

Pursuing Your Own Path

**Dealing More Effectively
with Others While Doing
What's Best for You**

Michael Kerrigan

*Author of **What Choice Do I Have?***

A ***Possibility Press*** Book

Pursuing Your Own Path

Michael Kerrigan

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*“‘Y*ou were placed on this earth for a purpose. To let the wishes of anyone derail you is unconscionable—as well as a source of great sadness and regret.”

—Michael Kerrigan

Your Vision of a Better Tomorrow Is the Guidepost to Pursuing Your Own Path

“Some people try to sabotage us by giving ‘advice’ that plants seeds of doubt. They really don’t know us or the facts, nor do they truly care about what’s on our hearts to do.”

—Michael Kerrigan—

Most of us, at some point in our lives, believed anything was possible. For example, our visions of the future were probably limitless when we were children. We pictured ourselves being a firefighter, basketball star, famous singer, admired leader, a person of wealth, or something else. There was no question in our minds that this was the role we would play. We believed anything was possible—freedom, wealth, travel, adventure, stardom. We were so convinced that, by the time we turned twenty-one, we just knew we could change the world.

But much to our chagrin, far too many of us have let others have their way with us when it wasn’t in our best interest. Before we realized it, we found ourselves detoured from pursuing our own path, and our heartfelt desires faded into oblivion. We got lost and settled for the mundane everydayness of an ordinary life.

Like many, we may have been lured into an inappropriate people-pleasing trap. We unthinkingly acquiesced to others whenever they said we “should” or “shouldn’t” be, do, or have something. Unfortunately, this led to an increasing level of discontent. Sadly, we

probably never even questioned it because this seemed to be the way life was for most everybody we knew. We tried to cope with the pain by falling into bad habits like: overeating, smoking, drinking, incessantly seeking entertainment and instant gratification, and buying and doing things we couldn't afford. But none of these things worked; they only made matters worse. These attempts to compensate for a life not fully lived never led to happiness and success.

We became employees instead of business owners; second fiddle instead of conductor. We caved in to the seeds of doubt others planted in our minds. We got bogged down by doing what we thought we were supposed to do, rather than staying the course and going the distance. Perhaps, when we shared our aspirations, we were told we should just be thankful for what we have, we weren't being practical, or we were nothing more than dreamers. We may even have been asked, "Who do you think you are?" The enlivened spirit of following adventure, boldly meeting and overcoming challenges, and living the life we had once imagined no longer seemed so important.

We ended up doing or not doing what others told us we should or shouldn't do and we lost our way. Maybe our vision of a brighter future didn't disappear entirely, but it dimmed or went out of focus.

As we continued to do what others said was more "important" or more "secure," the exciting life we had imagined got lost. Some of us even used should, perhaps inadvertently, as an excuse or permission not to grow and become successful. Life went on as we gradually gave up the hope of having a better tomorrow. We had let one or more people discourage us. Our desires went into cardiac arrest and there was no one around to help us revive them.

But why?

Some people try to sabotage us in pursuing our own path, giving "advice" that plants seeds of doubt. They really don't know us or the facts, nor do they truly care about what's on our hearts to do. It seems that all of us have had episodes of giving up what we really wanted for what we were told were good, sensible reasons. Or we second-guessed ourselves out of a fear of failure and never even attempted to run for office, start building a business, or follow through on an idea for an invention. We let the negative influence of others cause us to turn our backs on our path instead of pursuing it.

How sad. . . .

Acquiescing to the innocent-sounding six-letter word *should* is at least partly responsible for many of us not being where we'd like to be. Of course, where *you* are may be okay. But only you know for sure. You may already be doing what you really want to do with your life. If so, congratulations! But two out of three people *aren't*—largely because many gave in to *should*.

This book is not intended to teach that *should* can never be used. There are certainly situations where it is appropriate and desirable to use *should*, which are discussed later in the book. However, you need to understand that *should* is typically not well received. When people are told they *should* or *shouldn't* be, do, or have something, it tends to elicit a feeling of rebellion. They often feel anger at some level but may not even be sure why. As a result, they may stuff their feelings, and resentment may eventually build to where they lash out in an unexpected way. Most people don't think about how the word *should*, when used inappropriately, can negatively affect relationships and leadership effectiveness. This book addresses those issues.

