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# RHETORIC IN THE WORKPLACE: USING KAIROS TO SEAL THE DEAL



## Abstract

“Kairos is an ancient rhetorical concept that gained importance in many different disciplines over the centuries. Kairos is knowing what is most appropriate in each situation. For our purposes, let us think of it as saying or writing the right thing at the right time. Consider Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I have a Dream” speech. The speech was rhetorically powerful, it changed minds, persuaded people to support the civil rights movement, and served as a powerful rallying cry for a generation of reformers”

*- A Rhetorical Approach to Writing*

Now just imagine Dr. King’s amazing rhetorical talents being used in the workplace. Masters of the art of persuasion blending kairos to create the perfect moment. Silver tongue devils delivering eloquent dialogues while executing a million-dollar merger, fast talkers who know how to drive home a vehicle purchase, phone solicitors who know how to sugar coat the sale by giving a 30-day money back guarantee. Having employees who are skilled in persuasion and know what it takes to “Seal the Deal” are major assets in the workplace and generate millions of dollars in revenue globally.

## History at a Glance

In ancient Greece, Caerus Greek god of opportunity (also called Kairos) was in fact a spirit. He personified the favorable moment which comes and passes by quickly. (Greek Gods & Goddesses 1)

The Greeks had two concepts of time. They used the term Chronos to refer to linear, measurable time, the kind with which we are more familiar, that we track with watches and calendars. But the ancients used kairos to suggest a more situational kind of time, something close to what we call "opportunity." In this sense, kairos suggests an advantageous time, or as lexicographers put it, "exact or critical time, season, opportunity (Liddell and Scott 1996, 859)” (Crowley & Hawhee, 53)

The temporal dimension of kairos can indicate anything from a lengthy time to a brief, fleeting moment. In short, kairos is not about duration but rather about a certain kind of time. Kairos is thus a "window" of time during which action is most advantageous. (Crowley & Hawhee, 37)

Pythagoras taught “kairos as one of the laws of the universe linking it closely with the basis of all virtue, particularly justice, and civic education.” (Kinneavy 81) His sophistic teaching during the fifth century BC taught young people they did not have to defer to the wisdom of their elders or social betters, self-improvement was open to anyone who could pay for it. (Reames, et el. 22)

Highly skilled in rhetoric, public speaking, and the art of persuasion, sophists like Pythagoras and Cicero made a living as traveling teachers and philosophers. Sophist believed all reasonably intelligent persons could and should learn the skill of speaking persuasively, and that a good rhetorician should be able to

defend his own opinion was exemplified in their ability to make clear, convincing arguments on any topic.

Within the sophist movement, “kairos, was a central concept of Gorgias’ doctrines and principles. Kairos was above all demonstrated as the capacity to speak impromptu, taking time, place, and circumstance into consideration as the speech evolved. (Rhetorical Business.) These beliefs along with the technique of eloquence became the means to which Sophists earned their money.

Aristotle described public communication as three branches of rhetoric. The first, Deliberative, is speaking or writing with the intent of persuading the reader or listener to act upon or dissuade them from thinking or doing.

The second, Judicial, is speaking or writing as means to debate issues that have legal or ethical arguments. For example, justifying or defending your own or someone else’s actions.

The third, Epideictic, is speaking or writing in such a way that the message praises or places blame on a person for their actions. This can be accomplished through speeches, obituaries, or celebratory letters of recommendation.

Early Greek rhetoric teachings broke down speech preparation into five unique canons” which have remained the cornerstone of the study of rhetoric as a practical art of persuasion.” (Reames, et el. 3) The canons are as follows:

**Invention:** refers to the brainstorming and producing good ideas. This typically happens at the beginning of a conversation or even a speech when the speaker states their goal or idea.

**Arrangement:** refers to how the message being delivered is arranged. The flow, wording, paragraphs, images, and layouts that create an effective mode of communication.

**Style:** refers to the choices the speaker or writer makes to influence the audience. From wording, tone, pace, visual aids, to other emotional ties to the audience.

**Memory:** refers to the knowledge and understanding of the topic being spoken or written about. A knowledgeable orator will present a better presentation if they understand the topic to which they speak.

