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Genre as a Lens to Becoming Better Leaders

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Secretary of State Colin Powell once said a leader is, simply put, "someone people respond to and are willing to follow**."** When asked about the qualities of a leader, it typically doesn't take long for a lengthy list to be created. When we take the time to compare each list made in regard to these qualities, it's easy to see where characteristics begin to overlap. Commonly seen on these lists are characteristics such as strong communication skills, unmatched courage and confidence, and the ability to learn quickly, to name just a few. According to research done by Reinout E. de Vries et al., "one of the core elements of leadership is a leader's interpersonal communication style." To be a strong leader, you must be able to communicate in a wide variety of situations that appear within your role. Whether you are CEO of a company or president of a sorority, there is a range of individuals that you must communicate with in order to run the organization. This can be anyone from a manager to a general member, and the way in which you communicate with them must change in order for the interaction to be effective and accomplish its intended goal. The problem that arises, then, is understanding how to adapt communication styles to fit the situation at hand. To solve this problem, we will be analyzing these situations using the lens of genre in order to look at the way in which the quality of communication is used in regard to leadership.

According to Amy Devitt, genre is a "classification system deriving from literary criticism that names types of texts according to their forms." In other words, genre is known as the categorization of written works. We use it as a way to understand literature, to define texts as

falling into certain categories, such as Young Adult, Mystery, etc. However, this genre is much more complex topic than what it is commonly used as. Genre can actually be more generally defined as a set of guidelines used by individuals to "explain, interpret, and negotiate interaction" (Devitt, 576-577). What this means is that we can view genre as a way to understand situations and the types of interactions that they ask of us. Each situation has its own set of conventions that help individuals understand how to engage within the interaction. When we talk about conventions, we mean the features that make up a certain genre. For example, in order for a romance to be classified as such, it typically must have a love interest and some sort of struggle in the relationship. In writing, these features often draw on emotion or pull the reader into the story. However, the features themselves are not the emotion, such as the ecstatic feeling in your heart when your two love interests finally reunite. Instead, they are the expected concepts that work together (the problem that strains the relationship, the dramatic reunification at the end) create conventions for the genre. Each genre has its own conventions that make it unique and set it apart from other genres.

So how do we come to understand which conventions make up each genre? Genres emerge as a response to reoccurring situations. Take the romance novel, for example: the concept of two people struggling with love continued to reoccur to the point that it became a normal part of what was considered a love story. Over time, these elements became an expectation of a romance novel, and the genre was born. Now when a writer is attempting to create a romance novel, they have these conventions that they are able to follow in order to produce the genre. In this way, a genre is simply made up of a set of expectations that show an individual how to interact with a certain situation.

Furthermore, genre allows for a bit of variation that creates what is known as subgenres. These are categories of interaction within a set genre that, for the most part, follow the conventions of the genre but go a step further in creating another set of expectations not necessarily needed for the overarching genre. Think of this in terms of *Twilight* by Stephanie Perkins. Her story can easily be categorized as a romance novel with her love interests of Bella and Edward, but it also falls into the subgenre of paranormal romance because of the idea that some of her characters are vampires and werewolves. We can see the genre at play here, but it also involves another level that has its own conventions on top of the ones that emerge with the genre.

With this broader definition, we can look at leadership in a whole new light. Genre becomes a lens that we can use to analyze and understand the way in which we interact in certain situations that occur within a leadership role. These situations can be understood as subgenres, each with their own set of conventions, arising from the general genre of leadership, much like apocalyptic stories are a subgenre of science fiction or historical romance is a subgenre of romance. Leaders have a certain set of skills already within them that can be used in varying ways depending on the situation that arises and what that interaction calls for. If leaders are able to take a step back and analyze the conventions of a situation, they can better know how to use their skills in an effective way to interact with and address the situation at hand. By learning how to use the lens of genre, leaders can become more equipped to handle new challenges that come their way and communicate with those they encounter in the best way possible.