Manipulators often use *should* to further their own agendas at the expense of others. They are not concerned about creating win-win situations. Win-lose is fine with them. They use *should* to coerce and control, and often give advice without being qualified to give it. They use *should* in an attempt to maintain the status quo. Manipulators try to instill fear and don't want others to get ahead of them. They tend to be jealous and discount other people's desires. "Misery loves company" prevails.

Some people also use *should* to establish or maintain order. Consider the family structure you probably lived in from the day you were brought home from the hospital until you went out on your own. Your parents and older siblings may have started wagging their fingers at you and lecturing about the way life is around the old homestead—*their* homestead.

The older the sibling, the more he or she may have felt entitled, or even responsible, to tell you how things *should* be. Most of the time, however, they didn't use the word *should*. They were more prone to use the power-packed phrases, "You'd better. . . ." or "You must. . . ." They didn't want you thinking you had a choice.

The implication may have been serious—if you didn't do what they said, you would be in BIG trouble! But sibling relationships are only one example. (Then, as adults, they often continue the habit of trying to establish or maintain control in dealing with others.)

With the lingering unease you may have experienced from those encounters, you might have settled into many of the relationships you have today. If, for example, you're now associating with more positive-thinking people who believe in and encourage you, you may be aware of undercurrents of dissatisfaction with some of your previously developed relationships. While you may have been doing your best to ignore those feelings, they are still there—and that's okay. Your siblings, as well as many of your friends and acquaintances, may have chosen to maintain the status quo while you've chosen to move on. Think about it. Are you still friends with everyone you knew in school or college? There's not enough time to maintain relationships where there's less in common.

Millions of people have experienced should-sparked consequences in a variety of situations. You're not alone! We often use the should messages we received and adhered to when we were growing up to guide us in our current activities—appropriately or not. How often have you done what you thought was expected of you, and stayed precisely where you were, happy or not? Acquiescing to should can box us in and hold us back.

And there we stay—*stuck!*

What if the Wright brothers had given in to those who said they should stick with building and repairing bicycles? What if they had bought into the “wisdom” of the 1890s that said “If God had intended man to fly, he would have given us wings”? Today, the aviation and aerospace industries account for more than ten percent of the economy in the United States alone. Where would we be today if the Wright's had given in to the *shoulders*? Where would we be today if all the innovators and business-minded people had surrendered to those who advocated the status-quo of “We should be satisfied with where we are and what we have”?

You've chosen to read this book because you're moving ahead. At stake is the realization of your potential, but only if you reach for it. You've reached the point where you're ready to move on from the

constraints of should. You can now devote a larger part of your time and energy toward following through with more of your own choices. Challenging the inappropriate dictates of should will help you pursue your own path, while your example will encourage others to do the same. Dealing firmly yet kindly with those who would try to should you into submission can help you do what may now seem impossible.

Remember, *shoulders* can give advice based only on *their* perspectives and desires, not yours. They simply don't know what's inside of you. This book will help you deal more effectively with others while doing what's best for you. You'll be clearer about and more committed to doing what's on your heart and encouraged to continue moving forward. After all, it's *your* path, not theirs, and they probably think they couldn't follow it themselves anyway. Or, perhaps, they're jealous that you're spending time with your positive new friends and associates, and you desire to grow even more.

As you apply what you learn in this book, you'll grow stronger in dealing with *shoulders* and their agendas. They'll no longer be able to stop or slow you down from pursuing greater happiness and success, or whatever you're striving for. You'll be making more decisions and taking more actions that are best for you! You were placed on this earth for a purpose. To let the wishes of anyone derail you is unconscionable—as well as a source of great sadness and regret.

Your vision of a better tomorrow, born of desire and faith, is the guidepost to pursuing your own path. And no matter how much the *shoulders* or anyone else may fight you and try to prevent you from moving on, stay the course. Muster the courage to awaken even the whisper of a dream. Cling to what you know is best for you and your family, and rely on those who support you.

