My admiration and respect for New York Governor Andrew Cuomo increases following each of his daily COVID-19 briefings. As a scholar of political communication for more than 40 years, rarely have I studied a political leader who thoroughly understands how to respond rhetorically to a health crisis.

For example, in March Cuomo exhibited, as he has done regularly since, how to be a genuine leader, believable public figure and compassionate human being—and what rhetorical skills and virtues that demands. Using a very personal and powerful story about his brother Chris Cuomo (CNN Anchor) who tested positive for COVID-19, the Governor told a heartwarming, at times humorous, story that resonated with his audience.

It was a story with which anyone, regardless of political view, could identify. Cuomo used this personal narrative to document concretely how to challenge people calmly but firmly and decisively to take the pandemic seriously, hence behaving in a disciplined manner that is respectful to others.
Moreover, Cuomo daily portrays his own humanity, thorough grasp of the facts and awareness of what must be done to get us through this difficult moment in our country’s history. In addition, the rhetorically astute balance demonstrated in the Governor’s discourse—of personal narrative with the needed response to the pandemic—is superb, providing an archetype of successful messaging in times of crisis.

Of special note is the fact that Cuomo regularly and candidly acknowledges what he doesn’t know—something that increases his ethos and allows him to be taken more seriously. Cuomo realizes that people would rather hear the truth—no matter how bad or harsh—than to remain confused and in limbo. He appreciates the significant categorical difference between facts and opinions, frequently reminding his audience of Joe Friday’s catch phrase from Dragnet: “Just the facts ma’am.”

The Governor’s briefings are rich in easy to digest visual data and consistently decry the natural and unproductive tendency by politicians and pundits to spin information about and blame others for the coronavirus pandemic—all of which prevent solution of the problem. By contrast, Cuomo routinely marshals a rhetorically powerful case for why people—regardless of partisan perspective—should stop exploiting the current crisis by turning a health issue into a political one.

While some perhaps rightfully take issue with Cuomo’s failure to respond quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic, it cannot be denied that, unlike Donald Trump, his communication provides an effective
rhetorical response, revealing strength, personal resolve, love, compassion and honesty. Put simply, Cuomo illustrates how to balance what Aristotle in his Rhetoric called ethos, pathos and logos—the persuasive appeals most needed during a time of crisis. He proves what communication scholars have known for years: crises require a fitting rhetorical answer.

Imagine if we had a President of the United States who, instead of promoting himself, spewing false as well as dangerous information, attacking others and refusing to take responsibility, could lead in this manner.

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