In this particular essay, we'll be using the role of a sorority chapter president to understand the use of genre in strengthening the communicative quality expected in a leader. This position, held by a student elected by fellow organization members, serves as the liaison of

information between a national headquarters, the university, and the organization. In this role, there are multiple interactions that occur that call on the flexibility of a communication. We will be focusing on the situations presidents encounter when speaking with general members, their executive board, chapter advisors, and non-members of Greek Life.

By using the lens of genre, a president can understand the guidelines of interacting with a general member and adjust their communication style as needed. These general members are those that most likely have never held a position before and are fulfilling their basic requirements of being an active member, meaning that they may not have the knowledge of the inner workings of the chapter in the same way a chair holder may. However, they are all still college peers that are a part of the same organization, so there is a shared knowledge of basic sorority functions that all members have, such as slang that may come with being a part of Greek Life. In a way, they are similar to the employees of a company looking to their manager to know how to complete their job. They understand the general function of the company but may need guidance in understanding their exact role and the rules that govern their position.

The situation that most often occurs between the president and a general member is the presentation of meeting minutes at the weekly chapter meeting that keep members informed on what is happening at a national, council-wide, and chapter level. In figuring out how meeting minutes should be conveyed, a president must know the conventions, or expectations, of this interaction. It is in crafting these meeting minutes that the idea of genre makes its appearance. For this situation, those guidelines involve curating an explanation that adheres to chapter knowledge of a general member, using a tone that is both lighthearted but also conveys the way in which the situations should be understood, and ultimately making the decision as to what information is necessary. Below, in Image 1, we see an example of meeting minutes shared after

a council-wide incident occurred. Though the situation being addressed is a more serious topic, it is communicated in a way that is less reprehensive and more informative. The introduction to the minutes is lighthearted and enthusiastic, as seen with the explanation points, before it dives into the topic that needs to be discussed. Within the explanation of the event that occurred and how it effects the chapter, there is a lack of a personal connection. Instead it is written in a way that makes it clear these are simply facts that are being relayed, seen in sections such as, "Furthermore, the Sigma Phi Epsilon party is a clear violation of the moratorium…" The facts are given in a neutral tone, conveying to the chapter that this statement isn't meant to be accusatory but also needs to be taken seriously as it could potentially lead to a problem if women were in attendance. There are two different tones that are presented right in the first few sentences of the minutes, showing that the president knows the guidelines of the interaction and how to communicate in a way that works for the situation.

In presenting information to the chapter, a president must be able to adapt their style of communication to fit the situation, ultimately needing to have an understanding of the subgenre at hand. In this instance, the interaction calls for a combination of personal connection and enthusiasm in introducing the minutes and a neutral, informative tone to discuss the Sigma Phi event. Furthermore, the president must have an awareness of the members she is interacting with and the knowledge they have on the situation. Knowing the subgenre that is this interaction, a president can understand exactly what information needs to be explained to the members for them to have a grasp on the concept. The conventions that come along with this subgenre of leadership also lets the president know the tone that will be most beneficial in addressing the situation. Overall, using the lens of this genre can help a president communicate with general members in an effective way.

Image 1: Meeting Minutes

Hi ladies!! I hope you all had a great week!!

Over the weekend an incident occurred with the unrecognized Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity. The men who were once a part of this chapter hosted a party at their "lake house" that was attended by Panhellenic women. By attending this party, these women violated the NPC unanimous agreement. The unanimous agreement "strictly prohibits Panhellenic chapters from affiliating and interacting with unrecognized fraternities in any way, shape or form." Julia Henderson spoke with an NPC advisor, and as of right now only chapters with women who were in attendance will be receiving an infraction and have their Nationals notified. Here are some links about the unanimous agreement if anyone would like more information:
https://www.npcwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2037/2017/10/Resolved-to-Educate-Events-WithRecognized-Fraternities.pdf
https://www.npcwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2037/2017/10/Resolved-to-Educate-Understandin g-Unanimous-Agreements.pdf

