

The tragedy of should

T. T. SRINATH

When I was a child, perhaps till when I was 12 or 13, my mother would tell me that I should drink my milk, that I should complete my home work, and so on. I would silently rebel and attempt to sabotage her efforts to get me to do what she wanted.

She would ask me why I was being adamant as what she was telling me was for my well-being. This, I now realise, was her well-meaning intent, and yet, as a youngster, I fought her off.

While I did not know then that my rebellion came from 'feeling' forced, I recognise now it was also because she had used the word 'should', whose meaning I did not know, but struck me, I reckon, as being forced on me with little choice. As I now work with people, I am able to notice discomfort when I tell them that they 'should'. A teacher of mine, himself very adept at communication, said, "If you use the phrase 'you should', you are in effect commanding the other to do so, and leaving them feeling that they have no choice. Try, therefore, to replace the phrase 'you should' with 'you could'." When I tried this once in a workshop, and asked participants which of the two phrases they preferred, all of them without exception said 'you could'. They felt respected, involved and responsible when I said 'you could'.

Therefore, when we want someone to do something that we are prescribing, we should be able to make them think and feel that they are agreeing to our request not out of compulsion, but out of choice; it is most likely that they will then accede to our request.

The challenge for each one of us, when relating to another, is for us to not coerce but request and "Could you?" is a way of doing so..

(The writer is an organisational and behavioural consultant. He can be contacted at ttsrinath@vsnl.net)