

Disclaimer: Nothing here is intended to imply that you don't already know this, should know this, should have already had an insight about this, should have already done something differently, or any variations on this theme. If it occurs this way, kindly disregard everything you have read here.



By Lorne R. Armstrong

Stop *shoulding* on yourself! And while you're at it, stop *shoulding* on others. I am amazed at how many people believe that it is important for them to hold on to a *should*. A manager says, "We shouldn't be in the mess we're in." An executive says, "We should be making more progress." A supervisor says; "They should be providing better service to us."

When you think something *should* be different than the way it is, it inevitably leads to frustration because it is an argument with reality. And reality isn't paying any attention to what you think *should* be happening. Your intentions and actions will have some influence on reality but frustration is the result of getting stuck in how you think it *should* be. The real power here is in seeing and acknowledging how things really are.

I'm not suggesting that you must be satisfied (or dissatisfied) with the way things are – the integrity underlying your frustration is your desire to make a difference to the way things are. Acknowledgement of "it is" is not the same as "I am willing to let things be as they are". Whenever you are bringing your leadership to a situation you are intending a difference. It's just that telling the truth about reality is a powerful starting point for causing the difference you intend. When you think things should already be different, you are arguing with the reality of the starting point. When you argue with reality the frustration grows exponentially and undermines everything you are intending to accomplish. You become part of the problem; not part of accomplishing what's called for.

Should is not the same as an intention that leads to productive action. You may have an intention that things operate more smoothly than they are currently running. You may intend to accelerate the rate of progress on an important initiative; there may be some service standards that are not being met. Nothing about that however, says that they *should already* be any different than the way they are.

The impossible, and hidden, timing of *already* is the evil, nasty, suppressive, undermining part of entertaining the idea that your view trumps reality and therefore there is something wrong with reality. The truth is that things are the way they are; you are where you are, and you are either taking the action required to have the desired effect or you aren't. Reality will tell you the truth about that.



It is important to note that I'm not saying that a fight with reality is wrong; or that you *shouldn't* be arguing with reality. You are welcome to argue with reality. Just be satisfied with what that produces – not much beyond frustration. If on the other hand, you are willing to trust that reality will give you an accurate read out of what has and has not been accomplished so far – and then use that to inform what capability you might develop and what to try next – you will get something other than mere frustration. The choice is yours.

There is power in considering what to bring to the situation next, while simultaneously acknowledging that while your previous intention and/or actions may have seemed like they would accomplish what you intended, they didn't – at least not yet. It's also important to appreciate that you did what you could see to do. But now you can also see that for whatever reason it didn't match whatever was required and therefore something else is needed. This appreciation frees up the energy once gobbled up by the frustration and allows you to freely assess what else is required.

Turning the adrenalin of frustration into adrenalin for new action isn't an easy switch but is absolutely enlightening once realized. It promotes self-acceptance along with 'reality-acceptance' and makes a powerful energy available to move forward rather than swirling in the quicksand of frustration. The energy drained by shoulding is mind boggling once you realize it.¹

Some people still want to argue, "But, I *have* taken sufficient action to accomplish what was intended." (With "they should be different" or "it should be different" in the background.) This is pure fantasy; this is the argument with reality. The action you have taken so far, in the current circumstances and with other people's intentions and action, has led to the results you are seeing. No more; no less. Want different results? Figure out what that would take; develop your competence to a new level and know that life will give you an accurate read out.

It should, I should, you should, they should (or should have, or should have already) are all the same – each of them is an argument with reality. You may be more susceptible to one or the other, but make no mistake – they are all undermining.

Here is an example to illustrate this. In my work I frequently am on a plane flying to another city for a meeting or to work with a client. I'm actually on a plane right now as I write this. Anyone who has flown – or gone to the airport to pick someone up – knows that there is often a difference between when a plane is scheduled to depart and when it actually departs. Tonight for example, the plane was scheduled to depart at 7:20; it actually departed at 8:30.

¹ Thanks to Andrea Eberle for her insight into shoulds.



By 7:30 you might say “it should have already” departed (but it hasn’t); or “I should have checked to see if it was on time” (but I didn’t); or said to the agent, “you should get us on another flight”, (but they didn’t); when you found out it was a maintenance issue, “they should maintain their planes better” or, “they should have an extra plane available, (but they don’t). In each case it should, I should, you should and they should are all arguing with reality – it doesn’t matter where you start, you end up in the same place.

Reality is that the plane will be departing late and you won’t really know exactly what time until it takes off. The only effective action is to consider what you will do about this. Make a phone call to alert anyone expecting your on-time arrival? Check with other airlines to see if they have an earlier flight? Charter a private jet? Stay an extra night?

One thing I know for sure is that getting frustrated that reality didn’t line up with my idea of an on-time departure was not going to increase my options or enhance my creativity and resourcefulness in thinking of alternatives. Opting for frustration would have made not a whit of difference to when the plane departed – it would just undermine my peace of mind, health and demeanor all the way home. If the frustration got that far it would also have poisoned the possibility of my wife and I enjoying each others’ company when I did get home.

Stop poisoning yourself and others with the frustration of *shoulds* and watch out for *should’s* cousin: If Only. “*If only they had listened when we told them.*” Trust reality to give you an accurate read out of where things are and start there. Take the action that will cause what you intend and develop your competence to take performance to the next level.