Furthermore, the Sigma Phi Epsilon party is a clear violation of the moratorium and the Task Force will be taking this situation into consideration with their decision. Right now, any violation against the moratorium leads to an automatic 2 year probation from GVSU. At the meeting I attended on Wednesday with the Panhellenic and IFC presidents, we discovered that the Task Force is also looking for Greek Life to go completely dry despite initially telling us this was not a 100% dry period at the first town hall. That being said, members of Greek Life should not be attending or hosting parties during the moratorium. For those of you that are 21 or are turning 21 under the moratorium, please keep our own policies and procedures regarding drinking as well as the Task Force expectations in mind during this time.
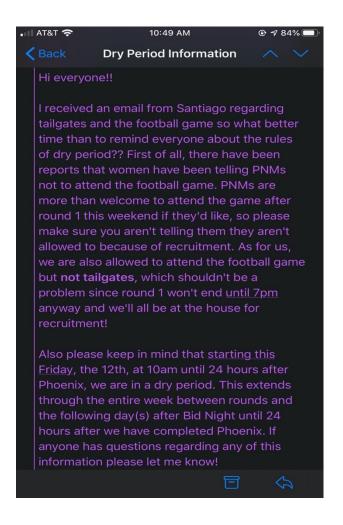
On a brighter note, thank you to everyone who attended the Lori Hart program! We had about 20 women in attendance and 166 Panhellenic women in total.

ATO is hosting another social media competition Feb. 25th-29th to promote their annual ATO Walks Hard event! The top three chapters with the most points by the end of the competition will receive either $50, $100, or $150 toward their philanthropic partners. I'll be sending out an email tonight that has a link to all the information about it so be on the lookout for that!

Sigma Pi will be hosting their DonateLife competition again this year. Their philanthropy chair will be coming in during one of our meetings to talk more about this and allow women to sign up to be an organ donor. The chapter that has the most women sign up will receive $50 toward their philanthropic partners!

In a similar fashion, emails sent out to the entire chapter adhere to the guidelines of this subgenre of interaction. The guidelines repeat in this situation, with the only difference being the formatting of emails which have a tendency to be a bit shorter and more to the point than meeting minutes. However, as seen in Image 2, the tone and general explanation remains similar to that of meeting minutes since the interaction is occurring between the president and the same general members that receive meeting minutes. The situation being addressed is one that members may have a basic understanding or previous knowledge of, and therefore does not have

to be explained in as much depth. The president still uses the lighthearted tone seen before in initially addressing the "dry period" that is being enforced. However, she must then approach the topic with the more neutral tone, explaining what this period means for members and how they then should interact with potential new members. In knowing these guidelines of the subgenre, a leader is able to effectively carry over the communicative style needed in this situation to the different formats of meeting minutes and emails.

Image 2: Chapter-wide email sent by president

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Presidents must also work closely with fellow executive board members to ensure chapter functions are being completed and care for the overall wellbeing of the chapter. Executive board members rest at the same level as the president, much like co-managers of a company. They have equivalent knowledge of the organization and have access to the resources needed to fulfill their positions. Within the leadership genre, the interaction between president and executive board members is another subgenre.

Typically, the majority of communication shared between executive board in this particular organization is done during weekly meetings but can also be seen via email, such as in Images 3 and 4 below. When talking with these members, the conventions shift to fit this situation. These interactions have new expectations the president should meet as she now talking to a chapter member who has a deeper understanding of the sorority and more knowledge than that of a general member. The guidelines now require a certain level of respect within tone and a change in explanation as the president is now talking to an executive board member with this advanced knowledge. We can compare this change in interaction to the way in which a historical romance must include differing information and stylistic choices than a contemporary romance story.

In the situation being discussed in Images 3 and 4, the interaction between the president and vice president requires a tone that makes it clear that decision making is ultimately up to the chair. There appears to be an unspoken agreement established that the rules of interaction change. As someone who is also in a chapter leadership position, the vice president too must have an understanding of the genres that arise within their role, which makes the interaction as a whole a bit easier to adapt to on both ends. While the president may make executive decisions when it comes to the overall wellbeing of the chapter, executive board members have

