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A RHETORICAL APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The basic principles of persuasion were formulated and developed over hundreds of years in Ancient Greece and Rome by philosophers, sophists and rhetoricians such as Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, mainly for those interested in public affairs. At the centre of this development was Aristotle's rhetorical triad of **ethos, pathos** and **logos**, which formed the basis of communication training and written and oral discourse from the fourth century B.C onwards. This formula was added to by the great Roman rhetoricians, who advocated a more practical formula of **invention, arrangement, style, memory** and **delivery**.

Keywords: rhetoric, communication

A RHETORICAL APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION

Jack Kennedy once remarked about Winston Churchill “*He mobilized the English language and sent it into battle.*” What Kennedy was saying, of course, was that Churchill understood the essential link between communication and leadership and used it successfully. We could rightly retort by saying, well, Churchill was one of the great communicators of the century, but what about me? I neither have these gifts nor do I have the opportunity. Well, neither did Churchill, as every historian will tell you. He had a stammer and a lisp and at 5 foot 8 inches he was far from being imposing. Likewise, he was on the fringes of politics in the mid nineteen thirties. So what did he have apart from the advantage of an aristocratic background?¹

“Communication isn’t as simple as saying what you mean. How you say what you mean is crucial ...”.

(Deborah Tannen)

He brought language to life, believed in what he stood for, and coupled this with excellent non-verbal communication (both in terms of body language and writing style). As Nick Wreden wrote in the Harvard Management Communication Letter, “*...he compensated for these weaknesses with a prodigious memory, a love for the English language, and a willingness to revise, revise, and revise again to capture the right combination of sense, sound, and emotion.*”² But above all, Churchill’s success lay in his firm beliefs and his sound knowledge and practice of classical rhetoric, which can be found in his book, “*The Scaffolding of Rhetoric*”, which he wrote at the age of 23.

Aristotelian rhetoric is simply *the art of persuasion*. The terms are interchangeable and embrace all ‘*public*’ speaking and interpersonal communication that seeks to persuade its audience: all discourse from the campaign trail, the pulpit, the court of law, the government, the bureaucracy, the advertising agency, the public relations office, scientific agencies, the media, the classroom, negotiations, and meetings.

In fact, persuasive communication is all-pervasive in any organisation.

¹ Nick Wreden, Harvard Management Communication Newsletter, Sept. 2002.

² Ibid.

Background to Aristotelian Rhetoric

The basic principles of persuasion were formulated and developed over hundreds of years in Ancient Greece and Rome by philosophers, sophists and rhetoricians such as Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, mainly for those interested in public affairs³. At the centre of this development was Aristotle's rhetorical triad of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, which formed the basis of communication training and written and oral discourse from the fourth century B.C onwards.

Aristotle's rhetoric had emerged simply because he could not accept the sophistic approach, which he considered as being unethical. He took issue with many of these Athenian Sophists who, at that time, viewed rhetoric as purely a means to gain power through the effective use of the spoken word. Nor could he go along with Plato's belief that the objective truth of any situation or issue could be arrived at through Plato's rather cold and emotionless dialectical approach. It was for this reason that he wrote his '**Rhetoric**', in which he accepted much from both the Sophists and from Plato. Aristotle's innovation was to include "*Ethos*", or the credibility dimension, into the Sophist's approach to persuasion. In terms of *logos*, Aristotle expanded the term to include not only deductive logic, but also examples, illustrations, analogies and so forth, which we will deal with in our third proof.

Aristotle, unlike Plato, based his view on the belief that the *polis* and *civilized life* were made possible because mankind generally possessed that modicum of *civil virtue* and the *logos* to distinguish right from wrong and just from unjust⁴. In his '**Rhetoric**', he reaffirmed his position that mankind could be reached through reasoned argument (*logos*). He held that human beings naturally argued about their actions, and that these actions were never inevitable, which naturally leads to a degree of uncertainty.

"The orator persuades by moral character when his speech is delivered in such a manner as to render him worthy of confidence; for we trust such persons to a greater degree, and more readily. This is generally true for all types of arguments, and absolutely true when there is uncertainty and room for doubt."

(Aristotle- David Cunningham)

In business, it is a simple fact that many of our decisions are about future actions, whether they be immediate or long-term, and no human action in the future is entirely predictable (although it can, in some circumstances, be highly likely). This unpredictability and uncertainty leads to disagreement and means that the questions being asked are of a conditional nature. This unpredictability moves business decision-making away from the area of certainty into the area of probabilities. Let us take the example of Jack Welch's speech to General Electric shareholders in 1989. He was speaking at a time when GE faced stiff competition from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, which made the future unpredictable. He drew an analogy with the '80s to show how difficult the future would be, with such statements as "*It's time to look at the '90s, and it is not a view for the faint of heart ... For the environment and the events we see rushing toward us make the tough, tumultuous '80s look like a decade at the beach.*"⁵

When uncertain and unpredictable situations exist, audiences are normally unsure and somewhat less motivated. As a consequence, logical arguments alone (*logos*) are not enough to convince them, unless there is a clear agreement as to the facts.

