

## **“SEND REINFORCEMENTS, WE’RE GOING TO ADVANCE!”**

**Angelo Coco, FBA Accredited Adviser**

How more clearly, could the General have worded his message to the troops? Alas, by the time it went from the officers through the long chain of command to the Diggers and reached the four thousandth five hundred and first person, at the end of the line, it came out as: “**Send three and fourpence, we’re going to a dance!”**

The following simple sentence can be punctuated in several different ways, and the meaning changes quite dramatically. “**What do you think I’ll hand over the Business immediately.”**

The Founding Director & Benevolent Dictator might punctuate it as follows, when communicating with his family: “**What! Do you think I’ll hand over the business, immediately?”** The implication here, being that he’s not prepared to do so, not at present, anyhow.

An aspiring, enthusiastic heir apparent, might punctuate those words in this way: “**What do you think? I’ll hand over the business, immediately!”** The message here is that he’s being asked for confirmation, that he’s ready to take over the business, now that the owner has determined to pass it on to him.

A casual observer, with no vested interest might present the words in this manner: “**What do you think I’ll hand over? The business? Immediately?”** The observer hears two people in discussion, about whether something might be handed over immediately or not.

Because the sentence is spoken, and not written, the punctuation is not visible to any of the three parties, and therefore, the meaning can and is very often open to interpretation. It’s for this reason that the intended recipient needs to carefully use their eyes and ears to obtain the context of the message. All of the tone, volume, body language and gestures assist the listener and the casual observer to obtain a better understanding of the context and intended meaning of the sentence.

That’s all easy, if the conversation is face to face, but what about where it takes place over the telephone, or even the mobile phone, with its inherent signal interference? Gone are the body language and gestures.

It’s precisely for this reason that family business advisers need to take care when communicating with families in business, and other stakeholders, such as non-family employees, advisory board members and professional services providers.

In business, we can’t write down all our communications, just to ensure the punctuation is correct, and that hopefully the intended meaning is conveyed accurately. Provided everyone was educated with the same punctuation rules, there would definitely be less confusion and better communication, but business transactions could only proceed at a glacial pace, waiting for each party to write rather than speak their minds. The most practical approach, I know of, is for each of us to adopt the ‘Code of the Reflective Listener’:

- Create some **quiet** space together with your partner
- **Listen** to them without interruption or judgment
- When they have **finished**, **reflect** back to them what **you** heard them say

- **Ask** them if you heard them correctly
- **Repeat** the process with them listening and reflecting what you say until you both are in complete agreement

These rules sound simple, but you need to practice often to master them proficiently. Hence my proposition, that “effective communication within family business, is all in the eyes & ears of the Listener.”

*Angelo Coco*  
*Family Business Support*  
*Townsville*