responsibilities in their own positions that require them to make certain decisions based on their own opinions. With this in mind, presidents must communicate in a way that creates an open discussion that leans toward the side of providing helpful suggestions or recommendations but is cautious of overstepping the boundaries of decision making. In Image 3, the concept being presented is explained, using slang that the vice president would understand, and ends with an the open invitation to consider the recommendation and create their own thoughts on the topic, seen clearly in, "Let me know what you think about doing this in the fall!" The response in Image 4 lets the president know that the vice president has given the suggestion some thought and ultimately has made a decision, particularly seen in the way she brings up the idea of mentioning it to a formal chair holder to be implemented sooner for new members. The conventions of the subgenre are at play in this method of communication, leading to an effective decision about the topic being discussed. Had either member involved been unaware of the expectations of the conversation, it may have made the entire interaction confusing and led to a less clear, focused decision on the matter of Bid Day.

While this is just one situation in which meeting the expectations of the subgenre has led to excellent communication between two executive board members, using this lens of genre can lead to better communication among the executive board regarding the chapter. The board collectively can better make decisions and communicate ways in which they see the chapter and functioning to the highest level through working together to meet these expectations of communication. As situations arise that this board must deal with, they are able to use these conventions of the subgenre to deal with any problems and challenges they face.
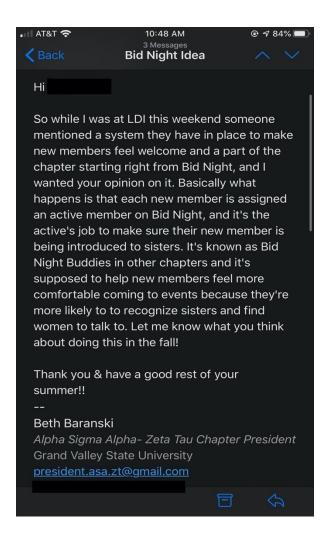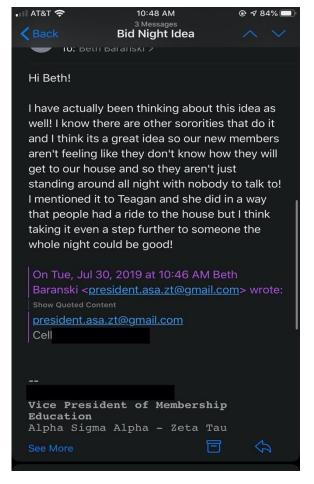
Image 3: Email to executive board member

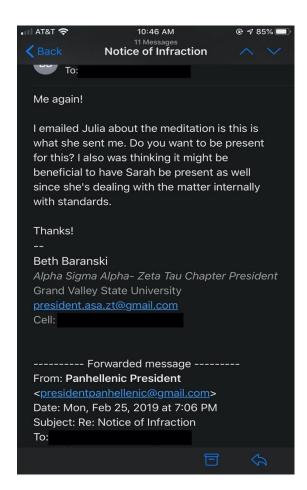*Image 4: Email from executive board member*

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When the president and executive board are unable to handle situations or challenges on their own, they turn to their advisors for help. Depending on the situation, this may be a chapter advisor who deals specifically with their individual chapter or a National advisor who handles the problems for all chapters. In both instances, the guidelines for interaction remain almost identical.

When talking with an advisor, similar to that of a CEO, a president must understand that they are talking to what would be considered the highest level within an organization. The way in which this interaction occurs is significantly different to that of a general member or even a fellow executive board member. The conventions of this interaction revolve around the idea that the president is now speaking to someone higher up than them in the hierarchy of leadership. This situation is unique, however, in that the president is not the typically the one leading the conversation. Since an advisor has more knowledge and experience in the organization than a president, the president must communicate in a way that makes it clear they are seeking the professional advice of a higher up. Effective communication with an advisor involves an increased level of respect in tone, the knowledge that explanations are not needed in regard to rules and regulations, and more formal way of speaking about situations that are happening. For both the advisor and president to work through challenges they face, they must know the expectations of the conversation placed on both ends, and a president must yield to the direction of the advisor. This situation shows the way in which the leadership role must adapt and change to the different encounters that occur.

