Leadership to Survive a Pandemic
Demands Rhetorical Sensitivity

April 4, 2020

In his daily coronavirus briefing, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo showed us again today (March 31, 2020), as he has regularly, 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 just tested positive for COVID-19, the Governor told a heartwarming, at times humorous, story that is sure to resonate—one with which anyone, regardless of political view, can identify. He concretely documented how to challenge people calmly but firmly and decisively to take the pandemic seriously, hence behaving in a disciplined manner.

Cuomo vividly portrayed his own humanity, thorough grasp of the facts and understanding 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 message—of personal narrative with the needed response to the crisis—was superb, providing an archetype of successful messaging in times of crisis.

Imagine if we had a President of the United States who, instead of promoting himself, attacking others and refusing to take responsibility, could lead in this manner. As a scholar who has studied and taught political communication for over 40 years, Cuomo’s example proves that effective rhetoric, which includes a careful blending of logos pathos and ethos, is an essential tool for the nation’s ability to survive COVID-19.

Put simply, now more than perhaps at any other time in America’s past, it is incumbent upon our leaders to employ principles that the discipline of communication has taught for years, dating back to Aristotle.

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