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Understanding your Audience’s Exigency

Whether it be in the words we speak, the letters we write, or even our body language, learning how to be an effective communicator is necessary to fulfill our wants and needs as people. One type of communication is that of the rhetorical situation. It could be simply asking someone to turn up the temperature, convince them to marry you, or even change what they believe is right or wrong. Grant-Davie described rhetorical situations as “such communication is therefore rhetorical — that is, it’s persuasive or motivated communication — and the situations in which it happens would be rhetorical situations.” (492) I understand this to mean that a rhetorical situation is the process of communicating with someone to influence that person to act in a manner that is beneficial to yourself. One of our primary goals in life is to fulfill our wants and needs and a good understanding and use of the rhetoric situation is paramount in achieving this goal. But everyone has different wants and needs, so trying to convince other people to help you is a difficult task. I have found that to succeed in my rhetoric situations I need not only to understand my wants, but also to understand how I can help achieve the wants and needs of my audience.

Exigency as I was taught in Grant-Davie’s “is a problem or need that can be addressed by communication.” (492) If we use the example of asking someone to turn on the lights, the exigency would be that you want the lights to be turned on. The audience is the group of people that you are trying to convince. Some rhetorical situations are simple, where the rhetor (the person speaking and trying to convince the audience) is attempting to convince the audience. Other times, it is far more complicated, such as in a discussion where both sides are the rhetor and the audience as they try to convince one another of what they want. Such was my case when I tried to convince my boss not to let me go.

During my off-track semester, I decided to earn some money working at a Solar company as a call salesperson. My goal was to try to become better at communicating with other people and I thought that talking with people all day on the phone would be great practice. I got hired for the job and found out that I would receive training and be shadowing the salespeople for about a week before I would start calling people. I decided to practice my sales pitch script and write all manner of notes as I shadowed my co-workers. After a few days, I noticed that I was struggling a bit with my training, so I just worked harder to improve.

My new boss noticed my struggle and decided to have a chat with me. He was friendly and courteous, but he told me that he didn’t think I had the makings of a salesperson. He said that his greatest worry was that he didn’t see in me the common salesmen’s personality traits that were a very good early sign of success. He also commented that he was very impressed with my hard work during training. Most trainees were ahead of me in skills, but their work ethic was less than mine. I wasn’t in the mood to go job hunting again, so I planned and steeled myself to engage in rhetoric. I would need to understand not only my audience and my exigency, but also the exigency of my boss since we had different goals in this conversation. Understanding this would be needed if I were to succeed in this rhetorical situation.

Since I had only known my new boss for a few days, I still didn’t know much about his personality. I had some ideas of the type of person he was like, but I didn’t have enough time to gain an accurate idea. But I understood that he was a salesperson and had been in the business for a long time. He wore the persona at work of a hardworking and always busy salesman. I had noticed that even though he was a supervisor over us, if there was a sale that was very difficult or if everyone else was busy, he would go right at it. I was not a natural salesman. I went into this job for the challenge of trying something new. He wanted employees that wore the persona of a salesman, and I hadn’t shown him that yet. In order to solve this problem, I needed to take upon myself the persona of one of my coworkers.

One of the main ways that Quentin Vieregge said to invoke exigency was “through the audience’s agenda and concern”. (177) I could see that my employer’s foremost worry was that training me for about two weeks would end up being a waste of time and money due to not seeing me as a typical salesman. I needed to alleviate the concern, so I decided to employ the tactic of using his own words as evidence to support my position. This was an important salesperson tactic that I had learned. If the customer has a concern, sometimes the best course of action was to agree with them and then explain the situation in a different light. One of the worse things you can do is tell the customer that they are wrong. Each day at work, my boss would speak to everyone about how we could improve as salespeople. One time, he talked about how salespeople need to find their own way to go about doing their job. He gave an example of one of the employees, a young man around my age, and said that he was great at his job even though he wasn’t the normal talkative, energetic salesperson. He said that he was successful due to him being quite knowledgeable about solar panels and was rather direct and to the point when talking to people. He finished by tasking everyone to find and focus on their unique strengths. And so, I explained to him that while I was not your average salesman, I did go on a religious mission in a third-world country and learned to adapt to hard and unusual circumstances. Some of my unique skills, including my ability to adapt, would allow me to succeed at this job. I told him that I understood his need for plenty of reliable salespeople, and I can fulfill that role as one.

