

Leadership

Why is “Rhetoric” Important to Leadership?

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On all the stages of the world, and in all the stages of the past, have we seen leaders of all kinds give elaborately drafted speeches filled with cleverly crafted rhetoric. Sometimes in response to an event, sometimes as a custom, and sometimes merely by obligation. However, nevertheless, their words have captivated the masses, inspired nations, prompted movements, and even educated those seeking new ideas. What we find in all cases, however, is an individual communicating with powerful rhetoric...

What exactly does that mean?

Many people, it seems, have the idea that “rhetoric” only refers to the modern-day expression of statement – Rhetorical – whereby a question is asked in order to produce an effect or make a statement, but not for the purposes of receiving an answer. However, this is not the subject of our analysis today. No, today we discuss speech rhetoric, the fine art of persuasion and discourse, its importance and its value!

What is “Rhetoric”, how is it different from a “Speech”, and why exactly is it important to leadership?

Rhetoric: Language that is intended to influence people and that may not be honest or reasonable.[1]

According to Reid and Klumpp (2005)[2], the term rhetoric does not maintain what would be considered a “stable” meaning. In other words, the reason it’s considered a “term” and not simply called a “word”, is because there exist several clearly articulated definitions – each different in some way from the others – and therefore, according to some, could hold one meaning, and others another. As Reid and Klumpp point out, there are three commonly considered schools of thought concerning the definition of rhetoric. Quintilian believed that rhetoric involved much more than the message, but also the individual speaking the message as well. This school of thought focuses a great deal on who the individual is/was, their character, values, ethics, and displayed principles. Here the idea is that, if the individual is not considered a person of good character, then the message they present doesn’t truly qualify as “rhetoric”. Aristotle’s definition, on the other hand, states that rhetoric is a means of education as well as persuasion through public discourse. Aristotle believed that any conversation that led to new knowledge, the discovery of new ideas, the advancement of purpose, or even the achievement of goals, qualified as “rhetoric”. Anyone who has read some of Aristotle’s works understands that it is often him talking to a student or public, working/walking through pragmatic ideas, in order to both educate and convince at the same time, whereby near the end, the student or public draws an epiphany to the answer or is convinced to the argument. In the education world, we call this “leading the answer”.

Rhetoric: The art or skill of speaking or writing formally and effectively especially as a way to persuade or influence people.

As you can see from the first two, they are very different in terms of what qualifies as “rhetoric”. Whereas the first in no way really matters much today, the second is still commonly used every day in the world of education and instruction. And just like the second definition, the third is still used today as well, only its area is commonly found in both advertising and politics. Burke’s definition of rhetoric is built from many common day psychological concepts, including cognitive biases, mental framing, and even mental anchoring. Burke’s definition believes that rhetoric is a message that uses language in such a way that the public is drawn to it, feels an attachment to it, and is moved, persuaded, convinced, or manipulated by it so as to induce a response of some kind. In other words, “We must act now! Because we’re Americans, and that is what *real* Americans do!”... Hopefully thus comes the public’s response... “We’re *real* Americans! Therefore, we must act now!” While Burke called them symbols, critical thinking calls it framing bias and argumentative fallacies. It’s the idea of using specific words because of their subconscious attachments. We see this a lot in today’s political rhetoric... Calling people “undocumented” sounds far better than calling people “illegal”. The purpose of using that choice of word is an attempt at making the public think illegal aliens aren’t “all that bad”. The same example can be found when people refer to America as “great” in a speech. “This great land...” for example, a word used to give the impression of something as *more* or *better* than it really is. And even in the most common type of Internet media found today – Junk Media (from junk websites) – do we see yet still the same things with “Click-Bait” advertising. “This girl started playing an ordinary guitar, then something amazing happened!”... No... nothing “amazing” happened, no the story was probably not new, did not originate from that site, and by clicking on the link to view the video – which was more than likely already on YouTube for months – you just made that website money through click advertising, and therefore justified the further continued existence and use of yet more click-bait...

Authors definition of Rhetoric: The use of specific words, crafted into certain styles, to produce a message intended to manipulate a public for a specific purpose.

While these many small examples vary in length and use, they all lead up to a common undertone of the nature of "rhetoric". Rhetoric, it would seem, is the hidden message within the message. It is the emotional attachment to the message, what gives the message its effectiveness (or so that is the hope), but indeed, it is not so much the message itself, and therein rests the difference. A speech is the act of giving the message, while rhetoric is the hope the message will be heard.

For leaders, there are some major points to take away from this understanding of the nature of rhetoric...

Speech: A formal address or discourse delivered to an audience. A spoken expression of ideas, opinions, etc., that is made by someone who is speaking in front of a group of people.[3]

For starters, the use of rhetoric in speech can walk a serious line of ethical standards. After all, rhetoric involves a carefully crafted essence of the message purposely designed to manipulate, and if we are to consider "manipulation" within a message, we have no choice but to consider ethics.

It is possible for communication to be free of manipulation. There's an entire field of study on critical thinking that shows how communication can be constructed free of fallacies and subtle psychological manipulation. Consider if it is your intention to manipulate with your message, than such a thing immediately draws an ethical consideration. To communicate free of manipulative techniques and purpose is to be completely open and honest, to be fair in the presentation of facts, and to allow others the freedom to make up their own minds without your own biased spin added to the mix. However, the majority of public messages you hear and see today are loaded to the hilt with bias and purposely designed to manipulate – many contain hundreds of different subtle manipulative messages all wrapped into one clever message or image. In that respect, there is a very unethical side of communication as well, and that unethical side seems to be the most commonly used and readily accepted social norm. Further, we see this every day in marketing and politics.

How all this affects our understanding of rhetoric is subjective at best.

According to one definition of rhetoric, rhetoric would be the "spin" within the message, the emotional feeling it contains, its attachments, its bias... its manipulative effects.

Yet according to another definition, rhetoric is merely the argument itself, presentation of facts used to educate and/or convince.

While the first is purely unethical (and sadly the readily accepted social norm of today)... the second not. It strictly depends on whether the message contains bias manipulative connotations, words, phrases, ideas, mental attachments, etc. as the ultimate determining factor in rhetoric use within the context of leadership.

Second, rhetoric can be used to both teach and inspire. Leaders provide purpose, direction, and motivation every day, and often this comes through the use of rhetoric in speech. As Aristotle once did, leaders conduct discourse to teach, coach, mentor, and guide others, and as Burke articulates, leaders give purpose, provide direction, and inspire motivation within others to accomplish the mission. The use of rhetoric is therefore useful in leadership practice as a way to form a connection or bond in a leaders communicative efforts great and small.

Rhetoric is an important aspect in leadership development, and essential for leaders to understand. Its nature rests within the message, yet is not necessarily the message itself. And while there are some serious ethical considerations that must always be kept in the forefront of the mind, its careful and considered use can inspire others to action. Rhetoric aides in the ability to provide purpose, direction, and motivation, while at the same time, aides in the leaders mission of teaching, coaching, mentorship, and guidance. We can find rhetoric within nearly any persuasive argument, any speech, in conflict negotiation, and any proclamation...

...And if you think about it, even this very post came crafted to a little bit of Aristotle stylistic rhetoric. We publicly reasoned, and hopefully both educated and persuaded, all at the same time.

References:

[1] Merriam-Webster (2015). Rhetoric. Retrieved from: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetoric>

[2] Reid, R. F., and Klumpp, J. F. (2005). American Rhetorical Discourse. Long Grove. Waveland Press.

[3] Merriam-Webster (2015). Rhetoric. Retrieved from: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/speech>

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