

The way to Rhetoric, Learning & Leadership

When management courses do not deliver what they promise. After decades of psychologising, a new rhetorical thinking is needed.

Management courses in communication often bind managers in a psychological straitjacket. Many managers, however, will in practice profit more by also learning the tools of rhetoric. The lacking communication skills of many managers are namely often due to a problem of *understanding*, not *feeling*. Communication only becomes a problem of feeling because managers do not master rhetorical tools. These are tools that could prevent many managers from internalising the problem of lacking communication competencies. Adding a portion of rhetorical thinking to communications courses will bring new inspiration to managers, give them a new framework of understanding and new analytical tools - which do not psychologise. Rhetoric as a tool of management is a new strategic orientation, clarification, and, not least, profiling ("branding") of management training.

In this Ph.D. project, 'Rhetoric, Learning & Leadership', I wish to examine the effectivity of the learning strategies and evaluation methods used in management courses with the aim of discovering what does work and what does not. The research project aims to provide an answer to the question: How do managers best learn to translate the theories and exercises that they meet on courses in personal development into practice? The aim is to give companies wishing to invest in management training a compass to help them find their way through the forest of courses and programmes available. At the same time, my hypothesis and hope is that rhetoric as a tool of management will enjoy a renaissance. The point of an empirical examination of the effectivity of learning strategies and processes in management courses is, beyond its own immediate value, to discover how and in what ways rhetoric can be introduced into management courses in the future.

The Utility Value of the Research Project

To answer the questions of to what extent management courses work or not, and how they can be improved, the research project will examine 3 aspects:

1. Knowledge about the effect of the learning strategies and processes used by the course developers and teachers to promote the managers' learning and competence development, i.e. what conditions should be fulfilled for learning to be most effective?
2. Knowledge about qualitative method(s) for evaluating soft competencies, i.e. how to determine whether learning has taken place?
3. Knowledge about how the theory and practice of rhetoric can contribute to managers' communication competencies.

In Denmark, no research is currently being carried out with the aim of increasing the effectivity of management training. A report from Copenhagen Business School recently concluded that the concept of management has become inflated – and not only the concept itself: the astronomical sums spent on management training alone means that it is necessary for companies and research institutions to cooperate on

its development, an effort that would in fact give the companies participating in such cooperation an innovative advantage and significant signal value.

The Purpose of Training Managers Today

To communicate means "to make common". From a rhetorical perspective the manager creates solutions through illustrative examples and stories that the employees can visualise and use as guidelines when they later encounter the problems. In short, the manager must be able to use metaphors that bring the employees together. In these storytelling times, it is surprising that rhetoric is not more visible in management training. Perhaps this reluctance to deal with rhetoric is due to the fact that despite 2500 years of reflection and research the unfortunate confusion between "rhetoric" in the widespread (negative) sense of "manipulative empty speech", and then the discipline of rhetoric itself, is still predominant.

Rhetoric as a discipline is *the teaching of speaking well* - both in form and content. This is exactly the opposite of "empty speech" since fancy talk with no content can never be good.

Having said this, we should not forget that what is true of any tool, is also true of rhetoric; it can be used for good or bad - it all depends on the use people put it to - just as fire can be a dangerous master, but a most useful servant.

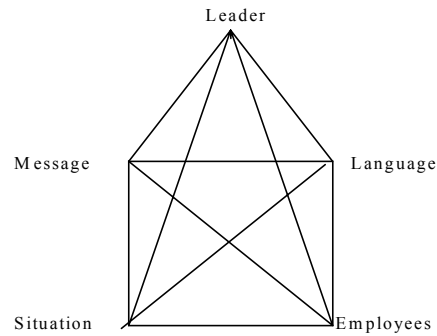
However, there is an ethical dimension to rhetoric, so that if it is misused the person's credibility (ethos) will be lost *over time* - and thus also the basis for persuasion. Here, I would also add that there is nothing reprehensible in wanting, or in allowing oneself to be, *persuaded*. As the enlightened individuals that many of us pride ourselves to be, it is in fact our duty to be open and allow ourselves to be persuaded by the best arguments.

Rhetoric is the art of influence in the broadest sense: an art of pointing to the persuasive elements in any given case with the aim of influencing others. This is particularly interesting when we speak about the *purpose* of management: *to solve tasks with and through other people*. Communication for managers has a clear purpose, namely to influence the employees and direct them towards a particular goal. From a rhetorical perspective, the manager must create *solidarity*, give the employees a feeling of community. The ability of managers to effectuate a close connection between themselves as managers and the employees is the condition for being able to appear with a credibility that persuades the employees to follow the direction the manager desires. The employees' feeling of community emerges only insofar as the manager's solutions are adapted to the thoughts, language and situation of the employees. This is achieved through stories, examples and images. The goal is for the employees to "visualise" the solution. In short, the manager must be able to create and communicate metaphors that bring the employees together.

Rhetoric as a tool of management consists in:

1. Metaphoric Management: a practised skill in creating a space for the employees; the manager's power of argumentation is directly proportional to his ability to empathise and share a sense of solidarity with the employees.
2. Metaphoric Vision: a practised skill in creating the future through solution-based images and communicating these so the employees have a clear inner picture of the framework for action.