My boss had already said that I was a hard worker, so I decided to focus on that. Quentin Vieregge also explained that another way to invoke exigency was “through reframing the subject matter”, and I planned to help my boss see my work ethic in a new and more positive light. (182) My goal was to agree with him regarding what he said about how I worked harder than most, but even with that, I still struggled to read the sales script without sounding robotic. The basic idea of his argument was that if I worked harder, I should be better at the assignment I was given, not worse than the average person. I explained to him that while it was unfortunate that I was struggling to become comfortable with the sales script, as I was already a hard worker, I would work as hard as I needed to become an effective salesperson. He had already said and seen me work hard and if I needed to train in a different way then I would do so. I explained that to overcome sounding robotic while reading from the script, I would memorize all of the things that we were required to ask while making a sales call. By having no script, I would need to use my own words when talking to people. He responded that he thought that was a reasonable idea. He had only let me train for three days and so he agreed that I might be able to surprise him due to my hard work. I convinced him to give me 3-5 business days of practice and shadowing other salespeople and two weeks of calling people. If by the end of this time I was still struggling to be an effective salesperson, then he would be right to let me go. I figured I could bargain this since the company was in a growing season and needed all the salespeople it could get and so I figured they would be willing to bend a bit more than the average company when training new employees.

My expectations on this reply working were about 50/50 and part of me worried that it wouldn’t work. From talking with people who worked in sales jobs I heard that if they didn’t see the personality traits that marked you as a salesperson, then they would drop you incredibly fast. But on the other hand, I really wanted this job so I could grow my skill set. After trying to convince my boss to keep me, he replied that what I said gave him a good laugh. I was rather shocked and confused, unsure if my words were somehow ridiculous for him. He then explained that I was trying to sell myself as a good worker. Since that was what I was supposed to do as a salesman, if my first instincts were to try to sell him something (myself), then he saw some potential in me. So, he agreed to wait a couple of weeks to see if I would become a truly good salesperson.

I was somewhat surprised that my words ended up helping me keep my job. But this fear of failure didn’t really need to exist. After this experience, I learned an important lesson about knowing your audience. In this circumstance, I wanted to keep my job and my boss wanted an employee that was a good salesperson. We both had our needs, yet they were different. I had succeeded only because I had convinced him that both of our needs, or rather the exigency, would be met by me continuing to train and work as a salesperson. I could have chosen my words in a variety of different ways. I could have begged, argued, or accepted the outcome. But the best way to convince him was to do my job of being a salesperson. Exigency is the goal you have in a rhetoric situation and one of the best ways to succeed in rhetoric is to understand the goal of your audience. What do they want? What is important to them? Those questions can often help you know what you need to do to convince them to act the way you want.

Works Cited

Grant-Davie, Keith. “Rhetorical Situations and Their Constituents.” *Writing about Writing*: A *College Reader*, edited by Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs, Bedford St. Martins, 2017, pp. 487-509.

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Summary of Notes

• I work harder than others or at least people are saying this.

• I am willing to put in more time if I struggle to get the proper skills needed for the job.

• I am willing and able to learn and develop these skills

o On my mission, I struggled to learn the language, but I worked hard and learned it.

• It looks like it might take me a few weeks in order to get good at working here

• There are other salesmen that aren’t standard salesmen and they learned to be successful.

• It seems that most of the people here use the script for about a month and then they stop using it.

• It looks like no matter how much I practice; I won’t really get a feeling about what my job is like until I actually start calling people. So in other words I can’t get too impatient.

• It does seem that I might need to memorize this script faster than others as the employees there have been hinting at that when I practice with them. As for why I don’t really know.

• It is important to get to know your client situation in order now how to convince them to go into solar, like for example why are they interested in going solar