³ A full discussion on the development of classical rhetoric is given in Brian Vickers' "*In Defence of Rhetoric*". Also see J. O. Urmson's "*Aristotle's Ethics*".

⁴ Merrill, John, "*The Dialectic in Journalism*", Chapter 1.

⁵ Jack Welch's speech is discussed in Jay Conger's book, "*Winning 'em Over*", pp.147-148.

As reasonable doubt is common to most business situations, it follows, therefore, that a logically constructed argument based on these questionable foundations will, in most cases, be insufficient on its own to persuade an audience. The Cartesian approach based on rationality alone will be insufficient. Something else is needed, as ultimately the successful communication of a message can only be measured by the audience's acceptance or rejection of it. Many times we are looking for a shift from a position of disagreement to agreement, non-acceptance to acceptance, or from non-compliance or passivity to action⁶.

There is a tendency in Cartesian thinking to assume that the success or failure of any argument can be determined in isolation from an audience. The *'facts speak for themselves'* attitude or *'let rationality have its day'*. If an audience is constituted of rational people, the theory goes, it should be unaffected by a speaker's persuasive appeals into moving them to accept the message, as they will base everything on the merits of the arguments. *Aristotle accepts this position when no reasonable doubt exists and where no extraordinary action is required from the audience.* However, such situations are rarely found in management. Except perhaps in a limited number of scientific areas such as statistics, where 'convention' has created a form of general agreement, and rationality alone is enough.

When uncertainty exists, in a persuasive exercise, a speaker must always give the audience some reason to believe that he or she is worth listening to. It is more than just employing clever arguments (*logos*). Why should an audience believe one particular speaker over another? Why should an audience accept one point of view over another? Such judgements are made when an audience has established confidence in the speaker's credibility based on the speaker's past history.

Aristotelian Rhetorical Model

To overcome this element of uncertainty that exists in life (which can be applied to business, as well), Aristotle developed his rhetoric into the three dimensions outlined in Figure 1. It is not necessary that each proof carries equal weight, but it *is* necessary that all three exist and make up a combination of proofs. The emphasis here is on the word 'combination', although the first one of these proofs will dominate.

Figure 1

Ethos	Credibility
Pathos	Psychology of Emotions
Logos	Arguing for Consent

⁶ For a full discussion on this topic, see Stephen Toulmin's book, *"Cosmopolis"*, pp. 5-13.

The Primacy of Ethos

The first proof, Ethos, which concerns the character of the communicator, is probably the most important of the three proofs. Aristotle himself was well aware of the temptation to abuse the rhetorical process stemming from the lack of ethos (credibility). He based his idea of ethos on his belief that truth and justice will always win over evil. He thought that what was true and better was easier to prove and more likely to persuade. History, however, is littered with examples of the abuse of the rhetorical process, and where persuasion becomes mere propaganda, e.g. examine some of Margaret Thatcher's statements on the Falklands War, especially in relation to the sinking of the 'Belgrano'.

“It is not the case, as some writers of rhetorical treatises hold, that the worth of the orator in no way contributes to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, moral character may almost be called the most potent means of persuasion.”

(Brian Vickers)

Gorgius, the Greek Sophist, is a very good example of the abuse of rhetoric. He stated that a communicator could argue the just and the unjust cause with equal force because rhetoric was amoral. Speakers can take a neutral position and not get involved in a moral way. This implies that rhetoric, as a theory, is morally neutral. We don't make moral or ethical judgements; we follow a morally neutral and pragmatic path. It was this attitude to rhetoric that cajoled Aristotle into writing his famous book on classical rhetoric. In it he emphasized adherence to honesty in revealing the real intent of the speaker and a sincere concern for the welfare of the audience.

Would Winston Churchill have succeeded in mobilising Britain in 1940 if he had treated his communication as a morally neutral concept as Gorgius did? Churchill built his credibility or ethos on his beliefs and used both pathos and logos to support this ethos in communicating to the country. This is in keeping with Brian Vickers, the author of '**In Defence of Rhetoric**', who wrote that Aristotle distinguished three modes of persuasion:⁷

“the first depends on the personal character of the speaker (ethos), the second on putting the audience into a fit state of mind (pathos); the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself.”

Consequently, all three elements of logos, pathos and ethos are integrated and essential to the rhetorical method, as we have just seen.

Rhetoric creates a lively and stimulating way to influence the minds and hearts of the hearers, which will, it is hoped, ultimately compel our audience into action. However, the success of communication efforts will, ultimately, depend on the first and most important dimension, *Ethos*; the credibility of the communicator. David Cunningham writes the following in his book, 'Faithful Persuasion':⁸

⁷ In David Cunningham's book, "*Faithful Persuasion*", the author stresses the importance of the secondary role of strict logical argument in the rhetorical process.

