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The Importance of Rhetoric in Leadership Formation

The public relations consultant James Horton believes firmly that a solid education in rhetoric is crucial to the formation of successful business leaders.¹ Though his focus is on business, what Horton claims about leadership can be applied to any organization of any type or scale, such as universities, organizational departments and work teams, non-profits, government agencies and national governments themselves, religious organizations, etc. To paraphrase Horton: Because we live in an information age, persuasive communications, the art of rhetoric, are more important than ever. Leaders who avoid learning the art of persuasive communications handicap themselves severely. This is especially true with the top position of any organization. For every Steve Jobs, who could hold an audience in the palm of his hand, there are 10 CEOs, Presidents, Chairs or Exalted Clerics who read boringly from a teleprompter, stand rigidly behind a lectern, or give rambling informal remarks that lose an audience more quickly than winning it.

To continue paraphrasing, Horton relates a story about a CEO of one of the largest corporations in the world who said with chagrin that he hated the Organizational Behavior course in his business education because it dealt with the ‘touchy-feely’ stuff of leadership. But, now, the CEO realizes that he should have paid more attention because he spends most of his time on ‘touchy-feely’ stuff. Communication is frequently grouped as part of the ‘touchy-feely’ stuff of leadership, but as rhetoricians understand, it is one of the most important studies of all because one’s life and livelihood can depend on it. One would think that modern leaders would understand this, but sadly, they don’t.

Rhetoric is far too often viewed negatively as merely the manipulation of words, empty word play, or a weak substitute for real action. A dismissive expression of the sort, “Don’t bother with it, its just rhetoric!” reveals the cultural scorn for rhetoric today. Nevertheless, Horton and many others are right in championing the crucial importance of appreciating and studying rhetoric in leadership formation. Why they are right can be

¹ The material from Horton’s article has been paraphrased and rewritten in places though his ideas and points made have been maintained. James Horton, “Persuasion Principles: They Haven’t Changed Much,” <http://www.online-pr.com/Holding/PersuasionPrinciples>.

concisely demonstrated: 1) By defining what and who a leader is. 2) By describing the intrinsic relationship between leadership and rhetoric. 3) By identifying aspects of rhetoric that are central to practicing good leadership. 4) And, finally, by concluding with some observations on leadership, rhetoric and the current “cancel culture” movement.

Understanding what and who a leader is begins with a basic proposition: Presuming certain educable aptitudes, intelligence and communication abilities, leaders are not born but made. Leadership is not given by nature, but is nurtured by proper education, training and experience. Still, the process of becoming a leader is essentially a process of character formation. This is much different from just acquiring a set of skills. This character formation is a matter of cultivating dispositional habits, or to use a current word for ‘habits’, competencies, which are rooted in a leader’s character: “characterial competencies,” to coin a term.

Leadership is unfortunately misunderstood as higher grade or degree of management. In organizations today, someone is selected to be a leader because his or her management skills are superior. There is, however, a difference in kind between leadership and management such that all good (effective, successful) leaders must be good managers, but not all good managers are good leaders. Good management skills are a subset of well-formed leadership competencies, but leadership is not merely a species of management. Leaders have the vision to know where to go, and their management skills are vital for actually getting there. Leaders who want nothing to do with the so-called “details” of management are failures because they do not execute well their intentions for the organization. Good management is necessary for leadership, but leadership is indeed a different kind because leadership is embedded in and emerges from the character of the leader.

Among other goals, ethical integrity is a principal aim of the process of leadership character formation. Ethical integrity as a characterial competency means a wholeness of character. Within the leader’s character there is no break, no fracture between what leaders know they ought to do and what they actually do. As Brian Tracy observed, “The glue that holds all relationships together, including the relationship between the leader and the led, is trust, and trust is based on integrity.”² And, as Peter Drucker explains, “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right thing.”³

² This is a well-known quote from Brian Tracy. See: <https://www.inspiringquotes.us/author/1007-brian-tracy/page:14>.