In Images 5 and 6, we see an example of this interaction. The initial email (Image 5) explains the situation the chapter is facing, leaving out explanatory information about what a
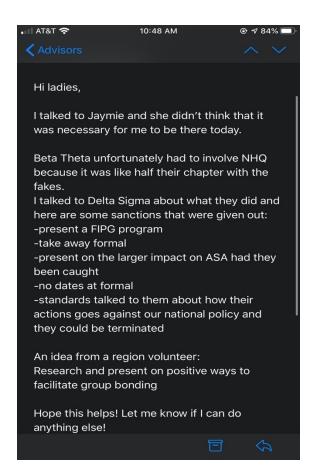
mediation or standards is. There is no need in this interaction to waste time explaining these

terms as the advisor is well aware of what they mean. The email is written in a more professional

and serious tone than other forms of interaction that the president handles, such as meeting

minutes, since she is communicating with someone higher up in the organization. However, there

is a small amount of familiarity with speaking to the advisor as this is someone the president

works with quite frequently to ensure the chapter is running smoothly. In knowing the guidelines

that come with this interaction, the advisor and president can bypass unnecessary introductions

and information to focus strictly on solving the problem at hand.

Image 5: Email to chapter advisor

In the response (Image 6), the advisor clearly indicates that she is aware of the knowledge

of the national organization that the president holds, and therefore forgoes diving into any

explanations of chapter names, acronyms, or other leadership positions mentioned that someone

like a general member may need. The chapter advisor also demonstrates that she understands her

role to advise to the best of her ability, but she also must offer options and allow the president to

ultimately make the final decision that will benefit the chapter the most. Though the advisor has

some information on what occurs in the chapter, the president is the one dealing with it day-to-

day and can make the best decision. The president and advisor are able to better communicate

with each other in a faster and more efficient way because of their understanding of the

conventions of the subgenre that is their conversation.

Image 6: Email from chapter advisor

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Lastly, a subgenre of interaction between a member and non-member of the organization can occur during a leadership period. In this specific interaction, a whole new set of guidelines are brought into place. Members tend to follow their leader when it comes to the recruitment stage, as leaders are expected to know how to interact with non-members in a way that makes those individuals interested in joining the organization. This interaction can be compared to that of selling a product to a customer. While leaders may be talking about an organization that they have intensive knowledge on, they cannot use information such as Greek Life slang to speak to these non-members. In order to efficiently communicate the goals and ideals of the organization, there is an expectation placed on the interaction for leaders, or members in general, to provide more of an explanation to non-members and speak in a tone that sells the chapter to them. In this interaction, we are more likely to see an upbeat, cheerful tone that invites potential new members into learning about the chapter. Though active members have previous knowledge of events, slang, or duties of a member, they must adhere to the conventions of the subgenre and provide a new explanation for the familiar information.

So, what does this all really mean for leadership? In using the lens of genre to look at the way in which we interact with others, we can become better leaders. The bulk of this paper focused on sorority leadership, but this concept can be applied across the board in any type of leadership position. We can figure out how to use all the qualities of a leader, not just communication, in the most efficient and effective way possible. If we look at each interaction as a being made up of a set of conventions, we can better understand the genre that we are interacting in, which leads to a stronger application of the quality being asked from us. Take, for example, the quality of honesty in a leader. While leaders are expected to be honest, there may

be certain interactions that call on that more than others. If a general member is asking about a situation, a leader may need to filter their response based on the knowledge of the inquirer and the need-to-know information of that member's position. If an executive board member were to ask the same question, the level of honesty may change to better fit the way in which a leader interacts with their board members, and so on, and so on. We can see the way this happens by replacing honesty with communication in the above scenarios. Knowing how to look at the genre of leadership can help leaders comprehend the situation at hand and respond accordingly with the quality being called upon.

Looking at leadership through the lens of genre can further help leaders to tackle challenges that they may face along the way and decide how best to address a certain subgenre that arises. Often times in leadership, we face problems that are new and do not have one set solution. By viewing these problems and situation with a genre perspective, leaders can understand how to better handle the issues. They can use the conventions of the genre of the problem or interaction to understand how to address it in a way that best serves the organization. So, while we may have thought that genre was just a way to categorize texts, it can actually be used to better organizations, starting with leaders and working its way down.

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