Acquiescing to inappropriate shoulds compromises your better judgment and can ruin your life, which is far too precious not to live as you envision. Now is the time, once and for all, to put aside any shoulds that may be holding you back. Pursue your own path with a new sense of urgency. No matter what any *shoulders* may think, say, or do in their attempts to stop you from doing so, ignore their negativity and hold on tight to your dream. Go forward in faith and create the life you want to live. *Now let's get on with it!*

“**T**here’s a fine line between caring and controlling. Make sure people aren’t stepping over that line in their efforts to seemingly watch out for your best interests.”

—Michael Kerrigan

Chapter 1

A Good Reason Is Hard to Find

Shoulds from Every Possible Direction

“Notice the difference between being influenced by good and reasonable ideas, versus being controlled by guilt and an assortment of other emotion-packed directives.”

—Michael Kerrigan—

Shoulds come from just about everywhere, including parents, siblings, friends, bosses, co-workers, associates, spouses, city ordinances, and even kids. They all use *shoulds* with varying degrees of success.

In their efforts to exert control, some use guilt while others use fear. Still others rely on saying “It’s your civic duty” to get you to act in certain ways, based on *their* agendas. They say you should—clean up your room, remember that person’s birthday, file your reports, keep your nose to the grindstone, or give them a bigger allowance. These shoulds are intended to do two things: a) control your behavior and b) make life easier—*for them*.

We even generate shoulds for ourselves! I should—do it myself so it’s done right, be a better parent, buy bigger birthday gifts, and, yes, even keep my nose to the grindstone. Notice the difference between being influenced by good and reasonable ideas, versus being controlled by guilt and an assortment of other emotion-packed directives. The difference is that guilt-charged shoulds are likely to leave you feeling angry, frustrated, or afraid.

Whether shoulds come from you or someone else, learn to recognize them when they appear. Tuning out should is the first step in dealing with it effectively. Put it where it belongs—outside your new world of reason. Don't let should interfere with your desire to do and be the best for yourself and your family.

Enter the Ever-Present Authority Figures

First, there are shoulds from people in authority: parents, teachers, bosses, and institutions, and a variety of others who believe they need to direct you in one way or another—way beyond their role or responsibility.

Let's start with parents. Many of them take their cue from something quite basic—the wild. For example, a mother tiger nuzzles her cub this way and that, teaching it to feed, play, hunt, and do the things that tigers do. After all, the cub will need those skills to survive once it's away from its mother's caring supervision. For wild animals in their natural environment, this is the way it needs to be.

In the wild, an animal's options are limited. When it gets hungry, it better know how to hunt, or else. A tiger cub doesn't have the option of choosing between getting a quick bite at the corner family restaurant, popping a frozen dinner in the microwave, or going to the local burger house for a mega meal.

For every learned or imitative behavior a tiger cub has, we, as discerning human beings, have one or more options. For every task an animal instinctively performs, we humans have choices. Living life always doing certain things in the exact same way makes sense—but only if you're an animal in the wild. There, shoulds play a big role.

We've all had our experiences with parents or other caretakers who act like protective mother tigers. They gave us should orders because they believed that would keep us safe, educated, liked, and, of course, germ-free. Remember being told you should—wash your hands, say thank you, and kiss Grandma goodbye? Same thing. Parents want to keep their children in line with shoulds so they can live an error-less, pain-free life, and survive with minimal discomfort.

Parental advice is good, but there's a limit. If we weren't given some direction as youngsters, we might act like cats in the wild, carrying small rodents around in our mouths! But we grew up and moved out of the house a long time ago. Even so, that hasn't prevented parents from pick-

ing up the phone and telling their adult kids to, essentially, wipe their noses!

There's a fine line between caring and controlling. Make sure people aren't stepping over that line in their efforts to seemingly watch out for your best interests.

Now parents certainly aren't alone in issuing should orders and making should rules; teachers fall into the same trap. When you sat down in Mrs. Hollybush's class to learn algebra, she had a good reason to include should with her directions. Solving an equation for "x" should be done by using a few specific steps, or else you simply won't get the right answer. Sure, you can guess. But guessing won't get you where you need to go. Furthermore, when you're directed to show your work, guessing is generally a red flag that you haven't a clue about what you're doing.

