

Persuasion Principles: They Haven't Changed Much

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One can tire of addressing the need for credibility, clarity and persuasiveness in public relations, and frustration grows with a sense of history. Basic principles of public relations and persuasion have been around for 2,500 years. So, why do businesspeople still have difficulty with them?

The Greeks codified communications techniques into classical rhetoric. The Romans refined them and rhetoricians in the Medieval and Renaissance periods expanded on their work. Rhetoric, the foundation of persuasion, was taught through the 19th Century and largely dismissed in the 20th Century although the 20th Century had greater need for persuasive communication than at any other time in Western Civilization. Media proliferated and multi-channel communications mushroomed. In the 21st Century with expansion of the Internet, rhetorical principles continued to be vital. Perhaps, it is time for businesspeople to study rhetoric again.

In 500 BCE, one's life and livelihood depended on knowing how to communicate persuasively. One couldn't hire a lawyer in Athens, Greece to defend oneself at trial: There were no lawyers. One learned to speak well to protect oneself in lawsuits and politics. Since Athenians had vested political and judicial power with free citizens in its early Democracy, Athenian juries could be as large as 200 citizens. One had to convince them of a position with eloquence and logic. As a result, the use -- and abuse -- of communications techniques were displayed early on. There is no difference between then and now.

In BCE. 427, an eloquent Greek journeyed to Athens from Leontini in Sicily to seek aid against the Syracusans. He called himself a rhetorician, and he taught the craft of speaking to persuade. With a growing demand for education, professional and well-paid teachers, called Sophists, taught rhetoric, politics, grammar, etymology, history, physics, and mathematics. Rhetoric was the dominant course.

Sophists were spinmeisters who believed technique was more important than content. They taught students to persuade listeners to whatever they wished listeners to believe without regard for truth. They trapped or confused opponents or overwhelmed them with noise and violence. They won listeners through clever speech and phrasing. Hence, they earned a bad reputation for deliberate use of fallacious arguments. By the second century BCE, Sophists had become professional pitchmen and entertainers who declaimed for the enjoyment of

audiences. Today, they would find a place in infomercials. Regrettably, sophistry remains at the heart of much advertising and political campaigning.

Thinkers arose who opposed the Sophists and the empty communications mechanics the Sophists taught. Plato believed some things were true or false. For example, $12 \times 12 = 144$. Nothing can change this fact, which is immutable and universal. Aristotle accepted Plato's notion of universal knowledge, but he held that humans gain knowledge from experience, from inducing probable knowledge out of observing facts of a particular case or cases. He too rejected the Sophist assumption that argument is manipulating words and people to win arguments and not to find truth. In his work, *On Rhetoric*, he says rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic -- discussion and reasoning by conversation in which opposing arguments are pitted against one another to find truth and expose falsehood. Rhetoric is the art of finding arguments that persuade people something is true or usually true.

Aristotle spent a great deal of time in his work, *On Rhetoric*, discussing virtue and character. He grasped the concept of credibility and its importance, but he was clear-eyed about it. He understood that a rhetorician could still be a spinmeister. Here is what he wrote:

Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself. Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men 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. This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak. 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 he possesses.

Aristotle noted an emphasis on swaying crowds emotionally, and it is clear that he saw it as overdone.

...persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech 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...

He also understood the power of persuasion through building proof through facts.

...persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question.

And, Aristotle understood that rhetoric comprised a group of techniques that apply across the board.

Neither rhetoric nor dialectic is the scientific study of any one separate subject: both are faculties for providing arguments.

And, in a rebuke to a notion of mass media, he understood where communications effectiveness lies – with listeners and not with message senders.

Rhetoric falls into three divisions, determined by the three classes of listeners to speeches. For of the three elements in speech-making -- speaker, subject, and person addressed -- it is the last one, the hearer, that determines the speech's end and object. The hearer must be either a judge, with a decision to make about things past or future, or an observer.

