

What's in a word?

By Caroline Evans

In May I posted an article on LinkedIn about my early experience of minuting board meetings. The topic proved popular and I was pleased to receive so many insightful responses, including some very valuable practical advice. I subsequently conducted a poll on the topic which revealed that by far and away the most important factor in creating good minutes is to have good board papers. In fact, an overwhelming 82% of respondents cited this as their number one priority.

Of course, it's not an unsurprising result when you consider that the veracity of the minutes is dependent upon accurate interpretation, by the board, of the information contained in the papers. Equally, it's important not to make mistakes in recording the debate and decisions made, as there may well be far-reaching consequences.

I recently read an article in the FT which immediately struck a chord. The piece was a review of a book that had been written about the history of interpreters and translators, and the 'joys and terrors' they faced in undertaking their work. 'Dancing on Ropes' by Anna Aslanyan covered the challenges met by translators over centuries, across countries and in various contexts: political situations, academic research and legal scenarios. I could not help but recognise the parallels with minuting.

The book talked about the diplomacy required to convey meaning with appropriate tone. Imagine trying to engender constructive debate between Kennedy and Khrushchev during the Cold War, and the interpretive ability necessary to ensure accurate understanding of new words and concepts. It's so much more than 'swapping' one language for another.

How do you accurately convey the meaning of jargon, metaphors and other figures of speech that are not yet in the dictionary or are recognisable only to individual mother tongues? What does 'man on the Clapham omnibus' mean to you? What might it mean to someone half your age or from another country?

How do you make sure you hear all the voices in the room; not just the loud and repetitive ones? There has to be an appreciation of non-verbal communications and the part these cues play in determining the meaning of what is spoken. Can you really 'hear' everyone? 36 interpreters worked simultaneously in four languages at the 1945-46 Nuremberg Trials. The impartial, non-judgmental recording of differing views, perspectives and priorities were of absolute importance in this literally life or death situation. Whilst the consequences may not be the same, the same principles apply in today's boardrooms.

Of course, the final decisive interpretation of all these factors is not, as Company Secretary, your responsibility alone but it is your responsibility to weave together the first coherent record of the meeting. You may not be risking life and limb in the same way as some of the interpreters mentioned in Anna's book but you certainly share some of the same challenges and might potentially suffer unfortunate consequences if you get it wrong.

John Dryden, a 17th Century poet, described his work in translating Ovid's Epistles as "It's much like dancing on ropes with fettered legs." How much does this resonate with you and your board papers?

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