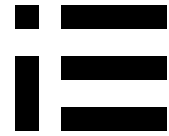


NARRATIVE LEADERSHIP: COUNTER- STORYTELLING FOR DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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challenges the myth
of meritocracy and
makes space for
voices long excluded
from leadership.*

Introduction

Leadership within higher education has historically been shaped by dominant narratives that reinforce existing institutional norms and power structures. However, with the increasing recognition of diversity, equity, and inclusion as fundamental principles of effective leadership, there is a need to re-examine the role of storytelling in this transformation. Research suggests that leaders who employ storytelling are significantly more memorable and impactful compared to those who rely exclusively on empirical data (Morgan, 2017).

The use of storytelling in leadership transcends mere rhetorical persuasion; it serves as a fundamental mechanism for constructing meaning, facilitating knowledge transmission, and shaping professional identity. Stories allow leaders to articulate values, communicate institutional missions, and engage in sense making processes that resonate with diverse audiences. Narrative-based leadership facilitates emotional engagement, which in turn fosters commitment and shared purpose among organisational members. This is particularly critical in higher education, where institutional histories and traditions often shape identity and belonging. The power of narrative in leadership lies not only in its ability to persuade but also in its capacity to humanise abstract concepts, making them relatable and actionable (Bensimon, 2007). This paper explores how storytelling, and in particular counter-storytelling, can shape leadership practices, influence institutional policy, and foster inclusive cultures within the sector. By critically engaging with counter-storytelling, higher education leaders can challenge dominant discourses, disrupt systemic

inequities, and create spaces for alternative perspectives that have historically been marginalised.

Counter-Storytelling and Higher Education Leadership

Storytelling extends beyond a communicative device; it serves as a vehicle for shaping institutional culture and reinforcing shared values. Gabriel (2000) highlights the role of storytelling in organisational life, arguing that narratives construct collective identities and influence institutional behaviours. Similarly, Bensimon (2007) contends that institutions that incorporate diverse narratives into their decision-making processes are more likely to achieve equitable leadership practices. Within higher education, where systemic inequalities persist, storytelling becomes a crucial mechanism for exposing hidden experiences and challenging exclusionary practices.

Counter-storytelling, as conceptualised by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), is a research and pedagogical method that amplifies marginalised voices by presenting alternative narratives that disrupt dominant discourses. This approach is particularly relevant in higher education leadership, where racially minoritised staff frequently encounter exclusionary practices masked by ostensibly neutral policies (Harper, 2012). Counter-storytelling exists in various forms, including personal narratives that document individual experiences, collective narratives that reflect shared realities, and composite narratives that blend multiple real-life accounts to illustrate systemic patterns of exclusion (Bell, 1987). By foregrounding these narratives, counter-storytelling challenges conventional leadership

paradigms and provides a platform for underrepresented voices to advocate for institutional transformation.

Resisting the 'Meritocracy' Myth

A persistent discourse within higher education leadership is the notion of meritocracy—the belief that talent and effort alone determine career progression. However, counter-stories reveal the systemic barriers that continue to shape leadership opportunities, including implicit bias, exclusionary professional networks, and limited access to sponsorship (Eagly & Carli, 2007). For instance, racially diverse leaders who have navigated gendered and racialised biases frequently recount experiences that challenge the assumption that leadership is universally accessible. These counter-narratives expose the hidden mechanisms of exclusion and underscore the necessity for proactive interventions, such as targeted leadership development programmes and sponsorship initiatives designed to support historically underrepresented groups.

Counter-stories serve as a powerful tool for informing policy reforms by highlighting the limitations of existing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. When women of colour in leadership positions share their experiences with microaggressions or the 'invisible labour' associated with diversity work, institutions are compelled to reconsider their approaches to inclusion (Ahmed, 2012). The integration of counter-storytelling within institutional policy discussions allows for the identification of structural inequalities that might otherwise remain unchallenged. For example,

leadership pipelines that fail to account for the distinct challenges faced by racially diverse staff can be restructured to provide targeted mentorship and sponsorship opportunities. Furthermore, inclusive governance practices that recognise and reward contributions to diversity efforts can be implemented to address the burden placed on minoritised leaders who are often expected to drive institutional change without formal recognition or compensation.

Building Inclusive Leadership Cultures

Embedding counter-storytelling within leadership training and institutional dialogues has the potential to transform higher education leadership cultures. Research indicates that storytelling based leadership development programmes cultivate more empathetic and responsive leaders by centring diverse lived experiences (Bensimon & Marshall, 2003). Institutions that incorporate counter-narratives into leadership workshops encourage senior teams to engage with the realities of systemic inequities, shifting discussions from abstract diversity commitments to concrete action plans. This approach fosters environments where diverse experiences are valued, rather than assimilated into dominant leadership norms.

Counter-storytelling serves as a critical reflective tool, prompting senior leaders to examine their own biases and positionality. Ahmed (2012) argues that diversity work often entails making visible the systemic barriers that institutions seek to obscure, and counter-narratives function as a means of forcing these conversations into leadership spaces. By

engaging with lived experience narratives, senior leaders move beyond performative allyship and commit to substantive institutional change. Examples of this include board meetings that integrate counter storytelling as a mechanism for assessing the inclusivity of institutional policies, as well as leadership workshops that feature narratives from marginalised staff and students to cultivate accountability and awareness.

Conclusion

Storytelling, and specifically counter-storytelling, functions as a powerful instrument for disrupting systemic inequities within higher education leadership. By integrating diverse narratives into leadership practices, institutions challenge exclusionary structures, shape inclusive policies, and foster cultures of belonging. Counter storytelling reveals the limitations of the meritocracy myth, highlights the necessity of targeted mentorship initiatives, and encourages reflexivity among senior leaders.

In embracing counter-storytelling as a leadership tool, institutions must move beyond rhetorical commitments to diversity and towards meaningful action. This includes embedding storytelling methodologies within decision-making processes, restructuring leadership pipelines to address systemic barriers, and ensuring that counter narratives inform institutional policies at every level. Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of storytelling interventions on leadership development, with a particular focus on how counter-storytelling influences institutional decision-making and policy implementation. By amplifying marginalised voices and fostering

inclusive leadership cultures, storytelling can be leveraged as a transformative force within higher education.

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