



March, 2019 In The Know Summary

Overcoming the Should Syndrome

A Case Study of Michelle Obama

Discussion Facilitator: [Karen See](#)

The Should Syndrome

In the book [The Should Syndrome](#), Karen See discusses the condition where we live our lives based on what we think we are supposed to do, or should be doing, instead of making choices that are true to who we are and what we want. Shoulds are expectations (often unconscious) that we have of ourselves or others—which cause us to make choices that are inconsistent with who we are, and therefore get in the way of achieving our goals. Examples of Shoulds include:

- *It's my job to keep everyone happy.*
- *I should be able to do it all, and do it all well.*
- *I should be the primary breadwinner in my family.*

Overcoming our Shoulds involves learning to understand and then change patterns of thinking and behavior that are getting in the way of living the lives we want. It is a cyclical three-step process: NOTICE (How is body responding?) > REFLECT (What are the costs? What beliefs are behind this?) > ACT.

Awareness Activity | Take five minutes to reflect and write down your own Shoulds. Next, consider how you can overcome these Shoulds.

Priorities Activity | Imagine you are at the end of a long, happy, fulfilled life. Consider what you accomplished and what is most important to you.

Discussion Highlights

- Feeling guilty and listening to Shoulds go hand in hand.
- Difference between Shoulds and 'Wants': Your Shoulds get in the way of your achieving those things you aspire to achieve. For example, Shoulds cause you to take on a volunteer responsibility that you don't want to do – but would feel guilty not doing. A 'Want' is when you do something that aligns with your goals. Everything you think you should do is not necessarily a Should.
- How do you overcome your Shoulds?
 - Listen to your heart. Think about what decisions involve, and what the tradeoffs are. *If I decline a promotion to partner, what would I be giving up?*
 - Reflect on and learn from mistakes. *Did I take those AP classes because I wanted to, or because I was expected to do so?*
 - Remember the feeling you have when you make a decision that you don't end up being happy with. *I went along with a house purchase that was a mistake, and I remember the feeling of conceding when I was not convinced.*

- Get specific about what is the COST of the Should.
- Reframe it. Example: The Should is that we should not show emotion or not share emotion in the workplace. Reframe it – What do we want our people to feel? (Inspired, challenged, etc.) If so, how do we behave to allow for that?
- Ask yourself, “Is that true to who I am?”
- Notion of the “Secondary Effect”— how we present ourselves affects how people treat us.

Lessons from Michelle Obama

- In this month’s book club, we used the framework of Shoulds as a lens to reflect on Michelle Obama’s recent biography [Becoming](#). We explored the question, “What lessons can we learn from Michelle about how to recognize and overcome our Shoulds?”
- “**Becoming** is never giving up on the idea that there is more growing to be done.”
- In Michelle’s early years, she often feels she is not good enough. She works hard at school, excels, and ultimately becomes an attorney. Unhappy with her job, she begins to journal and reflect on her life. Also, at different points in her life, mentors help her find clarity and guide her.
- The early years of motherhood, with Barrack now a Senator, are challenging. Michelle is in the shadows. As Barrack gains attention and begins his campaign for the presidency, she knows she has to work to find her own voice, and to create her own agenda as First Lady.
- Michelle’s mother has many Shoulds for Michelle, as many parents do.
- How do we navigate our way among the Shoulds? Question what you know. There are Shoulds that we are born into and other Shoulds we create from our own insecurities and experiences.
- Our Shoulds can keep us stuck. Many women say, “I should be happy with what I have.” I should be happy making the money that I am making. For Michelle’s parents, that generation is conscious of money. For the next generation, the money is steady, but they are concerned more about where you go to school.

Related Resources

- Laura Mendelow’s [blog](#)
- [The Should Syndrome](#) site theshouldsyndrome.com (Book excerpt, activity sheets)

*The Chesapeake Bay Organizational Development Network (CBODN) Book Club is a monthly session, open to all learners. Each month, a presenter shares highlights from a book related to leadership, business, or coaching. There’s no obligation to pre-read the book. The session summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. [Register here](#) for upcoming events. For a listing of Book Club summaries, [click here](#).