³ This is a famous quote from Peter Drucker. See: https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1GCEA_enUS822US822&source=univ&tbn=isch&q=peter+drucker+%22Management+is+doing+things+right,+leadership+is+doing+the+right+th.

There is an intrinsic connection between rhetoric and leadership because good rhetoric is a necessary characterial competency for good leadership. Warren Bennis believes that it is essential for good leaders to be able to translate their intentions into reality and sustain them.⁴ Leaders must be able to persuade their followers for the sake of motivating, organizing and aligning them so that the leader's aims yield and sustain the intended results.

Rhetoric is a significant means by which this can and does happen. Such rhetoric, however, is not merely techniques with communication, manipulating the followers with the right buzzwords, telling them only what the leader thinks they might like to hear as a sophistic politician does. Aristotle teaches that persuasion is achieved when the leader's personal character is perceived as credible: "We believe good [people] more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided."⁵ Aristotle continues his clear-eyed emphasis on character, virtue and credibility for effective rhetoric by stating that, "It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion."⁶

One of the aspects of Classical Rhetoric that is central to the practice of good leadership is understanding the meanings of and the proper relationship between ethos, pathos and logos in rhetorical communication. Ethos, obviously, relates to the integrity of leaders since they must establish their credibility, authority and trust with their followers. Leaders must realize that persuasion is an action which is in the category of "moral acts" because the leader's rhetoric aims to persuasively convince followers that what is being communicated is true or probably true. In order to do so, leaders themselves must know and believe as much as possible it is true, because any deception, any lie, would violate the leaders' trust and credibility. With deception, leaders would be manipulating the followers and disrespecting their integrity as persons and such would be unethical.

Logos involves an appeal to the audience's reasoning with well-constructed arguments using factual information, accurate data, and pithy and real (or realistic) examples. When issuing from authentic ethos, logos is the primary means by which leaders should aim to persuade followers of the truth or probable truth of their message. With logos, moreover,

⁴ W. Bennis, "The Artform of Leadership," in *The Leader's Companion*, ed. by J. Th. Wren, The Free Press., New York 1995, 377.

⁵ This quote (and the following quotes) from Aristotle is in J. Horton's article, "Persuasion Principles: They Haven't Changed Much" and is from: Aristotle *Rhetoric*, I.2,1356a 5-10, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. by W Rhys Roberts and edited by Richard McKeon, Random House, New York: 1941, 1329.

⁶ Ibidem, *Rhet.* I.2, 1356a 10-15,

leaders should be open and prepared to engage rational objections to their arguments. In fact, leaders' logos should itself frame and offer logical rebuttals to expected counter-arguments in order to strengthen the persuasive truth of their message.

Pathos communicates emotional appeals to connect with an audience through their feelings, sentiments and passionate self-interests. With pathos, leaders can sympathize or empathize with their followers, creating an affective bond with them that can reinforce their ethos and contribute to followers more readily "taking to heart" the logos of the leaders' message. For example, honestly addressing the ways in which the message could positively or negatively affect the followers' morale and sense of organizational loyalty is a clear example of the proper use of pathos as bolstering and moderated by ethos and logos.

Pathos, however, is perhaps the most misused aspect of rhetoric. Aristotle warned against rhetoric that merely and only plays on emotions to persuade. He cautioned that, "...persuasion may come through the [audience], when the [message] stirs their emotions. Our judgments when we are pleased and friendly are not the same as when we are pained and hostile. It is towards producing these effects, as we maintain, that present-day writers on rhetoric direct the whole of their efforts."⁷ Aristotle recognized that sophistic emotional rhetoric can be effective but it is deceptive and ingenuous since it lacks ethos and is not as effectively persuasive as logos. As he states, "...persuasion is effected through the [rhetoric] itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question."⁸ For Aristotle it was clear that logos fortified by ethos should be the primary means of persuasion.

