Rhetorical Leadership: Intentionality and Communication

This paper is a culmination of the ideas I developed throughout a semester of learning about rhetoric, leadership, and communication. For much of the semester, I was functioning under the assumption that a rhetorical leader is anyone who supplies constructive dissent for the purpose of creating harmony. However, through my study of the works of Plato, Keith Grint, and Paul Woodruff along with some outside sources, I have come to a different understanding of rhetoric and leadership as well as followership. As I have researched and written, I have come to the important realization that it is a rhetorical leaders’ ethical responsibility to communicate in a way that invites constructive feedback. While the exact nature of this communication may vary, the principle stays the same—rhetorical leaders and rhetorical followers share a responsibility to intentionally create place for constructive feedback and intentionally give that feedback, respectively.

In his book Leadership: A Very Short Introduction, Keith Grint claims that “What we actually need is constructive dissenters who are willing to tell their boss that his or her decision is wrong” (30). In this situation, he was talking about the responsibility an employee has to help their boss realize when a decision is right or wrong. The idea is applicable to a variety of situations with leaders and followers, though. From this quote, I eventually came to understand that good followers are vitally important to the success of a leader. This kind of followership can be defined as rhetorical followership. Rhetorical followers provide constructive feedback for
their leaders and thereby contribute to the growth of the leader and the harmony of the group. However, it is up to the leader to make a place for this constructive feedback within the dialogue of a group.

The responsibility of a rhetorical leader to create an opportunity for constructive feedback may seem insignificant when compared with other aspects of leadership, but when we consider the imprecise nature of human communication, it is plain to see that constructive feedback is incredibly important for the success of any leader or group. Mikhail Bakhtin wrote that “Between the word and its object” and “between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object” (276). The dense language of this quote basically means that every word comes with some baggage. Dr. Dennis Cutchins explained the idea more simply by comparing a dialogic interaction to people throwing a beach ball back and forth on a windy day. He explains that

Once the ball leaves the thrower’s hands it is subject to the winds and is likely to end up someplace different than the thrower intends. This is not to say that the thrower did not have intentions, it simply acknowledges that those intentions were not the only factors in the ball’s eventual landing spot. The catcher must adjust, perhaps more than once, to the thrower’s intentions, as well as to the effects of the wind. Perhaps the thrower, too, adjusts her aim to anticipate the wind (2).

If the thrower or catcher did not make any effort to adjust for the wind, the ball would never hit its target. The thrower (or speaker) must make their best adjustments to try and ensure they throw the ball to the right place, but beyond that, they need to appreciate it when the catcher (or listener) makes adjustments or has to run to catch the ball.
If the speaker were to get offended when the listener asked exactly what they meant, or if they spoke in a way that didn’t even allow for questions to be asked, can they be surprised if their listener doesn’t quite catch the beach ball of the conversation? A true rhetorical leader allows and encourages their audience to make adjustments and to ask questions so that the pursuit of truth can really be furthered. As the words “brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads” (Bakhtin 276), new meaning is formed. New understanding between speaker and listener is achieved. Plato hit this particular nail on the head in his novel Phaedrus. In the novel, Socrates explains to Phaedrus the difference between words like “iron” and words like “just” or “good” by pointing out that talking about iron causes most people to think of the same thing—namely iron—while talking about justice or goodness will invoke vastly different thoughts in different people. Socrates then says that “whoever wants to acquire the art of rhetoric must first make a systematic division and grasp the particular character of each of these two kinds of thing, both the kind where most people wander in different directions and the kind where they do not” (60). Socrates realizes that people are not always going to understand each other, and so it is vastly important for a rhetorician to understand the differences between concrete and flexible definitions and, more importantly, to be aware of their audience so they can communicate more effectively and invite constructive feedback.

It is ironic that Socrates seems to have such a great knowledge of the importance of communication, because he is an exceptionally bad example of it. Throughout the novel, he is discussing (and I use the word discussing loosely here) various philosophical ideas with a young man named Phaedrus. The reason Socrates is such a bad example is the fact that Phaedrus rarely speaks more than five words at a time. More often than not, his response to a lengthy theoretical question is simply, “How could it be otherwise?” or “Certainly,” or simply “Yes,” (62-63). There
is no possible way that this could be considered constructive feedback, and so Socrates learns nothing from Phaedrus. He doesn’t even give Phaedrus the opportunity to give constructive feedback, and so Phaedrus does not receive the opportunity to be a rhetorical follower by giving that feedback. If Socrates had opened a space in his dialogue, both Phaedrus and Socrates would have had the opportunity to advance as rhetoricians in the pursuit of truth. But the way Socrates communicates could be compared to a brick wall—solid and unbending on every side. Even if Phaedrus had made a better effort to give constructive feedback, Socrates neglected to open a hole in his brick wall of communication, thereby closing all opportunities for Phaedrus to add to the dialogue and robbing both himself and Phaedrus of the opportunity to have a constructive interaction. A rhetorical leader must intentionally make room in their dialogue for feedback if they want to communicate effectively.