**Delivery:** refers to how the message is relayed to the audience. From eye contact, posture, articulation, gestures, and charisma. When used in written discourse, the quality of paper, ink, penmanship would be analyzed.

Aristotle delved deeper into researching rhetoric and created the Rhetorical Triangle by combining the Greek elements of Ethos, Pathos, Logos, and Kairos to create a rhetorical strategy for effective and persuasive communication.

Ethos is the speaker's authority, ethics, or credibility of convincing an audience. Pathos is the speaker's emotional appeal to the audience. The more an orator can pull at the heartstrings or deliver a convincing plea can often change the mind of a listener. Logos is presenting facts, statistics, and reason as a means of persuasion. Finally, kairos is the timeliness or perfect moment all these elements come together.

Aristotle who referred to kairos as “the elements of a speech that acknowledge and draw support from the particular setting, time, and place that a speech occurs.” (owl.purdue)

In rhetoric, kairos can be described as when the lighting, acoustics, even the topic is all on point; a moment in time when the delivery of a speech is so perfect, the stars above align, and light cascades from the heavens upon the listener who finally understands and agrees with the persuasive argument the speaker has so eloquently delivered. Well, maybe light shining down from the heavens is a bit much, but when kairos does happen in a rhetoric setting, it can create an audible win for the speaker.

Plato, through the voice of Socrates, described rhetorical (oral) exchange as valuable because it responds flexibly to kairos, the immediate social situation in which solutions to philosophical problems must be proposed.” (Reames, et el. 98)

Plato’s work helped to define what persuaded an audience or a listener to agree with the information a speaker was delivering, noting the likeability or “Charisma” of a speaker thus increasing their chance of persuading an audience to agree with whatever the speech giver was promoting. “Aristotle, was initially more interested in the art of rhetoric, than in the act of rhetoric, gave kairos considerably less prominence than Plato.” (Kinneavy 82) Aristotle, later learns that kairos is intertwined within rhetoric.

Aristotle asked the question “what makes an eloquent speaker? His theory of rhetoric and delivery elements such as tone, timing, charisma, and topic are key rhetoric ingredients. These important elements of speech have been utilized throughout history in teaching rhetoric students the art of persuasion.

Aristotle’s classical teachings are still being taught in classrooms worldwide. Even though many people cannot name the rhetorical definition, at some point in their life everyone learns the importance of being at the right place, at the right time...aka perfect timing. This is the Theory of Kairos; kairos: (n.) the perfect, delicate, crucial moment; the fleeting of rightness of time and place that create the opportune atmosphere for action, words, or movement.

Today kairos is often referred to as Rhetorical or Situational Context. “Situations are social constructs that are the result, not of “perception,” but of “definition.” Because human action is based on and guided by meaning, not by material causes, at the center of action is a process of interpretation. Before we can act, we must interpret the indeterminate material environment, we define, or “determine,” a situation.” (Miller 136)

For some, their initial experience with the joining of Chronos and Kairos is experienced through positive reinforcement from parents, friends, teachers, coaches, and bosses. Idioms such as “knock ‘em dead, your time to shine, finest hour, break a leg, claim to fame, and bring down the house” are quick reminders or rhetorical context from a speaker to a listener that a perfect moment is about to happen, the listener just has to seize the opportunity.

Phrases such as “bring home a win, and moment of glory” have proven to be useful not only on a football field, but within a workplace environment as well. For years companies have trained employees to speak to audiences, promote products, research what prompts customers to buy, and create corporate images evoking trust and goodwill.

Kinneavy states that kairos is about situational context. He states “speakers must be taught the common language of humanity in its full rhetorical scales. This means that all disciplines should incorporate a training in persuasive techniques of rhetoric.” (Kinneavy 102)

This approach to kairos “reveals a more complex, more social theory of expressive discourse.” Kairos is a rhetorical mechanism that asks for us to recognize how certain moments are so unbelievably timely that otherwise refuted issues might gain some social traction. Of course, this begs us to think about why knowing kairos gives such an important intellectual edge: We are at our most political when both fêtes and tragedies spell into our immediate “space” in theatrical “decorum,” to use Kinneavy’s word. (Pender 91)

