

What is Rhetorical Leadership?: My Perspective

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What is Rhetoric?

“Rhetoric” is too often viewed negatively as empty, bombastic, a means for selfish advantage, or a substitute for “real” action. However, rhetoric is symbolic *action* and is essential to any cooperative effort among people. When problems have shared (not just individual) stakes and are something that individuals cannot do or solve alone (e.g., clean water, a team project), rhetoric—“the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (Burke, 1950/1969, p. 43)—is inevitably involved, though it may be used well or poorly, ethically or not. When used well and ethically, rhetoric functions to adjust ideas to people and people to ideas (Bryant, 1953, p. 413). The ethical rhetor operates bilaterally and welcomes, learns from, and incorporates or responds to challenges from others; in this way, the best outcome for the group, not just the individual, can emerge and gain shared support. Such humility and flexibility are vital to symbolically fashioning, publicly testing, and encouraging people to embrace cooperative courses of action because “arguments are not won by shouting down opponents. They are won by changing opponents’ minds” (Lasch, 1991, p. 72).

Christopher Lasch has gone so far as to say that people usually do not fully sort out why or even what they think or believe about a shared problem or issue until they must defend their position to someone else using rhetoric:

Until we have to defend our opinions in public, they remain half-formed convictions based on random impressions and unexamined assumptions. It is the act of articulating and defending our views that lifts them out of the category of “opinions,” gives them shape and definition, and makes it possible for others to recognize them as a description of their own experiences as well. In short, we come to know our own minds only by explaining ourselves to others. (1991, p. 72)

Of course, for the ethical rhetor, any public attempt to encourage others to share one’s original point of view, as well as the act of thoroughly and critically researching one’s position before publicly arguing it, carries the risk that one’s own mind might be changed.

Thus, good rhetoric involves inquiry, not just advocacy. Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric reflects this position. He called rhetoric “the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion” in a given case (*Rhetoric* I.ii.1). He claimed that discovering the whole range of available means and evidence helps one choose the most probable or best of the possibilities to defend as well as anticipate and skillfully refute less well-supported alternatives. Aristotle was equally clear that an honorable rhetor would not use every available means of persuasion observed because no

advocate should argue a position that she or he does not believe, based on inquiry, is the most probably true one or slyly attempt to “warp the dicast’s feelings, . . . which would be like making the rule crooked which one intended to use” (*Rhetoric* I.i.12-14; I.i.5-6). However, since rhetoric deals with probable human issues regarding what courses of action to take or avoid as a group, matters of praise and blame, and questions of responsibility for prior human acts, it is often possible to have committed, ethical rhetors arguing their best on different sides of an issue. Given such inevitable clashes, Aristotle expressed unprecedented faith in a non-specialized audience’s ability to discern the best option for the group’s common interests--*if* the vying alternatives are competently advocated with the strongest arguments on all sides of the matter (*Rhetoric* I.i.11-12). Thus, he considered rhetoric and the presence of skilled rhetors on all sides of probable issues vital to cooperatively dealing with practical matters well. At its best, a rhetorical education actively resists dogmatism and “coercion through a liberalization of the mind” that coaches potential leaders to critically and continually entertain and evaluate all sides before settling on one (Sloane, 1989, p. 472). Rhetoric, then, is the essence of leadership, particularly among peers facing practical shared problems and probable decisions.

What Is Rhetorical Leadership, and Why Is It Important Now?

Rhetorical leadership scholarship and education programs seek to revitalize this appreciation for and the ethical practice of rhetoric in today’s world. We live in a time when, for all practical purposes, “leadership is everyone’s business,” and our shared survival and success depend on realizing that “there are no chosen few. Rather there are skills, abilities, and circumstances that call on all to perform the leadership function” (Morse, 1992, p. 72). Thus, one may function as a leader in some areas of life and as a critical follower in others and may move in and out of performing a leadership role in the same arena across time. While rhetoric has more or less room to operate depending on the political and economic conditions of an age, America’s 21st-century conditions cry out for broader appreciation and use of ethical rhetorical leadership. These conditions include trends toward working (whether as concerned citizens, business people, parents, health care professionals, educators, social advocates, volunteers, non-profit associates, religious workers, etc.) on shared problems toward cooperative ends often in collectivities with flat hierarchies and non-existent/unstable lines of formal authority, few resources, fluid organizations, temporary teams where trust and credibility must constantly be built anew, an excess of information available to all concerned (yet not all of which is equally reliable), diffused responsibility, and divided power among multiple agencies or parties on many major concerns (see Bryson & Crosby, 1992; Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992; Olson, 2006). Currently, America’s foundering economy, the aftermath of the banking crisis, and numerous budget deficit redress measures at local, state, and federal levels make carefully and fully deliberating how best to use our limited shared resources to address a plethora of common problems with communal consequences more important than ever. Simultaneously, the demise of strong institutional advocates (e.g., public unions, like teachers’ unions that negotiated issues of public concern such as class sizes and continuing teacher education as well as the commercial interests of their members) creates a rhetorical void that other community voices must fill.