⁸ Brian Vickers outlines these proofs very well in his book, "*In Defence of Rhetoric*", p. 20.

The authority of a particular argument,

“is closely connected to how the audience evaluates the person who offers that argument. As the audience judges the speaker’s character to be more or less worthy of confidence, the speaker’s arguments are accordingly considered more or less authoritative”.

Hence, an audience is left to make its own conscious or unconscious judgement about a speaker’s character and, therefore, his authority, which in turn will affect the acceptance or rejection of the message.

The Second Proof: Pathos

Pathos, the second of these proofs, concerns the effective employment of audience psychology. Pathos can be seen as the bringing of an audience to the right state of emotion. It is about connecting up emotionally with your audience. It is when our audience has reached this state that they will usually accept our message. Because of this need to link-up emotionally, speakers often give priority to techniques enhancing eloquence over argumentation. This priority, unfortunately, is often taken too far and results in eloquence and other such persuasive techniques becoming the centre of an address at the expense of clear arguments and even honesty.

The Third Proof: Logos

Logos, which is the first proof, is based on deductive and inductive logic. In logos we are inventing our arguments in order to gain the consent of our audience; in order to prove our case. For example, we could make two statements that are quite acceptable to our audience because they are based on known facts. From these two statements, we can deduce a new statement, which, if fairly construed, will be accepted. Also, statistics and other factual type evidence are usually used to support a statement.

Practice: The Five Canons of Rhetoric

These three dimensions of rhetoric – logos, pathos and ethos – will remain, however, a merely theoretical concept unless we know how to put them to some practical use. Consequently, to achieve this end, we simply follow what the Greeks called the five major canons of rhetoric, which the Romans, in their practical way, used as the basis of instruction:

1. **Invention**, the development of the right argumentation;
2. **Arrangement**, the organization of the discourse;
3. **Style**, the use of language to persuade;
4. **Memory**, and
5. **Delivery**.

1. Invention

Invention is the discovery of arguments to support or deny your premise. It is about identifying the key questions. This demands the use of your imagination and a proactive attitude. It concerns the collection of material and the choice of ideas suitable to the purpose of your presentation.

Arguments are **invented** to support your premise. It is the premise that is important, **not** the arguments. Arguments have a supportive role only.

2. Arrangement

Arrangement is about how your arguments are structured. A persuasive presentation should consist of five parts: introduction, narration (statement of fact), proofs (logos), refutation (logos), and conclusion and appeal (logos and pathos). The key to organization is the use of the topic sentence, a simple declarative sentence at the beginning. This defines the subject to be discussed. Other important points to be borne in mind in arranging your presentation are:

- i) Explaining the topic sentence;*
- ii) Amplifying each assertion (from the topic sentence) with supporting facts;*
- iii) Indicating a relationship between assertions and facts;*
- iv) Developing the argument while considering the contrary arguments;*
- v) Putting the speech into words (Elocutio - style or phrasing in language); and*
- vi) Memorizing the speech*

To ensure that the audience has followed the line of argument, it is important to end the speech with a restatement of the points that have been made, stressing the general connection between them. Remember to wrap up your speech with strength; this is the part, in normal circumstances, which the audience will most remember. Finally, when reviewing the arrangement, there are three elements that need a quick check: clarity, consistency, and appropriateness.

Clarity

Clarity requires that the arguments be developed in a logical deductive order. This means that no irrelevant comments or unnecessary verbiage should be included in order to pad out your presentation. The various stages of reasoning should be clear and linked.

Consistency

However, in laying down the reasoning process, there must be a consistency that flows through the discourse. There must also be a level of consistency between what one says, one's attitude, and what one does.

Appropriateness

As our intention is for our audience to understand our message as we intend it, it is essential that our arguments and style are appropriate. This does not mean that one cannot be creative or imaginative, but it does mean that we must design our speech with our audience in mind.

3. Style

Rhythm speaks for itself. These are two essential elements of style. Style is related to a speaker's choice of words and non-verbal forms of communication. For example, Churchill's large cigar, manner of dressing, and, of course, his famous V sign, sent a message of confidence and reassurance to his audiences. To put it another way, style is related to the music we create. A composer sets his or her ideas to music; the words of a speech should be delivered to a rhythm.

It is also related to the way we do things and display our self-control. It is related to our social and cultural identity, of which self-restraint is an indispensable part. And it is related to the rules, codes and conventions that we follow, and to our value system, and serves as a criterion for value judgements in certain situations. Ultimately, style is related to our very identity.

The arrangement of words and figures of speech are usually chosen for emphasis, clarity, variety, emotion, and rhythm. For some examples of arrangement, look at some of Winston Churchill's speeches and Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address from the point of view of the use of words.

