

*LEADERSHIP
COMMUNICATION
IN TIMES OF
CRISIS*

Independent Research Project

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Background

Information Studies 614: Management for Information Professionals is a core course in the Master of Library and Information Science program of Syracuse University. The exigence of the course is to give students a basic understanding of the many facets of management and leadership, including an independent final project on the topic of their choice. Leadership communication is an area of interest for me, and I chose to expand my understanding in the area by exploring some of the theories behind rhetorical communication and how they have been applied in crisis communication situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction to Rhetoric and Leadership Communication Theories

While “communications has proven as elusive as the unicorn (Drucker, 2005),” a common thread among the writers and theories on leadership communication is Aristotle’s modes of appeal. Aristotle described rhetoric as the art of persuasion in which three distinct appeals, ethos, pathos, and logos, are used to engage audiences in the message of the rhetor (or speaker as I will use throughout the rest of this text) (Kennedy, 1991). All three modes should be balanced when constructing a message for a rhetorical audience, which Bitzer describes as having two key criteria:

1. There must be an exigence (a problem or action item) that the audience is able to either solve or at least improve the situation; and
2. There must be a way for the speaker to persuade the audience to change their opinion or act (2009).

Ethos, the appeal to the values and trust, brings to light the speaker's understanding of their audience as the credibility and character of the speaker is viewed through the lens of the audience's values. In *Effective Professional Communication: A Rhetorical Approach* Bennetch, Owen, and Keesey note that the speaker's goal is to appeal to and evolve the values of their audience (201-). In my experience, there is a tendency among humans to trust good judgement, good will, and good character and an appeal to our social values tends to anchor our trust in the speaker

The second appeal, pathos, feeds off the emotions of the audience. As Bennetch, et al put it "pathos appeals are any strategy that get the audience to 'open up' to the speaker" (201-). Information that is given with the intent to evoke an emotional response from the audience. In their 1957 Harvard Business Review article, Nichols and Stevens shared findings that emotional reactions to what someone is saying can be equally as distracting as environmental hazards (such as noise and the now ever-present smart phone) (Nichols, 1957)

Third, though no less important, logos appeals to the logic and rational modes of thinking of the audience. It requires the speaker to understand that information presented should be able to be fact-checked through multiple sources. Speakers use logos when presenting a solid and non-biased explanation of their argument for the given exigence (Bennetch, 201-).

Once the three modes of appeal are understood, effective managerial and leadership communication always factors in the exigence or purpose of the message. Conroy and Jones (1986) outline several major reasons for communicating as:

- To inform: convey both information and understanding.

- To gather information: collect input from others to help make decisions and solve problems.
- To motivate: change or reinforce behaviour and prompt specific action.
- To instruct and/or train: enable another to carry out instructions, task, or procedures appropriately.
- To coach and/or discipline: encourage faster growth, prevent disciplinary action, help another learn to do a specific task better, and improve attitudes or behaviour.
- To counsel: help someone with a personal problem that affects work productivity or morale.
- To mentor: help another succeed, usually by imparting better understanding of organizational policies, practices, or politics.
- To build teams: help work groups establish interpersonal rapport, build esprit de corps, and develop cohesion.

Persuasion works by appealing to the needs and drives of the audience and does so in predictable ways. Which makes the rhetorical approach important when dealing with crisis situations.

Crisis Communication and the Public Sector

In *Leading through Tough Times: Overcome even the Greatest Challenges with Courage and Confidence*, John C Maxwell talks about the importance of connecting with people during times of uncertainty to counter feelings of demoralization. Maxwell further explains that

leaders who listen to understand can gather information, challenge assumptions, and modify their approach to people (2021). When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, most public sectors in Canada engaged their Emergency Measures Organization (EMO) systems to plan and communicate with their employees and the larger public they serve. The public began to receive crisis communications, defined in *Chief Crisis Officer: Structure and Leadership for Effective Communications Response* as “the process of ensuring an effective communications response to an unstable or critical state of affairs that threatens to have an undesirable or negative impact on an organization’s reputation, business, or goals (Haggerty, 2017).”

Reviewing what effective leaders did during the first 12-months of the pandemic, Kerrissey and Edmondson said, “leadership in an uncertain, fast-moving crisis means making oneself available to feel what it is like to be in another’s shoes – to lead with empathy (2020).” While the ethos of many leaders in the beginning of the crisis was reinforced, the message needed to overcome the amygdala “fight or flight” pathos response so the audience could hear the logos at the heart of the message be kind, be calm, be safe (Henry, 2021). Studies from the Working Through Violence Research Team (2021) reinforce the message that managers and organizations that took on a relational, rather than transactional, approach to employee engagement and continue to invest in community embeddedness build long-term trust and mutual respect, leading to reciprocal support from employees and the community.

Lessons for the future

As we reflect on the decisions made in early 2020 and the evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic there are several lessons we can take away, and in years to come there will be more reflections on how to do things “better” next time. However, four key lessons for leaders in a novel crisis are summarized by Kerrissey and Edmonson (2020)

- Act with urgency: there is a tendency in leadership to wait for more information and clarity before communicating. In a rapidly developing situation, this can prove to be more dangerous than choosing to act, with the ability to pivot as needed.
- Communicate with transparency: provide honest and accurate descriptions of reality – being as clear as humanly possible about what you know, what you anticipate, and what it means for people. Be clear and concise whenever possible.
- Respond productively to missteps: listen, acknowledge, and orient everyone to problem solving while avoiding blame and defensiveness.
- Engage in constant updating: leaders need to be steady, but ready and able to pivot as their understanding of the event unfold and new information comes to light.

When factored together on the foundation of Aristotle’s modes of appeal, they give a recipe for effective communication in almost any situation. While there are those who would argue that the listener needs to understand how to handle messages coming to them from communication styles that are not their default style (Goulston, 2013) good managers and leaders will encode their messages with an understanding of the perceptions of their audience and a willingness to adjust the way that future messages are sent based on the feedback received from the intended audience.

Resources for Communication Styles

Leadership IQ Communication Styles Quiz and Assessment:

<https://www.leadershipiq.com/blogs/leadershipiq/39841409-quiz-whats-your-communication-style>

Fogarty Fellows Communication Styles: A Self-Assessment Exercise (based on the work of P

Case “Teaching for the Cross-Cultural Mind” Washington, DC, SIETAR, 1981):

<https://fogartyfellows.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/5DCase.pdf>

5 Love Languages “Strengthening Workplace Relationships”:

<https://www.5lovelanguages.com/start/workplace>

and a follow-up article in Forbes Magazine on “How to Best Communicate your Appreciation in

the Workplace” <https://www.forbes.com/sites/amyblaschka/2019/10/29/how-to-best-communicate-your-appreciation-in-the-workplace/?sh=4e982af620a7>

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