Up until now, the focus of this paper has been mostly on the responsibility of a rhetorical leader to create space for constructive feedback. It is equally important to acknowledge the responsibility of a rhetorical follower to provide that constructive feedback. Let’s go back to the imagery of the beach ball on a windy day to further explore this idea (Cutchins). The person holding the ball will be our rhetorical leader and the person waiting to catch it will be the rhetorical follower. The person holding the ball notices that the day is windy, so they carefully adjust their position and the angle of their throw, and then make their best attempt to throw the beach ball directly to the other person. But let’s imagine the other person simply holds their arms out and watches the ball soar past. The first person’s adjustments and care make no difference at all if the second person doesn’t also make an effort to catch the ball. Now let’s say that the first person is trying to communicate a complex idea and the second person is listening. The first person realizes that the idea is difficult and does their best to explain. Instead of asking questions
to clarify or contributing their own ideas, the listener shrugs or nods or simply says “yes” to all questions. Neither speaker nor listener benefits from this interaction. The listener must see the beach ball coming towards them and dive towards it, or they have no hope of catching it and both speaker and listener will fail in their efforts to understand one another.

Speaking face-to-face is not the only way to have constructive interactions with others. In my introduction, I mentioned that rhetorical leadership can take different forms since it depends on communication, and the nature of communication is changeable. In *The American Scholar*, Ralph Waldo Emerson famously wrote that “There is then creative reading as well as creative writing.” While this quote is unfortunately overused, I think it has some merit in this discussion. Since we can’t communicate personally with most of the people that have lived on earth, writing is one of our most valuable forms of communication. Readers take on a special responsibility of interpretation when the speaker is not physically present, as is the case with most writing. When a person reads a text, the roles of leader and follower become hopelessly entangled. The author is the original creator of the work, and so they are a leader in many senses. However, they are no longer in charge of their book, and it becomes the responsibility of the reader to make room in their own personal thinking for the text to make an impression on the reader. In other words, the reader must make room in their dialogue with the text for that text to make a type of constructive dissent in the reader’s thinking. The action of creating space in your thoughts for new ideas is the move of a rhetorical leader, so the reader could be considered a rhetorical leader in this particular situation. At the same time, it was the author who originally created the text and left the conversation open for feedback from the reader, so the author is also a rhetorical leader in the situation. This brings me to one of my last points—it is almost impossible to disentangle the rhetorical roles of leaders and followers.
This might seem far-fetched at first, but when you think about it, leaders and followers share many of the same traits. Don’t followers crave leaders who truly represent the group they are leading? If the followers are providing the leaders with constructive feedback, doesn’t that make them leaders in a way? When I started my work on this paper, I decided that my first task would need to be separating and defining the roles of rhetorical leaders and followers, but the harder I tried to deconstruct them, the more entangled they became, and the more fragmented my definitions became. Because of this, I realized that rhetorical leadership and rhetorical followership not only help form each other, but are really incredibly similar in nature.

Bakhtinian theory refers to something called the carnivalesque that relates closely to this interconnected nature of leadership and followership. Carnivalesque is a theory based on the famous Feast of Fools, which centers on the idea that every individual has something to contribute, and that society benefits from the occasional turning of the tables. In this topsy-turvy festival, the peasants become royalty and the royalty become peasants. I discovered a handout for an English class that says, “Bakhtin claimed that carnivalesque literature…broke apart oppressive and moldy forms of thought and cleared the path for the imagination” (Baldini). The fact that rhetorical leadership and followership are intimately connected lends itself to this carnivalesque turning of the tables. Even though there might be a defined leader and follower in a situation, if the leader is doing their rhetorical job and creating a space in the dialogue for the follower to contribute constructively, it allows followers to rise from their station and take on a leadership role. This reversal of roles keeps ideas from becoming, as Baldini says, “oppressive and moldy.”

Paul Woodruff accurately pinpointed the interconnected nature of rhetorical leadership and followership in *The Ajax Dilemma* when he said, “Good followers are not machinelike in
their obedience to authority. Like leaders, they are focused on the common goal and will help the
leader see the way to get there,” (193). According to Woodruff, rhetorical followers really hold a
leadership position—they are in charge of making sure the leader stays on track just as the leader
is in charge of taking care of their followers. In regards to the role of a leader, Woodruff said that
“They listen to advice from many quarters, but they are not bowled over by what others have
said,” (193). Because leaders have to be willing to listen to the constructive feedback of others,
there is a large element of followership in any good rhetorical leader’s behavior.

The interconnectedness of rhetorical leadership and rhetorical followership and the
importance of constructive dissent within those roles are complex issues that I am barely
scratching the surface of, but the study of communication is something everyone can benefit
from and should continue to pursue on their own. All humans play the roles of leader and
follower at different times in their lives, and both roles are greatly benefitted by the ability to
communicate clearly and constructively. The importance of intentionality in this communication
is something that cannot be overemphasized—good rhetoricians must create room for feedback
and make an effort to give constructive feedback at every opportunity. These are the key goals of
any good rhetorical leader or follower. Embracing the fact that our words will continue to “brush
up against thousands of living dialogic threads” (Bakhtin 26) can give us the freedom to be more
intentional in the ways we throw and catch the theoretical beach ball of communication.
Works Cited


Cutchins, Dennis. “Adaptation, Intertextuality, and Bakhtin.” 2014. TS.