Once you wander into the world of the social sciences, things are a little less clear—more subject to viewpoints. For example, political science isn't math. In the world of the softer sciences, shoulds are almost always met with at least one side believing you shouldn't! For every group that says we should build a dam, there's another that says the river should run free. So who's right? The answer isn't nearly as clear as solving for "x." But making a decision together through considerate brainstorming, rather than accepting other shoulds, often produces the most beneficial solution.

It's the Law

Institutions are right behind parents and teachers in dispensing shoulds. Actually, they are probably the worst offenders when it comes to using shoulds as their guiding lights. Rather than helping you grow to adulthood or pass the ninth grade, institutions aren't nearly so helpful or concerned. Shoulds, in their hands, have a more grating purpose. They're used to get you to *conform*.

The expansion of Interstate 25 through the heart of Denver is a great example. This project, dubbed T-REX (yes, as in the unruly dinosaur), was originally scheduled to take four to seven years to complete. And by all accounts, it promised to be a noisy project as it jostled people living on both sides of the 19-mile stretch of construction.

The time frame was a little vague because before any construction comes destruction—lots of it. In part, 12 old bridges spanning the highway had to be replaced. Here's what the state and the contractor

told the affected residents: You should let us make a lot of noise 24 hours a day, especially during bridge replacement time. After all, it's for a good cause!

The reason for the project's vague timeline finally surfaces. If the demolition of the bridges is allowed to be carried out (loudly), even during normal sleeping hours, the project will take only four years. Otherwise, it could well take the full seven years. Fortunately, bridge demolition will be done in short segments and only at the front end of the project. And while it won't be at the noise-level of passenger jets taking off every minute for four years, people will definitely lose some sleep.

So, should people go along with what the sponsors of the project are proposing as the prudent thing to do? After all, the sponsors are pretty sure they know what's best. But not everyone agrees. Some opposing the project are simply not willing to do what they're being told they should. So are *they* right? Who knows? But at least they're aware of their options, rather than blindly following when shoulds are being thrown their way. Some people aren't willing to play a predictable, acquiesce-to-should, passive role. And of course, it's these people who lead the pack of those less vocal in their opposition.

The institutional approach of using shoulds is *duty*-based—as in “it's *your* duty.” It's designed to encourage obedience to help the institution meet its deadlines and save costs while sacrificing the comfort of only a few for the supposed best interest of the many. As for the institution, the *many* is what's important. But what about you? Frankly, the institution doesn't really care. It has its own politically influenced agenda.

Yes Sir/Ma'am?

Everyone has his or her own preferences, priorities, wants, and needs. So how often will someone else's priority be yours—especially when that someone else is the boss or has been designated as being in charge? This brings us to dealing with those who are calling the shots. They often throw their weight around—in some cases, just to flaunt the power they have in the position they've been given.

Everyone has had a boss at one time or another. When some start working, this person is often either the head burger flipper or the assis-

tant shift manager. Typically, they are fairly focused as they go about issuing orders: “Get those fries out of that fat!” And the fries come out. If the employees to whom the orders are barked choose to disobey, the boss knows there are always plenty of others who can replace them. (Have you noticed that some employers always seem to have a “Now Hiring” sign in the window?)

Most of us, unless we are self-employed, have to take orders from other sorts of bosses. We may even end up answering to someone who is supposed to be more skilled than the assistant shift manager. And how do we know that? They use *shoulds*! “Get those fries out of that fat!” becomes “You should get those fries out of that fat!” See the difference? They may sound a bit better and less authority-wielding, but *shoulds* tend to build resentment.

Of course, good bosses are more sophisticated than that—especially those who reach management’s upper levels. As far as they’re concerned, *shoulds* have a much higher purpose: to meet deadlines, increase the bottom line and, *always*, to control. (Note: From the finance-driven perspective, the scale of the project and the money involved are the only things that really separate “fries” from other, “higher” callings.) It happens in every business and industry, from the best-intended non-profit organizations to the largest corporations: *shoulds* tend to have free rein. And it’s not good.

