

Punctuation is an essential—
if not always consciously
applied—part of our daily
communication. When we write,
those little dots, dashes, curls,
capital letters, and other marks
all provide powerful meaning and
direction. (And if you doubt the
power of a simple comma, consid-
er its influence over the meaning
of this sentence: ‘At various times
he ascribed his success to his
parents, Jean, and God’ versus
‘At various times he ascribed his
success to his parents, Jean and
God’)!

Punctuation isn’t complicated, but it does exercise great power through the direction it provides and the meaning it helps create. And of course, the lack or misuse of punctuation creates confusion and misunderstanding—a little bit like leadership.

Let’s consider just six elements of punctuation—in this case as their principles might relate to leadership.

The Capital Letter

Capitals signal the start of a sentence. They also show respect for the names of people and places. Capitals give prominence. Leaders also give prominence by what (and who) they capitalise, what they show respect for, and where they choose to start things. Starting, naming, and focusing are everyday ways in which leaders ‘punctuate’ their mission, their methods, and their meaning.

The Full Stop

It brings a sentence to a close. ‘Enough of that, let’s move on to something else’, it says. As a general rule, the closer a full stop is to the start of a sentence, the easier the sentence is to follow and understand.

Being clear about commitments, completion, and conclusions is equally essential for clarity in leadership.

Of course, not every leadership commitment can be carried out with a simple start and stop. And so we have the comma.

The Comma

This sometimes bedeviling little mark has three essential roles: to separate introductory information in a sentence, to separate items in a list, and to insert explanatory or detailed information within a sentence. A tiny mark, but one whose placement—as our ‘parents, Jean and God’ example above highlights—can considerably alter meaning.

It’s important for leaders to be able to clearly connect and separate related events, activities, and issues—like items in a list. It’s also vital to give context to what you’re asking: providing introductory information, if you like, before articulating the specific request. And sometimes there are qualifying or clarifying directions, explanations, or requirements to be communicated.

Just as the comma is perhaps the most frequently misused punctuation mark, so too leaders can misplace, misuse, or mistime pauses and comments. More information is not necessarily better communication.

The Colon

There are also three key ways the colon is used: to introduce a word or phrase that serves as explanation, clarification, summary, or interpretation; to introduce a list; and to formally introduce a quotation. Colons illustrate and amplify.

Six! Leadership? Punctuation, Points:

Leadership is punctuated with colons when we clearly establish, explain, and enumerate. There’s a sense of order and rationale that a simple, clear list of ideas or explanations provide.

The Question Mark

The question mark is one punctuation point that probably needs more, rather than less, use in our workplaces—particularly in leadership. It invites a response, encourages engagement, and indicates an expectation of contribution.

‘When we become leaders, we feel that it is important for us to have answers rather than questions’, writes Michael Marquardt in *Leading with Questions* (2005). ‘The ability to ask questions goes hand in hand with the ability to learn. A learning organisation is only possible if it has a culture that encourages questions.’

The Spanish language does the question mark particularly well, placing an upside down version of it at the start of the sentence. This lets the reader know up front that what’s being said is a question, rather than requiring them to wait until the end of the sentence for that important context to be revealed.

¿It’s great, don’t you think? Perhaps there’s something in that for leadership communication, too.



Punctuation printing blocks for a vintage letterpress in a small wooden typesetter box.

The Exclamation Point

Finally! The exclamation point conveys surprise, anger, strong emotion, or enthusiasm. While most business writing should be free of exclamation points (and exclamations!), they can add appropriate meaning in informal ways (e.g., note the difference between emailing someone 'That's great' versus 'That's great!').

Two things about exclamation points and leadership: it's important to occasionally and selectively signal appropriate surprise, appreciation, disapproval, or enthusiasm by exclaiming; and, the more you do it, the less impact it has—just as it does in writing.

So that's the free punctuation lesson (and also a chance to shamelessly promote my fantastic half-day 'Writing for Results' workshop, but I'll refrain from an exclamation).

In summary, the six punctuation points of leadership remind us that (colon):

- Leaders should carefully identify what gets capitalised so it's clear

what the starting point is and who the key identities are.

- Leadership is as much about stopping as it is about starting (and you have to stop before you can start—just like a sentence).

- Leaders must carefully and clearly provide introductory information, separate issues and, as necessary, insert additional information.

- Leadership is about providing a sense of order and rationale by clearly and simply establishing, explaining, and enumerating.

- Leaders must ask and encourage questions. ¿What difference could that make?

- Leaders are expected to occasionally and appropriately exclaim their surprise, appreciation, emotion, disapproval, and enthusiasm (!).

The point is, leadership requires appropriate punctuation—otherwise leadership can feel like an awfully long sentence for followers. So, how will you punctuate your leadership opportunities?

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