:

1. **Expand Networking Opportunities for women:** One effective strategy I have found is to actively expand networking opportunities for women interested in board positions. This involves connecting women in my network with organizations and platforms dedicated to promoting gender diversity in boardrooms, such as women's leadership forums, industry-specific associations, and networking events focused on board recruitment. The emphasis here is not about just me attending these myself! I'm actively inviting other women to join these forums and introduce them to other people, to broaden THEIR networks. By widening the pool of connections for women in this way and actively enabling them to talk directly with qualified female candidates and board members, I believe they can get access to the information and connections they need so that their organizations can more visibility

see them as potential senior managers and board members and the women too can grow in confidence to say yes to offers for senior roles knowing they have a network to tap into for support and advice on their journey to the top.

2. Provide Board Training and Development to Women based on Real Experience: Another crucial aspect is providing training and development opportunities specifically tailored to preparing women for board roles. I'm working on a selection of offerings such as workshops, seminars, mentorship programs and an e-learning program focused on board governance, strategic decision-making, financial literacy, interview skills, finding your unique value proposition and much more to enable women to build relevant skills that can help them build the confidence and competence of a potential female board member. Basing these offerings on my personal experience of going through the process of preparing and interviewing to successfully land two major board roles, this is one critical way I can open up the black box of "how to find a board role" and "pass it forward" by investing in women's professional development and equipping them well to excel in board positions and contribute effectively to corporate governance.

3. Challenge Biased Selection Criteria by Advocacy: Where I can I am helping organizations to critically evaluate their selection criteria for board positions to ensure they are inclusive and free from bias. This may involve re-examining traditional requirements, such as prior board experience (we all have to get our first role!) or executive-level roles, which could disproportionately disadvantage women who may have taken non-linear career paths or have expertise in areas not traditionally associated with board positions, or who are simply waiting for the break where they get their first offer to sit on a board or manage a team. By broadening the criteria to encompass diverse skill sets, backgrounds, and perspectives, organizations can attract a more diverse pool of candidates and enhance the overall effectiveness of their boards.

By implementing these strategies, I can help women to be confident and equipped well and so they I can support organizations can dispel the myth that there is a lack of qualified women for board roles. It's my mission to help organizations to actively work towards building more diverse and inclusive boards that reflect the diversity of their stakeholders and society as a whole.

Final words

In summary, '*Narratives: The Stories That Hold Women Back at Work*' provides a compelling exploration of the pervasive biases and stereotypes that hinder women's progress in the workplace. Through insightful analysis and real-world examples, the book sheds light on damaging narratives such as 'women can't work together' and 'we can't find women to fill leadership positions,' challenging readers to confront and dismantle these harmful myths.

The importance of the topics covered in the book is undeniable in today's professional environment, where gender disparities and biases persist despite efforts towards equality and helping point out the biases.

By addressing these narratives head-on, workplaces can create more inclusive cultures and opportunities for women to thrive in leadership roles.

As a recommendation, I believe 'Narratives' is not only a valuable read for women navigating their careers but also for men in the workplace to open their eyes as allies to bias. By understanding and actively challenging these narratives, we can work together to create a more equitable and supportive work environment for all.

- **Catherine O'Connell, Principal at Catherine O'Connell Law, Outside Board Member (Toyota/Fujitsu), Host of the Lawyer on Air Podcast**