In this way, rhetoric emphasises the five factors of communication:



The model illustrates the mutual dependency and intimate relation of these factors. If managers are made aware of, are trained in, and reflect on, the interplay between these five factors, this will then create a *dynamic* connection simply because situation(s) are changeable. The recognition that situations are changeable creates a demand for the manager's attention and presence (Aptum); that the manager at a given moment can be creatively present (Kairos). Such a rhetorical awareness would sharpen the communication competencies of managers so that in a given situation they find the appropriate demeanour and linguistic attire in relation to the employees and to their immediate activities. Being able to combine these five factors in one's demeanour requires a well-trained skill in adapting language and message to the ongoing reactions of the employees. As mentioned, rhetorical awareness does not do this alone - tools are necessary.

From Emotion to Reason

Many managers experience that the professional qualifications, with which they attained their current positions, are no longer adequate when the managerial task consists in mastering problems of communication and conflict resolution. It is precisely the managers' *feeling* of powerlessness and incompetence that paves the way for the march of psychologisation - at least judging by the courses available and the CVs of many teachers. It is important to emphasise that it is not psychology as such that I am criticising, but rather the teachers' handling and interpretation, and not least the question of whether psychology contributes at all to the way managers communicate in practice. Management trainees often encounter an abyss when they attempt to *transfer* the psychological techniques and experiences from the course to what they need in practice.

Whereas psychological techniques often focus on the negative, on what goes wrong, rhetoric builds on what actually works. The detour around the managers' personal feelings often overshadows the real purpose of management courses: to enable the manager to solve tasks by using language in certain ways. Aiming towards this goal, it is therefore just as important that management courses are not only based on feelings, including personal profiles, embellished with abstract "techniques". These things only concern the *conditions* for being able to communicate – not communication in practice. Communication in practice concerns to a greater extent concrete linguistic training, demeanour and ability. Unlike feelings, language is common to all.

Problems and Solutions

New concepts of management and so-called buzz words escalate in an upwards spiral and at a speed that completely lives up to Aldous Huxley's prediction that the only certainty in the history of mankind is that everything increases in speed. A glance through the weekly articles giving recipes for good management will also show that there is indeed good reason for being dizzy with confusion: in one week everything is about *trust*, the next *credibility*, then *commitment*, etc. There is nothing wrong with that: the problem consists in the fact that they are presented as isolated concepts – that, in contrast to rhetoric, there is no framework of understanding that conjoins them. From a rhetorical perspective, there are three ways in which the manager presents persuasive arguments:

1. Through his character: **ethos** – credibility, that the employees have confidence in the manager's judgement and human qualities.
2. Through his representation of the case: **logos**; through appealing to reason to demonstrate the correctness of what is said with a view to the action to be taken.
3. By influencing the feelings of the employees: **pathos**, to create motivation and commitment through solidarity.

On the one hand, there is widespread psychologising, and on the other, the reason of rhetoric - but this does not mean that one excludes the other. But whether or not one considers these to be simply different perspectives, rhetoric is an important team player considering that the basis of management is, in fact, to achieve a common goal for a *group* of employees and not to score an own goal.

Firstly, psychology does not include a theory of communication that can be translated into practical, useable tools. For example: a manager must find, prepare and communicate a solution for a problem to his employees by the following day. On his table are the tools for thinking: pen and paper. What next? How does the manager arrive at the solution? When the manager has found the solution, how should it be introduced? Next, how does the manager structure the case? Last, but not least, how does the manager conclude the presentation so that the employees will remember, and visualise the solution, after they have left? Because psychologically oriented teachers often do not have the tools to solve such concrete problems, they tend to problematise the very nature of communication - this is equivalent to turning illiteracy into the personal problem of those individuals who cannot read or write, instead of giving them tools with which to tackle it. The fact is, of course, that managers *can* already read, write and speak - in short, they can communicate. So why not just give them the necessary tools so they can also *communicate* their messages, solutions and visions in an exciting way? Rhetoric is based on a rational focus on the things that work – on the positive rather than the negative – on what already functions well with every single person.

Secondly, a great deal of psychology is based on an I-you relationship, whereas rhetoric is primarily based on communicating to a *group* of people - which is naturally more in line with what managers have use for. Unlike the *individual orientation* of psychology, rhetoric therefore focuses, as mentioned, on persuading and influencing with a view to creating a feeling of community and *solidarity* – perhaps the most important attribute of managers today. Therefore, my research project emphasises the need to improve learning through practice by training managers in the use of rhetorical tools.

The advantage of rhetoric, in addition to a thorough recognition of what communication actually is, is that it also includes concrete tools and argumentation techniques that build up the managers' confidence, their powers of reason and judgement. The tools of rhetoric simply make managers better at what they already can do and what they wish to do. Instead of assuming that communication is a problem whereby managers must make an inner detour, it is important to maintain that the objective of good management is an outwards solution of the tasks that they are in charge of.

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