In these various arenas, such conditions require capable leaders "who may or may not have positions of authority, but who inspire and motivate followers through persuasion, example, and empowerment, not through command and control" (Bryson & Crosby, 1992, p. 21). These

leaders may be ordinary people who are not officially appointed and may not want to step forward, but who

emerge as leaders because of their role in framing experience in a way that provides a viable basis for action, e.g., by mobilizing meaning, articulating and defining what has previously remained implicit or unsaid, by inventing images and meanings that provide a focus for new attention, and by consolidating, confronting, or changing prevailing wisdom. (Smircich & Morgan, 1982, p. 258)

In controversy and ambiguity, these rhetors' symbolic choices help shape their group's sense of community and common interpretation of a complex, relevant situation as well as develop a system of shared meanings that resonate with those involved, which provides a basis for organized action. And, since this process often must occur on the fly, successful "leaders must develop lightning reflexes in a world where flux and ambiguity are the only constants" (Sipchen, 1999, p. 10).

Critical management and analysis of meaning--and the preparation to recognize and seize the rhetorical moment--is the essence of leadership, argued Gail T. Fairhurst and Robert A. Sarr (1996, pp. 2, 10). Potential leaders should thus cultivate and practice the critical abilities to grasp, process, imagine alternatives, and address such symbol-dependent opportunities on the spot. Whether in civic, religious, business, health care, education, or other realms, effective "leaders at any level must communicate spontaneously—anytime, anywhere. They must know how to handle a wide range of people and situations in split-second moments of opportunity, when there is no time for carefully scripted speeches" (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996, p. 10). Though they do not name rhetoric, the Smircich and Morgan *Journal of Applied Behavior Science* article's definition of "leadership" resonates with the practice of a bilateral, ethical rhetoric:

Leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others. . . . Through these diverse means, individual actions can frame and change situations, and in so doing enact a system of shared meaning that provides a basis for organized action. . . . [L]eadership involves a process of defining reality in ways that are sensible to the led. (1982, pp. 258-259)

Writing from a business perspective, Ron Rowe similarly stated, "To lead is to help others to move forward and to move ahead. To lead is to guide by persuasion" (1998, p. 72).

Key to ethical rhetorical leadership (rather than propaganda or more hierarchical takes on persuasion) is that the emerging interpretation of the situation and the proposed shared course of action are not imposed top-down, but become "sensible to the led" through mutual symbol use in which various positions may be vigorously argued, tested, and refined; as Lasch would say, in the process, people's minds (including possibly the potential leader's/rhetor's) are mutually changed as participants publicly generate, argue, test, and jointly revise their perspectives on the common options. Frequently, the "community" that the rhetor perceives to have shared interests or problems is not yet formally recognized, even by its potential members. Thus, in a given case, an important part of rhetorical leadership may be getting those affected to see themselves as a community with shared concerns and one capable of action. "Identification" is thus more central to rhetorical leadership than is "persuasion," a distinction/complement articulated most famously by Kenneth Burke (1950/1969) and extensively developed by other rhetorical scholars. The 2500-year-old rhetorical tradition--which reaches back to Aristotle, the theorist, Cicero, the public practitioner, and Isocrates and Quintilian, the teachers, and moves forward through

centuries of development--theoretically grounds and pragmatically develops a rhetorical leadership perspective and related teachable skills through models and practice.

| A well-planned rhetorical leadership program (e.g., [Rhetorical Leadership at UWM](#)) offers a rich humanities-based alternative to leadership curricula incubated primarily in the social sciences or the military. By its very nature, the social science tradition seeks what is most probable or the norm. While that is certainly valuable to potential leaders, some of one's biggest leadership challenges occur when things do not operate according to the norm or to probability predictions or when there are disparate interpretations of what the available information "means" for a group and its subsequent action choices. Rhetorical leadership teaches attunement and adaptation to the uniqueness of a particular situation or case and its multiple interpretations; it offers critical approaches for flexibly appreciating a range of viewpoints while still generating productive symbolic strategies for forging identification and inventing common purpose. Leadership training adapted from curricula originally developed for the military also offers some insights, but its reliable transferability to civilian circumstances is severely limited by the lack of a strict, enforceable, formal hierarchy with specific terms of participation and extensive control by higher-ups of the information to which the led have access (see Slater & Bensen, 1964/1990). Finally, comprehensive rhetorical leadership training is superior to quick-fix leadership guides and workshops offered for popular consumption, even when their subjects are some fragment of the rhetorical tradition (e.g., ethos/credibility). A good rhetorical leadership program sets its recommendations in a sustained history through which challenges and refinements can be traced and critiqued, a history comfortable with ambiguity and from which a palette of unique symbolic possibilities can be generated and tested in light of one's new challenges. Thorough education in rhetorical leadership is a valuable asset to people with various concerns in today's complex world. Published studies explicitly exemplify its relevance for social advocacy, education and health care policy reform, and business (Olson, 2007, 2008, 2009).

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