



Aristotle's Rhetoric and Business Communication

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Abstract:

In today's business environment, communication is not just another soft skill. It is a fundamental requirement that needs to be groomed and developed into a leadership competency. Hence, communication skills and communication management are considered essential in any business organization. A communication message is not a mere collection of words to present information but a well-thought-over strategy to realize a business objective. Thus, rhetoric aids communication to be deliberate and strategic activity. As poor communication has been one of the potent reasons for businesses to go wrong, it is a worthy choice to revisit the notion of effective communication. This essay aims to reappraise Aristotle's rhetorical ideology to throw light on effective communication strategies for businesses to consider.

Keywords: *Effective communication, Rhetoric, Strategy, Persuasion.*

Introduction:

Persuasion is a crucial part of business and communication, and rhetoric is the study of ways of persuasion. There have been thoughts of ways of expression since the time of classical rhetoricians like Aristotle (1991). The ancient rhetorical works mainly focused on politics and public speeches; neo-rhetoric was concerned with people's everyday lives, like in debate (Lee, 2018). Externally, communication is essential for businesses to sell their products and secure the trust and loyalty of their consumers (Kim & Benbasat, 2006; Jaganathan, Mayr, & Nagaratnam, 2014). Internally, it is essential to convince organizational members about the need for structural

reforms like downsizing (Hossfeld, 2018), advertising goods to consumers, justifying a decision to internal and external stakeholders of a company, or pitching to get investments and various other activities. As businesses, through communication, address mass public and diverse groups, they need to plan the expressions and the implications. Hence, such situations warrant persuasion.

Significance of rhetoric in business organizations:

Organizations are the integral entities that have a tremendous influence on the way people carry on in life. They are the driving force behind matters such as national policies, public thinking of health care, the environment, business and so on. One of the prevalent and often unnoticed ways in which organizations exercise their influence is through deliberate 'rhetoric.'

According to Chester Barnard (1939), an organization is a system of consciously coordinated activities of two or more persons and people form organizations as they lack the power to independently accomplish some of their goals. This view suggests a few common characteristics among organizations, such as communication, cooperation, and common purpose. It is needless to mention that organizations cannot exist without communication. Scholars like Cooren, Taylor, and Van Every (2006) argue that communication is what creates organizations. It is so essential if the interdependent practices of any group have to work together. Organizations do require individuals' participation for achieving their goals. Hence, they create messages which show and convince individuals that the benefits of joining organizations outweigh the costs or disadvantages, if any.

Organizations adopt *organizational rhetoric* as they invariably are in need of individuals' contributions and trust for their proper functioning. The use of rhetoric by organizations is a strategy to influence audiences' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, which are crucial for achieving organizational objectives. As organizations happen to face many kinds of audiences, and audiences often have multiple and conflicting interests, such situation warrants well-crafted rhetoric or effective communication.

Understanding Rhetoric:

Rhetoric is a very ancient thought about the process of persuasion. Most human activities are rhetorical, whether or not people are conscious of it. Rhetoric is about using strategic approaches to communication, whether textual, verbal, or visual. When people communicate to different audiences on the same topic, they make strategic plans on what information to include and what kind of evidence or support to use to appeal to diverse audiences.

Knowledge has been a critical aspect of sustenance and development among human societies. Knowledge is created and constructed by people through discourse. Anything that is considered 'truth' or 'fact' depends on social consensus. Rhetoric helps people to understand knowledge. Scholars in different fields such as communication, social psychology, public relations, philosophy, history, management, economics, law, political science, anthropology, sociology, and literature have drawn on the concept of rhetoric (Lucaites, Condit, and Caudill, 1999).

Research scholars have identified ancient traditions of rhetoric in countries like China and Egypt (Lipson and Binkley, 2009). But the one which is most often referred to is the traditional Western rhetoric that originated in ancient Greece and Rome. Among the available works that specifically stand out are the works of Quintilian, Aristotle, and Cicero (e.g., Aristotle, trans. 1991; Cicero, trans. 2001; Quintilian, trans. 1920/1996). The popular and the best-known definition of rhetoric from this tradition is the one given by Aristotle: "Let rhetoric be an ability, in each case, to see the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, trans. 1991, 1.2.1). There is a description by Isocrates, another of the ancient Greeks, pointing to the epistemic quality of rhetoric when he asserted that "we use the same arguments by which we persuade others in our own deliberations" (Isocrates, trans. 2000, 15.256).

The ancient rhetoricians often disagreed with one another, but they could see themselves as bearers of a glorious tradition in rhetoric. Over time, rhetoric got associated with empty and flowery language and, thus, moved into disrepute (Conley, 1990/1994; Kennedy, 1999). Rhetorical scholars in the present era attempted to move away from an aesthetic understanding of rhetoric that was preoccupied with form. They favoured scientific knowledge along with the modernist notion of objectivity. It is observed that every human behaviour does involve rhetoric. It is rhetoric that helps people to accept some ideas and reject others.