The proper use of pathos in rhetoric can be further elaborated by analyzing Aristotle's views on catharsis in his *Poetics*. Richard Janko in his "Introduction" to his translation of the *Poetics* proposes a compelling case for what Aristotle actually meant by catharsis.⁹ Janko contends that Aristotle's meaning of catharsis was deformed by the psycho-analytic school of therapy which viewed catharsis as a type of psychological healing. This healing is effected when audience members viewing, reading or hearing a stage-drama, film/TV show, speech, or any literary form, experience the arousal and then the release of pent-up undesirable emotions. Catharsis in this psycho-analytic sense is, then, the purgation of negative emotions: sort of a curative sweat-lodge for the psyche.

⁷ Ibidem, *Rhet.* I.2, 1356a 14-18, 1329-30

⁸ Ibidem, *Rhet.* I.2, 1356a 19-21, 1330

⁹ Richard Janko, "Introduction," Aristotle's *Poetics*, trans. Richard Janko, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987, pp. ix-xxvi.

Janko, however, maintains that Aristotelian catharsis is not the purgation of undesirable emotions but the rectification of emotions. He indicates that catharsis makes the emotions tractable for education. For Janko, Aristotle saw emotions as essential to forming good character and making good judgments. Therefore, catharsis applies to errors or flaws in character and emotion, as well as to errors in moral judgment. As Janko interprets Aristotle, we should feel the right emotion, towards the right object, at the right time, to the right degree. In the formation of good character, it is important to develop the habit, the characterial competency, to feel emotions properly so we can make ethically and rationally correct decisions.

The pathos in leaders' rhetoric must be moderated by their ethos and logos, especially when their organization is distressed and facing morale challenges. In these circumstances, leaders whose persuasion is mainly arousing "happy" emotions with an abundance of feel-good promises of fatuous "new solutions" are merely pandering to their followers to assuage their discontent. Such leaders are just manipulating their followers' emotions, which cannot yield organizational recovery.

What good leaders should do is achieve a catharsis issuing from ethos tempered by the logos of a realistic recovery plan. The leaders must argue that the followers' anger of resentment or their indignant resistance to leadership cannot sustain the recovery plan. The leaders must empathize with followers and persuade them that only a collaborative effort based on a pathos of reasonable hope, mutual loyalty and mutual sacrifice can generate effective recovery. In doing so, the leaders would aim to rectify the negative emotions of the organization and accomplish recovery with a genuine Aristotelian catharsis.

As a concluding section of this presentation and perhaps as a bit of an excursus from the above material, it would be worthwhile to examine briefly the rhetoric of the cancel culture movement. Progressive leaders, namely social media influencers, mainstream media figures, academic intellectual elites and demagogic politicians, mainly prosecute the aggressive *Kulturkampf* of the movement. The targets of their "cancel rhetoric" range from the inane to the contemptuously profane, from cancelling Pepe Le Pew and Dr. Seuss to Saint Junipero Serra and Andrew Jackson. It is the resentful rhetoric of the self-proclaimed offended, which sadly transmits a contagious pathos that can debilitate organizations. Good leaders must recognize that their own organizational cultures can be sickened by this virulent "cancel pathos" and they should aim to keep their cultures safe by understanding, exposing and challenging the motivations and claims of this pathetic rhetoric.

In order to resist the Progressive cancellers, leaders must understand that the cancellers maintain as axiomatic that culture is downstream of politics. Traditionalists, however, generally accept the so-called “Breitbart Doctrine” named after the late conservative commentator Andrew Breitbart that posits, “Politics is downstream from culture.”¹⁰ According to Dan McLaughlin this dictum means that people tend to invest more of their hearts and free time into cultural pursuits than political ones. People are much more engaged with their families, churches, schools, civic groups, sports, hobbies, mass and social media, etc. than they are with the strategies and struggles of politics. Consequently, the beliefs and attitudes that pervade the larger spaces of their lives affect the smaller ones, not just in what they believe but whom they know and trust, as well. People’s politics is, then, a smaller space, which is formed and developed by their lives within culture. So, effecting changes in politics, winning elections and securing political power requires influencing the people’s culture. Cultural change and evolution yield political change and evolution, which for the traditionalists/conservatives is a type of “socially organic” process; it is the “natural” way in which culture lives and grows within a society, or, on a larger scale, a civilization.