We must also take into account the nature of our particular audience when making a speech of praise; for, as Socrates used to say, "it is not difficult to praise the Athenians to an Athenian audience." If the audience esteems a given quality, we must say that our hero has that quality, no matter whether we are addressing Scythians or Spartans or philosophers.

Aristotle and rhetoricians after him divided speaking into five areas of study that encompass the same processes we use today to put together a persuasive argument.

The first was to know one's audience and how to present to that audience. One planned for proofs needed, emotional appeals, and the power of credibility. This was called *invention*, a word used in the sense of finding a way to get the job done, of developing a creative plan to persuade listeners. The second study was how to arrange the parts of the speech to make a convincing case. As Aristotle said, every speech needs a beginning, middle and an end and each part works with the other to build proof and persuade. The third task was to determine the style of the speech. Was it to be plainspoken or ornate? Was it to use elegant tweaks of language for pleasure of the audience or brutal confrontation? Classical rhetoric defined three styles – the folksy, down-home talking-to-the-people-on-the-street style, a middle style between the sophisticated and the down-home still used today on television news and a grand style rarely heard outside of the US Senate or pulpits in churches. The fourth task was memory,

which was important in the absence of teleprompters and PowerPoint. Memory is still important in that even if one speaks informally, the key points of a speech should be lodged firmly in one's mind. This is often forgotten to the despair of media trainers. The final study was of speaking itself, of how to use one's voice, arms, body and facial expressions to get a point across. Call it acting if you must, but it is often lost on CEOs, particularly those who stand immobile behind a podium, head-down and reading from a text.

Within these studies, classical rhetoricians broke communications into smaller parts. These included the introduction and how one put the audience in the right frame of mind, the narration in which the speaker tells the audience what he is going to discuss, the proposition in which the speaker lays out the central theme, the division of the speech into sections supporting the theme, the proofs supporting the theme for the thesis and the conclusion that summarizes what the speaker has said and appeals for audience support. Anyone who writes speeches knows these elements. It's a pity that many businessmen do not because they are called upon daily to defend their views in staff meetings, before customers and with employees. Gobbledygook that passes for communications in many companies wouldn't pass muster with a Sophist.

Classical rhetoric encompasses broad categories of study, much of which is no longer pertinent to business situations, but the principles and considerations are no different than what concern communicators today. There is a reason for this sameness. Humans haven't changed much in thousands of years and their psychology endures from generation to generation. Why then have business people and business schools abandoned communications training?

Not long ago I talked to a professor at a prestigious business school who was lamenting how badly his students wrote and presented their cases. And these are students who will look for \$80,000 to \$90,000 per year starting jobs when they finish two years of study. I related my own experience in business school. Professors emphasized finance and accounting to the near exclusion of everything else. This continues to be the case in most business school teaching where communications courses are poorly attended electives. I suggested to the professor that every student entering a business school should take a writing and presentation test. If the student fails, communications courses would become mandatory. Neither the professor nor I had any expectations this suggestion would ever come to pass.

Yet, the difficulty remains. We live in an information age in which persuasive communications are more important than ever. Businesspeople who avoid learning the craft of persuasive communications handicap themselves internally and externally. That is especially true in the top job of a company. For every Steve Jobs of Apple who can hold an audience in the palm of his hand, there are 10 CEOs who read boringly from a teleprompter or give rambling and informal remarks that lose an audience more quickly than winning it.

I heard recently a CEO of one of the largest corporations in the world say with chagrin that when he went to business school, he hated the organizational behavior course that dealt with “touchy-feely” stuff of leadership. He wanted math and finance courses. But now as CEO, he spends almost all of his time on “touchy-feely” stuff. He realizes he should have paid more attention. Communications is part of the “touchy-feely” stuff of leadership and it is, as the Greeks understood, one of the most important studies of all because one’s life and livelihood can depend on it. You would think the modern businesspersons would understand that, but they don’t.

So, there continues to be employment for professional communicators, and that’s not bad for public relations counselors, I guess.

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