Arrangement of words (Scheme) involves looking at the following:

- *The recurrence of the same word or letters*
- *The repetition of a word or phrase*
- *The use of identical suffixes*
- *The repetition of words*
- *A balanced sentence with opposing ideas or repeating a similar idea*
- *A play on words - a pun; and*
- *A comparison or simile*

Figures of speech (Trope) include some of these usages:

- *The use of words to mean the opposite - irony*
- *The use of a paradox - contradictory statement*
- *A question that answers itself - rhetorical question*
- *An exaggeration made for emphasis*
- *Understatements; and*
- *A metaphor*

The key is to paint a visual image of the message in the minds of our audience by use of words. In doing this, repetition and reinforcement are necessary. Reinforcement is achieved by use of transparencies, slides and handouts. They can demonstrate a fact, for example. Words can also be used for reinforcement; words that demonstrate size, sound, touch and taste. Likewise, repetition can be used throughout the speech by stating your message at different times in different ways. Finally, in order to be assured that our audience is getting our message, a number of rhetorical questions should be placed throughout the

presentation or speech. By doing this, we will receive immediate feedback, which will allow us to know if the audience is receiving our message or not.

Let's look at an example from one of Winston Churchill's BBC speeches and read it aloud while searching for the poetical rhythm, repetition of words, balanced sentences, use of suffixes, and so on.

*"All of them hope that the storm will pass
before their turn comes to be devoured.*

*But I fear - I fear greatly -
the storm will not pass.*

*It will rage and it will roar,
even more loudly, ever more widely,
It will spread to the South;
it will spread to the North⁹.*

4. Memory

Memory is greatly connected with our imaginations and associations. If we can imagine a place, for example, and make associations with certain aspects of this place, it will become quite easy to speak about the place, as long as we maintain some sequential order. Cicero used this system. Each part of his house was associated with a part of his speech. For example, the doorway is the opening statement or attention grabber. It is also the conclusion, as we always end by referring back to the beginning. Although memory is important, speakers are advised to carry an outline of their speeches in case of necessity. Tony Buzan, in his book¹⁰, talks about Albert Einstein. Einstein relied on his imagination and on his technical training. He worked out his new mathematics only after he had experienced the phenomena in his imagination. In a similar way, in a business discourse, if a speaker can see his or her ideas, then memory will not be a problem.

5. Delivery

Delivery is very much tied up with non-verbal communication and style. There is no one style that is appropriate for all occasions. Style can be changed and many do it successfully. A recent example was a heading in the London newspaper, *The Independent* (2nd May, 2002), which ran "*Iain Duncan Smith had one winning feature. Now Blair's pinched it*". Here the journalist spoke about how Tony Blair had stolen Duncan Smith's style just as he had stolen William Hague's style. This was all a matter of delivery. For example, Simon Carr, the journalist wrote of Tony Blair:

*"He rose above the dispatch box
with a whole new masculine presence.
He gave us the voice, the manner of a public school ...
Fast, unsmiling, well modulated but keeping to the lower register,
he bundled the leader of the opposition."*

⁹ See Harvard Management Communication Newsletter, Sept. 2002.

¹⁰ Buzan, Tony, "*Making the most of your mind*".

The writer continued by saying “*This Blair is so possessed with confidence he doesn’t need courage. He didn’t attempt to evade, avoid or sidestep Duncan Smith, he just ran straight over him*”. This was in contrast to the other Blair who consistently lost the afternoon exchanges to William Hague. Duncan Smith, Hague’s successor, had been seen as a manly soldier type, whose qualities were often depicted as the opposite of Blair’s flair for the theatrical. But Blair changed his style at the dispatch and pinched Duncan Smith’s delivery style.

Remember

- Aristotle saw rhetoric as the art of persuasion.
- In this paper, the terms persuasion and rhetoric are used interchangeably.
- There are three kinds of proof available to the practitioner of persuasion:
 - *Ethos* (depending on the persuader’s character),
 - *Pathos* (depending on the persuader’s ability to create the right atmosphere), and
 - *Logos* (depending on the persuader’s ability to form the right argument).
- To put this conceptual basis into practical use in our everyday communication, we have the five canons of rhetoric: *invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery*.
- *Invention* is the discovery of arguments to support or deny your premise. It is about identifying the key questions. *Arrangement* is about how your arguments are structured. *Style* is related to a speaker’s choice of words and non-verbal forms of communication. *Memory* is greatly connected with our imaginations and associations. If we can imagine a place, for example, and make associations with certain aspects of this place, it will become quite easy to speak about the place, as long as we maintain some sequential order. *Delivery* is very much tied up with non-verbal communication and style. There is no one style that is appropriate for all occasions. *Style* can be changed and many do it successfully.

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