### **Kairos for the Kill**

Sophists are more commonly known today as professional speakers. These rhetorical experts have honed their skills in reading an audience and can deliver their message smoothly and without flaws, however, professional speakers don’t just rely on advanced speaking skills to deliver an eloquent speech, they also depend on kairos and the art of persuasion to win the belief of their audience. “The notion of persuasion as used in traditional short-term transaction marketing is manipulative.” (Miles & Nilsson 15,16)

Today, professional speakers can be found in a variety of careers and positions and rely on the art of knowing how to inquire information, how to ask the right questions and situations which enable appropriate communications for a variety of audiences. At the heart of kairos is the qualitative notion of

time - the right moment, which exists in a duality with Chronos, or measurable time.” (Kumar & Wallace 7543)

Around the world fast-talking salesmen, persuasive speakers, and silver tongue devils are often derogatively referred to as conmen. Always keenly aware of their audience, professional speakers know when and where a rhetorical situation or argument is headed. “Rhetoric in the context of marketing persuasion evokes feelings of suspicion. Persuasion makes us do things (consume things, obsess about things, pay attention to things) that we should not.” (Miles & Nilsson 15,16)

If the delivery of a speech by a professional speaker is not turning the conversation in their favor they will likely withdraw from the argument and refocus. But if the moment is perfect, they will take having the advantage and go in for the kill. As Buddha states, “The tongue like a sharp knife...kills without drawing blood.”

From bloggers speaking about plants to food options, to politicians running for local, state and government positions, persuasive speaking has the potential to effect change. Every four years the United States presidential election is watched globally because the candidate chosen has a worldwide impact on not only trade and economy by also foreign aid and environmental issues.

Daily, most people will only feel the effects of persuasive speakers when looking to make new purchases. Pushy salespeople have often been compared to vultures because of the way they hover over a potential client or customer, often spewing a scripted sales pitch, but always waiting to swoop in and make the kill aka “the sale.”

The world has become a global marketplace, and professional speakers know to “seal the deal” it’s all about charisma. The speaker not only has to have charm, but know how to utilize tone, rhythm, and eloquence of delivery. Along with these techniques the speaker needs to be educated and understand the topic in which they speak and know how to read an audience. When all these pieces of the rhetorical puzzle come together, they know it is time to seize the moment.

From new vehicles purchased during overstock liquidation sales, TV’s bought while Black Friday shopping, to eye make-up advertised to make listeners look younger, with each of these scenarios the outcome remains the same; someone used the art of persuasion to influence the mind of the listener to make a sale.

In the corporate world, silver tongue devils and fast-talking salesmen are sometimes hard to identify. Corporate attorneys, accountants, and bonds traders make multi-million-dollar transactions each day by combining skills from the rhetorical triangle and the five canons into a sales pitch superbomb.

For example, “on Wall Street, there are kairotic moments to buy, sell, and trade stock to maximize gains. Victorious sprinters often accelerate at just the right time to pass their opponents. The success of a joke or funny quip depends upon its timing, or the kairos of its delivery.” (Crowley & Hawhee 38)

Having the right person on your team to “seal the deal” is a powerful asset, making the art of persuasion big money. Corporate closers enable companies to snatch up properties, investments, stocks, even employees from other corporations during corporate takeovers.

## **The Future**

As we make our way through the Fourth Industrial Revolution; global technology has made communicating to audiences easier and faster than ever. Richard Buchanan pointed out “rhetoric is both the practice of persuasive communication and a formal art of studying communication; moreover, the power of rhetoric’s call to persuasion is that it is formulated as an “art of shaping society, changing the course of individuals and communities, and setting patterns for new action.” (Kirby 2)

From digital advertising, cookies and spyware, algorithms that read our words and listen to our conversations, to professional speakers utilizing available technology for their own advantage, leaves some unanswered questions. How will situational context play out in the future? Will computer programs created by humans be able to teach AI robots the ancient Greek rhetorical elements of Ethos, Pathos, Logos, and Kairos?

Will humans have the same reaction to a machine persuading them to act as they would if they were speaking to another human? Technology is making great strides and is ever changing to make our world a better place; however, human instinct is intrinsic. Our natural ability to know when the time is right, to seize the moment, to seal the deal, is instilled, not created.

## Resources

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