Going Off Automatic

Now the intent here isn’t to get you to turn a deaf ear to *should*—especially when your boss is serious, which most of them tend to be. That would be irresponsible. The trick here is to truly listen to what’s being said and decide whether it *really* makes the best sense. You’ll ultimately have more control and get greater respect from others. Here’s an example of how it could work:

Your boss, Mr. Burns, thinks that you should pay a visit to the water bladder manufacturing plant in East Aardvark because sales are down 15 percent from a year ago. “Check it out,” Mr. Burns says.

As you reflect upon it with your increased awareness of *shoulding*, you realize Mr. Burns tends to give out orders seemingly at random. He also disregards any scheduled time off he may have already agreed to give you before he barks out the new orders. You, like most em-

ployees, have always said “yes” to his orders—without thinking. As a result, you have disappointed your wife, your kids, and others, many times in the past because you gave in to Burns’s shoulds.

This time, however, you analyze Burns’s orders so you can determine their true meaning. Not only is this the right thing to do, but Burns’s new directive conflicts with plans you’ve already made and he already approved. The truth is that you have a business you’re developing on the side. You and your wife had planned to spend the next two days at a related convention. The new directive is creating conflicts on a variety of fronts: nonrefundable airline tickets, new information that will come out of the convention, contacts you would undoubtedly make, and of course, your wife’s expectations of going—*with* you. Are you really going to let Burns have his way with you once more?

In a lot of cases, people receiving this order do what they were told without a second thought. They would do what they had always done before, regardless of any previous plans or the wisdom of the order itself. They’d fly into East Aardvark International Airport first thing Monday morning, tour the plant, grill the production supervisor, visit the water bladder manufacturing operation, kick the tires of the big rigs down at the loading dock, and report *something* back to Burns. And why not? This is what they were told they should do. So they just do it!

Another thing to consider when analyzing this should is whether it is what Burns or any other boss really wants. Does he or they want someone who follows orders without thinking? In some cases, the boss may be too insecure to confidently receive feedback from one of his or her employees. But let’s say, for example, Burns isn’t insecure. Sure, he told you to check it out; but Burns has twelve things floating around in his head, and he was just speaking in shorthand. His concern (and that of *his* boss) is *really* about the declining sales. Does this mean a trip to the manufacturing plant is necessarily the company’s best first move? Probably not.

Now, it’s time to take yourself out of automatic mode and consider more seriously the waning patience of your loving wife. You figure that you could probably get a lot more relevant information from the marketing department. At least it’s a good place to start. If it’s a prob-

lem with bladder quality, then a trip to the plant might be in order. If it's a challenge because the water bladder market is saturated, then the difficulty might reside in advertising or sales. Or maybe it is simply something beyond your control. One thing is certain though: Kicking truck tires at the loading dock isn't going to change the way prospective buyers look at water bladders.

The truly responsible thing to do, both as a professional and a loving husband, is to listen to and think about the should order being given, consider the alternatives, and then act in a kind, measured, and reasonable way. As you listen and respond *appropriately*, several positive things begin to happen, including increased self-respect, regardless of how spontaneous or reasoned the order may have been.

When you listen to shoulds with empathy and understanding, and don't automatically say yes just to please the boss in the short-run, you'll more clearly perceive the assignment's importance and its meaning as well as your personal situation. You'll be able to assign specific values to the direction being given, the information the boss really needs, and the previous personal commitment you made. When you look at it all from the broader perspective, you'll be of more benefit to the boss as well as to yourself and your wife.

You might be saying that this is a communications issue. And you're absolutely right. That is precisely what should is all about: communicating an idea with an authoritative, six-letter word, or one of its cousins, in an attempt to manipulate an instant yes. But how *you* respond is under *your* control, not your boss's. You might ask Mr. Burns: "Is a trip to East Aardvark really what we need and, if so, can it wait until next week? I've prepaid for a weekend trip with my wife, and I'll really be in trouble if I tell her I've got to work." It could be as simple as that! Just be open and honest.