Aristotle and his Rhetoric Ideology:

Aristotle, the renowned philosopher of Greece, wrote *Rhetoric* during the fourth century B.C. He was born in 384 BC. For about two decades, he studied under his mentor, Plato, another Greek philosopher. Aristotle's works on science, logic, politics, metaphysics, and various other subjects have stimulated Western thought and influenced many philosophers.

Many historians have formed opinions about the kind of work *Rhetoric* is and its objectives and have not yet come to any agreement (Newman, S.J., 2001). *Rhetoric* by Aristotle is generally considered a handbook on persuasion. However, many criticize the work as a redundant and messy compilation of a few lecture notes and poorly-written guidelines as per its own advocacy of methods (Lee, I.J., 2005; Burke, M. 2008). A few other historians, ignoring the format, argue that Aristotle's purpose behind *Rhetoric* was to defend the subject from criticism by other philosophers. Aristotle recognizes that people can use rhetoric for causes without integrity; but he emphasises and advocates its value as a good tool of public discourse; he presents its complexity and potential as a method that can engage both emotion and reason (Triadafilopoulos, 1999). It is observed that Aristotle thus, asserts and seeks to convince that rhetoric is a valid technique despite his peers' contrary opinions.

The field of persuasion is known to be critical, and Aristotle has established the discipline well through his work *Rhetoric*, which offers a good framework for the idea. Ever since its publication, '*Rhetoric*' has remained relevant. Aristotle has discussed what successful rhetoric entails, the purpose of rhetoric, and what effective rhetoricians do. Defining rhetoric as persuasion, he explains the components of argumentation, and the same can be employed to devise an effective presentation, whether oral or written. He distinguishes rhetoric from dialectic, acknowledging the similarities between the two. Accordingly, dialectic involves logical argumentation about issues through

dialogue; it is a debate for skilled people on philosophical matters. But rhetoric refers to the capability to identify the possible/available means of persuasion in various situations (Molina & Spicer, 2004).

After delineating rhetoric as different from dialectic and stressing its validity, Aristotle writes on the specifics. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle explains the important three appeals which are generally referred to as the "Rhetorical Triangle." He focuses on the artistic means of persuasion. Accordingly, he mentions ethos - the speaker's character, pathos - the audience's needs and emotions, and logos- the rational element of the argument or the message. As per the technique, a successful orator or a communicator can consider merging ethos, pathos, and logos. As Aristotle maintains, since rhetoric does exist to affect decision-making, the orator must try to make the argument demonstrative and worthy of belief, make his own character look right, and put his audience into the right frame of mind (Aristotle, 2004). Aristotle further explains that rhetoric is not pure reasoning; it involves style, elegance, and eloquence (Meyer, 2012). Based on this framework, he continues his rhetoric description by revealing the power of words through analysis, wherein he unites rhetoric's ethical, philosophical, and literary aspects. He firmly believes that everyone has the opportunity and potential to engage in rhetoric, either as a speaker or a listener.

Importance of Rhetoric:

Aristotle acknowledges that some persons have latent talent for persuasion, making them unique from others. According to Triadafilopoulos (1999), in a system of democracy, all are given equal opportunity to deliberate, judge, and speak; quite often, an exemplary person who is adept at the art of persuasion will be noted as the representative of a specific idea or a program. The general view is that some persons possess an inherent aptitude for persuasion, but only through developing rhetorical skills can people engage in effective discourse. Aristotle believed that rhetoric was an important aspect of education and work. His landmark teachings reformed the ideology of rhetoric, and the art of persuasion came to be considered a proper discipline. The study of rhetoric stressed integrative learning, steeping learners in society's values and preparing them for life as accountable and honourable leaders (Green & Zinke, 1993).

Concluding Remarks:

Despite criticism from a few scholars who doubt Aristotle's rhetoric ideology, there are a good number of scholars who support it by stressing rhetoric's potential, and hence, they suggest its revival. Heather et al. (2000) offer clinical protocol and medical writing as an example – an area that would draw many benefits from more profound attention to rhetoric. Ultimately, despite different opinions, many scholars agree on the power of words or speech in the art of persuasion.

Though written many centuries ago and regarded with varying views, *Rhetoric* by Aristotle has remained relevant and valuable ever since its publication and practice. It is clear that persuasion proves the potential of expressions and speech. Public administrators and others in the public sphere recognize and appreciate it; rhetoric goes beyond its traditional oral and written contexts. It is a vital aspect of advertising in the present times, which has become an increasingly influential field. Not only in the business of selling, but persuasion is also inevitable in the area of

politics too. The techniques presented by Aristotle thus, transcend time and medium; it is of advantage for anyone without discrimination, and business organizations should make use of it.

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