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Thank you for adding richness to the texture of the stories in this new book.

FLOW: How to turn your stumbling blocks into stepping stones

Author: Brenda Eckstein

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In appreciation, we have attached a copy of one chapter, straight from the book.

BOOK 1 OF THE **F L A G S** BOOK OF IDEAS
FLOW LEAD ADVANCE GROW SERVE

22. PUNCTUATE YOUR LIFE WITH PURPOSE

I'm always excited when I hear or participate in a quality conversation. Afterwards I share examples with those in my communication skills workshops. One morning, as I sat having breakfast in a local coffee bar, I was fascinated at the topics I could overhear being discussed by strangers at the table next to mine.

They were talking about the English language and how punctuation can change the meaning of a message. This was of particular interest to me because in my 'How to get your point across' workshops, punctuation is an important aspect of the written examples participants work on. The big question is: how do we minimise the gap between the sender's intention (in sending a message) and the recipient's perception of the same message?

During their conversation, the strangers discussed some examples of how punctuation can alter the meaning of a message.

- Sam says George is mad.
- Sam, says George, is mad.

Also, the classic favourite, 'What is the difference between a panda and a cowboy?'

- The former eats shoots and leaves.
- The latter eats, shoots and leaves.

In written communication, a comma can significantly change the meaning of our message.

Let's look at another area in which punctuation is important. A question we need to ask ourselves is: 'How is punctuation impacting on the meaning of our lives'?

Life can be thought of as a continuum, artificially punctuated in a variety of ways. Each birthday marks a change, an event that often puts us in a different category. That change in age enables us to do certain things and excludes us from other opportunities. It may qualify us for a certain race or prevent us from entering a Miss World Contest.

Think of your next birthday: what will you no longer qualify for? For example, in my uncle's case, as a colonel in the army he enjoyed his work but the army computers were set to recognise only those people whose ages were up to 75, so there was no way he could be paid his salary after that age. So, he very reluctantly resigned.

What new opportunities will your next birthday present? You may now be able to apply for a driver's licence. For some of us, it could qualify us for extra tax concessions.

Just as a full stop ends a sentence, and a new sentence starts after that full stop, so a birthday marks the end of an age and the beginning of a new era. Similarly, each New Year follows another full stop and generates a whole new range of possibilities.

For those of us with different religious or cultural affinities we may also recognise New Year at different times and our celebrations may take different forms.

Any New Year may be a good time to make a fresh start, to strategise our future. But if we do this only once a year aren't we missing out on other opportunities? Shouldn't we be setting aside regular sessions to exercise an 'attitude of positive discontent'? I think of the wonderful story told in 'Management Mess-ups: 57 pitfalls you can avoid'.

The author, Mark Eppler, was walking along a pier and saw fishermen with their boats upside down on the beach. He was concerned as he realised that by not being out fishing the fishermen were not generating income. They explained that they regularly punctuate their lives by not going fishing and rather spend the day scraping their boats. He still didn't understand. They explained that barnacles attach themselves to the boats below the water level and multiply at an alarming rate. This makes the boats heavier, slower and less manoeuvrable. In addition, the boats can consume up to 40% more fuel in order for the fishermen to reach the waters where they fish.

Doesn't that sound just like our lives? Things creep up on us. 'The deception of the gradual' is one way of referring to the process. We don't realise we are being weighed down, burdened by excesses. It becomes harder to achieve our goals and takes us more time because we are less flexible. And the cost of achievement is greater in terms of energy used. So we become less effective.

By creating punctuations in the flow of our lives, we can pause, observe, reflect, create meaning and then take appropriate action. Regarding our resources, our service and the way we operate, we should assume that nothing is good enough and ask ourselves how we can improve. Of course, after careful consideration, we may decide that something is the best it can be for us at this time, so we'll leave it as it is. However, even if it is good enough (now), we need to create an opportunity in the future to re-examine and reassess whether it is still the best it can be. This helps us to avoid becoming complacent or forming bad habits.

So, my message to you is: punctuate your lives periodically in a purposeful way. Have a break from routine and carefully appraise every aspect of your life. Are things the best they can be? If not, how could you improve? And then take appropriate action. Implement strategies for success.

Just as the punctuation in written words can alter the meaning of sentences, so the meaning of our lives can be altered considerably by strategic pauses and relevant positive action.

Quality conversation is not confined to coffee shops – although a good cappuccino can help.



- When did you last stop and really listen to the conversations around you?
- What did you learn?
- How can you apply these lessons in other areas of your life?
- In which ways can you pause to apply an attitude of positive discontent?

Punctuate your life with purpose

Reflection and generalisation

Three of my learning points through reading this chapter:



Active experimentation

As a result of the above I am going to take the following action:

