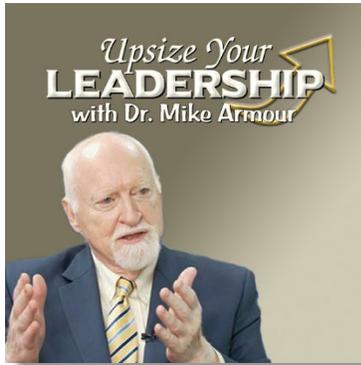


What Happened to Accountability?

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With today's program I'm starting a new series centered on the subject of accountability. In the event you haven't noticed, personal accountability seems to be in dwindling supply. And no one recognizes this trend more than leaders and managers. They must contend far too often with accountability issues among employees, suppliers, and even customers.

In upcoming episodes – I don't know exactly how many yet – I'm going to delve into the meaning of accountability and examine contributing factors which are serving to undermine it. And throughout I will be highlighting the implications for those of us who are in leadership roles.

Not the least of these implications is the need for us as leaders to become exemplars of accountability ourselves, to model the way for our people and for those who look to us for leadership. We cannot realistically expect our people to act more accountably than we do as their leaders.

Moreover, wherever you lead or manage, exemplifying accountability thoroughly, consistently, and courageously is one of the surest ways to upsize your leadership.

For us as leaders, diminished accountability should be a matter of grave concern. And I use the word "grave" literally, not metaphorically. The death knell for any human community is lost accountability.

Nowhere is this better understood than in the military. The reliability, resilience, and effectiveness of any fighting unit correlates directly to the strength of personal accountability within its culture. This principle proves true as far back as we can trace the performance of elite warrior groups, like the Spartan warriors defending the pass at Thermopylae in ancient Greece.

But the essential link between accountability and cultural resilience is true not merely for military communities. It holds equally true for any community which must stand as one, whatever the challenge. The emphasis on accountability is simply more visible in fighting forces, so that principles of accountability from the military are particularly instructive.

One such principle is that leaders are accountable for embodying the virtues and ideals of their organization. They must be exemplars of proper behavior. The military takes this expectation so seriously that it removes or discharges even senior commanders for what is called "conduct

unbecoming an officer.” It comes as no surprise, therefore, that accountability permeates the training of officers from day one.

To illustrate, I would point to the coat of arms at the U. S. Military Academy at West Point. The Academy adopted this insignia in the 1890s, and it still symbolizes the institution today. Its design was finalized over several years, with every element carefully chosen. Particular care went into the choice of three words emblazoned near the top. “Duty. Honor. Country.”

These words are not a mere slogan. They are a mantra which has shaped generations of American military leaders. And they were famously celebrated in one of the most stirring speeches in American history, an address to cadets at West Point on May 12, 1962 by General Douglas MacArthur. He referred to them as “these hallowed words.” Their purpose, he said, was to “reverently dictate what you ought to be, what you can be, what you will be.”

All three words imply accountability. Pervasive, personal accountability.

- Duty – being accountable to our commitments.
- Honor – being accountable to the principles that we cherish.
- Country – being accountable to the community on which our security, safety, and well-being depend.

The lesson I take from this is that leaders should sit in judgment on their own accountability first, and only then on the accountability of their people. I’ve coached and trained thousands of managers and executives. They often speak of their frustration with workers who seem less than serious about accountability. Yet I rarely hear leaders critique their own accountability. Perhaps that’s mere coincidence. But I sometimes fear it’s not. When we see national leaders shirking their accountability, it should come as no surprise if the same malady affects other levels of leadership.

With that said, let me turn now from leadership accountability to personal accountability in general. In military life, reminders of personal accountability are on every turn. In civilian life, they are less frequent, but present, nonetheless. Accountability is implied in our Pledge of Allegiance. On sports teams it’s captured in the phrase, “One for all and all for one.” It’s likewise acknowledged when we take an oath of office or the oath to serve on a jury.

Life therefore surrounds us with reminders of accountability. But how many of us take them seriously? Do they genuinely serve to remind us? Or have they become little more than a formality which does little to reinforce accountability?

When I talk to people over 40 or 50, almost none believes that accountability is as strong today as it was two generations ago. Indeed, most of them feel that overall accountability is in steep decline.

Personally, I’m inclined to agree. I know for a fact that I’m far less trusting in social and financial interactions than I was in my twenties and thirties. Some of this caution, of course, stems from age. I’ve lived long enough to wise up about a few things that I need to watch out for. But that hardly explains the extent to which I’m highly guarded in day-to-day activities. And sadly, as guarded as I myself am, many of my friends and colleagues, both young and old, are even more so.

Such guardedness points to an erosion of trust, which does not bode well for America as a whole. Trust is the glue which holds any society together. Indeed, trust was probably the first social value which humans developed. Primitive societies depended on hunters who would venture from the village for days on end in search of game. These bands of hunters were willing to embark on these hunts because they trusted the villagers back home to take care of their families and property while they were away.

Social trust, then, is the foundation of human culture. And the cornerstone of social trust is personal accountability. For social trust to prevail, we must be confident that others around us hold themselves accountable to what the community values.

Thus, the more personal accountability erodes, the weaker social trust becomes. And the weaker our social trust, the weaker the fabric of our society. A downward trajectory in personal accountability is an early warning signal that social disintegration is in the making.

And note how often I've used the phrase "personal accountability." I do so because I want to distinguish personal accountability from *interpersonal* accountability. Both are important. But the starting point for interpersonal accountability is the practice of holding ourselves individually accountable. Unless I personally hold myself accountable, there is no means of assuring that I will consistently treat others in a manner consistent with community ideals.

Those words emblazoned on the West Point shield – duty, honor, country – all presume personal accountability. Yet practiced collectively throughout the corps, personal accountability solidifies interpersonal accountability and creates a robust, unified community.

This, then, raises a pivotal question. If accountability is indeed in decline, why? What undermined it? What changed to trigger this dilemma in our society? In a word, we're asking, "Who should be held accountable for us losing accountability?"

The unpleasant truth is, we've all contributed to the decline in accountability. Some much more than others, to be sure. But few of us have done our utmost to stem the general erosion of accountability. For several generations, now, we've drifted along with social, political, and legal trends which have cumulatively undermined a widespread ethos of accountability.

And as with many things, the problem begins at home. No one is born self-accountable. Accountability must be learned. We come into this world as very self-centered, self-focused, self-defending creatures. Nothing is our fault. Someone else is always to blame. We feel no innate responsibility for our actions. We therefore have no sense of personal accountability. Learning to feel responsible – and therefore accountable – must be instilled. And a primary function of the family is to instill it.

But families can easily falter in this regard. You see, alongside a sense of accountability, families must also instill a sense of self-worth in a child. Why? Because accountability and a sense of self-worth form a synergistic bond in healthy adults. Since the connection between these two may not be immediately apparent, bear with me for a moment as I explain.

Forty years ago, a noted psychologist made a telling observation about self-worth. Two types of children, he said, are destined to struggle with self-worth issues in adulthood. The first are children who are never allowed to succeed. The second are those who are never allowed to fail.

In the first instance, no matter how well a child performs – even in routine matters – parents or siblings do little to celebrate the accomplishment. They may not even celebrate it at all. Instead, they point out flaws in the performance.

He illustrated the dynamic in such families with a striking example. He described a young preschooler who draws a picture of her dad and runs to show it to him. But rather than praise her thoughtfulness and creativity, he asks, “Why did you draw me with six fingers?” The child had run to her dad, a smile on her face, proud of having done her best. But the smile is now gone, along with her good feelings inside. Her best was not good enough.

Children raised in this kind of environment never learn to feel good about themselves based on what they have accomplished. They enter adulthood with little sense that their capability or potential is worthwhile. Their sense of self-worth is impoverished.

The second group – the ones who are never allowed to fail – are surrounded by a family which always rushes in to rescue them. To complete their unfinished projects. To make excuses for them whenever they underperform, violate norms, or fall short of reasonable expectations. The so-called “helicopter parents” of recent years are stereotypical manifestations of this family dynamic.

Children growing up in such circumstances have few opportunities to learn resilience in the face of disappointing setbacks. Yet, adulthood will confront them with setbacks aplenty. It’s inevitable. And having never learned how to tap into personal resilience, they are poised to crumble in the face of adversity.

I cite these two scenarios because they dramatically demonstrate a dynamic which weaves its way through all childhood development. In the formative years of life, we must not only learn accountability. We must also develop an inherent sense of self-worth.

In the first months of life, we feel good about ourselves largely on the basis of how others treat us. When I’m hungry, do they feed me? When I’m dirty, do they clean me up? When I’m frightened, do they comfort me? If the answer is “yes,” I develop a sense of security that governs my relationship with the world. I conclude that the world values me. And with this sense of security, a feeling of self-worth begins to unfold.

So, let me answer the question which you may be asking yourself. “Why this foray into child psychology? I thought we were talking about accountability.” And so we are. But I would argue that there is a profound relationship between childhood development and self-accountability.

My thesis is this: a strong sense of accountability depends on a healthy, underlying sense of self-worth. If I don’t have a deep conviction that I’m capable, that I can make worthwhile contributions to the world, that my actions can have lasting and telling impact, I don’t tend to hold myself accountable. After all, how can I be held accountable for making a difference which is entirely beyond my capacity?

Now, I’m not saying that people are consciously aware that they use this rationale for being unaccountable. It’s merely an outlook on life which sprouts naturally from poor self-worth.

And notice that I keep using the term “self-worth,” not “self-esteem.” Even though people commonly use these two phrases interchangeably, they point to entirely different aspects of our existence. They even function in two different domains of our being.

Self-worth makes its home in the affective domain, that part of our being which houses our deepest values, our deepest motivations. As its name implies, self-worth is a value judgment which we make about ourselves. It's the product of the combined answers to three questions:

- Is there any value to who I am?
- Is there any value to what I do?
- Is there any value to what I may become?

In other words, self-worth encapsulates how we feel about who we are.

By contrast, self-esteem resides in the cognitive domain, the portion of our being where we make judgments and where we process thoughts, beliefs, and rationales. Self-esteem centers on how we think about ourselves, the image which we have of ourselves. The image which we try to project of ourselves.

In most cases, a low sense of self-worth goes hand-in-hand with low self-esteem. But not always. I've known scores of people who had tremendous self-esteem, but terrible self-worth. In fact, their self-esteem was so strong, that to the casual observer, the low self-worth was masked from view.

Some of these people have been high-functioning executives whom I've coached or consulted in the corporate world. Even with inadequate self-worth, they had gone quite far in life with highly-energized self-esteem.

And because people like this want to be esteemed highly by others, they make every effort to appear responsible and accountable. They meet deadlines on schedule. They follow through on promises. They stay within the guidelines. But this is what I like to call "micro-accountability" – the accountability which we demonstrate when we are under an observer's microscope. For people like this, the deep desire to "look good" to others sufficiently motivates them to act accountably when under observation.

By contrast, there is a much broader realm of accountability, to which I ascribe the name "macro-accountability." This is my term for that sense of accountability which governs our actions when they are not on open display.

Macro-accountability is rooted, not so much in self-esteem, but in self-worth. Our sense of wholesale accountability will never be stronger than our sense of self-worth. And heaven knows, we have a crisis of self-worth in the world today. If nothing else, the levels of suicide and drug addiction bear telling witness to this crisis, especially among the younger cohorts of our communities.

To resolve the general accountability crisis, then, we must simultaneously address the self-worth crisis. What has changed in the last half-century to give rise to it? That's a question I'll take up in the next episode. And alongside it, we will examine the cultural forces at work which war against an embedded sense of accountability. I look forward to that conversation with you.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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