An Effective Rhetorical Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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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 an elected official who so thoroughly understands how to respond rhetorically to a health crisis. He is a model for other political leaders.

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 requires. 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 yet firmly and decisively to take the
pandemic seriously, hence behaving in a disciplined manner respecting the lives of 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 laudable, 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. This increases the Governor’s ethos, allowing him to be taken more seriously by his constituents. Cuomo is cognizant of the fact 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 differences between facts and emotions, as well as data and politics, 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.

In the last week, as the number of hospitalizations and deaths in New York has declined, the Governor’s rhetoric shifted. Noting that New Yorkers now are “ahead of the beast,” Cuomo deftly explained that the States’ residents no longer are the victims of COVID-19. Instead, they now have control of future pandemic outcomes—that their behavior will predict in an almost cause and effect manner exactly what will happen in
the future. This rhetorical shift is significant: it not only conveys positivity but it “liberates” New Yorkers.

Best of all, Cuomo uses his daily briefings to persuade audience members that the coronavirus pandemic presents more than a crisis; it also is an opportunity to take positive steps to address other issues. His discourse on cleaning the subway, as well as helping find shelter for the homeless who increasingly have used these trains to sleep at night, are just two recent examples. Beyond solving problems that did not originate with COVID-19, Cuomo’s messages illustrate the therapeutic function of rhetoric, projecting a more positive and hopeful way to think about the pandemic; this is something desperately needed by an audience whose daily lives are filled with worry and trepidation.

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.

Cuomo proves what communication scholars have known for years: that, in addition to fact-based policies, crises require a fitting rhetorical answer. As academic research reveals, rhetorical responses often are as important as chosen policies and impact the effectiveness of those policies.

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. Not only would that reduce the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic but it would help unite a politically divided nation.
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