The Progressives differ strongly. Daniel Patrick Moynihan once astutely claimed, “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself.”¹¹ As Moynihan affirmed, Liberals/Progressives believe that it is politics that is the supreme engine of cultural change: It takes cultural change to change society and cultural change happens through politics; it happens through winning elections, controlling the judiciary and the system of jurisprudence, and dominating mass and social media with their political aims.

The cancellers are ideological zealots whose tactics intend to secure political power. Their political power grows with their cancellations, and the more cancellations, the more they exert the power not merely to change but to erase and wholly dismantle existing culture. They reject that any type of culture can or should be organically or naturally developed. The

¹⁰ Dan McLaughlin, “Politics is Still Downstream of Culture,” https://redstate.com/dan_mclaughlin/2016/05/04politics-still-downstream-from-culture-n58816. The following description of Breitbart’s Doctrine paraphrases some of McLaughlin’s points.

¹¹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, <https://www.godreads.com/quotes/116754-the-central-conservative-truth-is-that-it-is-culture-not>

cancellers emotionally despise the organic growth of a culture because it does not necessarily conform to their political designs. They hate any culture that is not engineered by their politics because all of such cultures are offensive and oppressive. Their emotional resentment teems within a vengeful retaliation, which cannot be entirely assuaged since its actual object is to suppress fully their political opposition. They cannot accept political defeat on any scale. Their success must be total in order for their politics to fundamentally transform culture. They feel convinced that their opposition will find their politicized replacement culture so “naggingly” inhospitable that ultimately the opposition will be worn down and accept it just to live in some peace.

For organizational leaders, maybe the most threatening tactic of the cancellers is when their rhetoric insists that their target must be cancelled because it embodies and propagates racism, misogyny, ethnic prejudice, or sexual orientation intolerance. The public spread of their offended pathos can eventually infect an organization’s personnel so that they begin to splinter into antagonistic groups along the lines of the cancellers’ assaults. Such balkanization creates serious morale problems and gravely disrupts the organizational culture.

To resist the cancellers, the leaders should communicate to their followers that the ethos of their organizational culture respects the integrity and equality of individuals. This respect does not subsume individuals into group identities but values the dignity of individual persons as such. They should emphasize, moreover, that followers should not be swept up by the politicized emotions of vengeful retaliation, since to be so manipulated is to become pawns in the political tactics of the cancellers, which again, is an assault on their individual dignity. Finally, the leaders need to exhort followers that their organizational culture is indeed theirs. If they acquiesce to cancellations and take on politicized group identities as what they are primarily, the cancellers will never be satisfied until their organizational culture is reduced to rubble and the emotionally unstable pathos of the offended is all that is left. It is indeed the very dignity of individual persons that is at stake, and unless leaders strive to resist the cancellers’ attacks, individuals will become nothing more than collectivized drones engineered to carry out the angry politics of “woke” culture.

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The Importance of Rhetoric in Leadership Formation Summary

Contrary to much academic, public and businesspersons' opinion, education in rhetoric is definitely important for leadership formation. Leaders who are uneducated in the art of persuasive communications are severely handicapped. This article argues this claim 1) By defining what and who a leader is. 2) By describing the intrinsic relationship between leadership and rhetoric. 3) By identifying aspects of rhetoric that are central to practicing good leadership. 4) And, finally, by concluding with some observations on leadership, rhetoric and the current "cancel culture" movement.

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