

# Lead by Modeling Accountability

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

## Episode 79

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For the last three episodes, we have taken a deep dive into a troubling problem in American culture: a declining commitment to personal accountability. Thus far we've primarily asked the question, "What has created this loss of accountability? What are the contributing factors?"

Some listeners might question whether we really needed to spend three programs analyzing the root causes of this loss. Three programs might seem like overkill. But I had a clear reason for choosing this course. I wanted to show that lost accountability will not be easily or quickly overcome. The underlying causes are simply too numerous and powerful. At

the outset, therefore, I wanted to be sure that we did not underestimate the complexity of the problem.

Now that we've made that point, it's time to move to a second question: What is our role as leaders in restoring a broader and deeper sense of personal accountability? That's the theme that I take up today and in remaining programs in this series. I'm not going to talk in terms of wholesale solutions for reasons I will outline shortly. Instead, my focus will be on countermeasures – specific things which leaders can do to raise the level of accountability in circles where they hold influence.

None of these countermeasures constitutes a quick fix. Their success will require a deep resolve on the part of leaders to improve accountability through sustained effort. They must therefore make a firm determination to stick with this task long term, with patience and consistency.

There's an old adage, "Rome wasn't built in a day." Neither was it destroyed in a day. From a population of one million under the Caesars, it was reduced to about 30,000 people by the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It was destroyed, little by little, as one wave of invaders after another swept in from the north and east. Eventually the city would rebuild itself. But Rome wasn't rebuilt in a day.

Neither will the level of accountability which you and I want to restore in American culture. As the earlier podcasts in this series have shown, accountability didn't deteriorate in a day. And like Rome, it will not be rebuilt in a day. The task at hand calls for long-term enlistments. If you're ready to sign up, then the message in today's podcast will help you upsize your leadership.

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I'm inviting you today to join a counteroffensive to regain the ground which personal accountability has lost in our culture. As a retired naval officer with a graduate degree in military history, I've studied scores of counteroffensives. Some of them begin as full-bore, massive assaults. Others are launched quietly, subtly, and with no fanfare.

Reality being what it is, I'm suggesting that our counteroffensive should take this second approach. We will be going up against social, political, and cultural trends which are so entrenched that they will easily rebuff a full-blown frontal attack. No, our counteroffensive to restore substantive personal accountability must start quietly, here and there, as individual leaders and managers commit to it. Thousands of these local initiatives, taken up independently, can collectively – and over time – have the cumulative effect of putting a firmer footing under personal accountability.

As a leader, if you enlist in this counteroffensive, I suggest that you begin in a low-key manner. My recommendations today have nothing to do with joining some highly-organized, well-orchestrated movement whose mission is to restore a higher state of personal accountability on a broad scale. No, I'm encouraging you to become a guerilla fighter, operating with no more than a small band of allies. Here's the reason.

People who are highly accountable did not develop that trait by participating in a mass movement. They learned it from close relationships with people whose opinions they respected. In their family. In a peer group. From a scoutmaster. From a favorite schoolteacher. From a childhood mentor. From a meaningful hero whom they idolized.

If that's how we learned accountability in our formative years, then it stands to reason that learning greater accountability in adulthood must take a similar course. If you have only a remote connection with someone, your odds of helping them be more accountable are slim at best.

Your odds are much greater if you concentrate on enhancing accountability in a circle which already relates to you. For you as a leader, it's the circle which most frequently interacts with you and looks to you for leadership.

This means that in a multi-layered management system, you should target the primary thrust of your counteroffensive at only a small segment of the organization chart – fundamentally, those who are no more than two tiers below you. Beyond that point (or so I've observed), your effectiveness in effecting change in people falls off sharply. Your relationship with them is too thin and your interaction with them too infrequent for you to have the kind of impact which can enhance their accountability.

This doesn't mean that you don't talk about accountability or build the case for it in broader circles. It simply means that you should devote your most intense efforts in the counteroffensive to a more immediate sphere of influence.

Now, before we go further, let me map the road ahead. In the length of a single podcast episode, I can't do justice to how leaders should conduct their offensive. We took three episodes to survey the factors which have undermined accountability. I intend to be equally measured in how I map the counterattack. There's too much at stake for me to take any other course.

With that said, where should you start? My answer may sound trite. It's a piece of counsel that's tossed around so often and with so little substance that, for many, it's now little more than a catch phrase. But here we go anyway. Your first order of business is to model the way.

Why is modeling the way so vital? Because of how we are wired from birth to learn. We've all heard the old saying that imitation is the highest form of flattery. It's also the primary way in which we develop new patterns of behavior. As toddlers and children, we acquired new abilities by imitating what we saw in others. What's easily overlooked is that we still do the same in adulthood.

Think of how you respond when you find yourself confronted with an unfamiliar situation, yet one which calls for immediate action. For me, I've encountered many occasions like this while traveling abroad. Especially in remote areas of Asia and Africa. Perhaps I've been invited to speak at a special dinner event. The meal placed in front of me is a local cuisine which I've never seen before. I'm not sure what it is. And I have no idea how to eat it. Is it a finger food? Do I cut it with a knife? Do I dip it in some sort of sauce? I'm at a loss as to what I should do. And being seated visibly at the head table, whatever I choose will hardly go unnoticed.

So, what do I do? I react precisely the way that you probably would. I wait and watch those who are familiar with the dish take their first bites. I study them closely, then do my best to follow their lead. In a word, I look for someone to model the way, someone I can imitate. That's how we learn new ways of doing things.

Or let me use another personal example. As a professional speaker, my style of delivery is an extension of my personality. Yet, interspersed in my style are various elements which I've copied from teachers and speakers who have made a lasting impression on me. For instance, one of them relates a gripping story, and I am struck by the way that she structures it. I therefore incorporate something of the same structure into my own story-telling technique. Later I'm captivated by how another speaker wraps up his presentation. He packages his conclusion in an unforgettable way. The next time that I deliver a speech, I opt for a wrap-up patterned along the same lines.

When I utilize someone else's techniques in speech after speech, the techniques soon become part of my personality. Thus, my persona as a speaker is a unique blend of native ability and mannerisms which I've incorporated from role models.

One renowned thinker – no other than Einstein himself – went so far as to say, “Example isn't another way to teach. It's the only way to teach.” His contemporary Albert Schweitzer said something similar: “Example is not the main thing in influencing others,” he noted. “It is the only thing.”

Modeling the way has numerous unique benefits. For people who learn best by watching (which is most of us), it shows them specifically what to do and how to do it. Most importantly, it builds credibility and trust in you as a leader. People believe what they see more than they believe what they hear. When you encourage accountability, then consistently model the behavior which you encourage, you validate the genuineness and authenticity of your words.

So, first model the way. But what exactly does that mean? Let's explore that question for a moment, shall we?

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Modeling the way begins with candid and forthright self-assessment. For purposes of our counteroffensive, this self-assessment should pose questions like this. To what degree are my actions presently consistent with a high sense of accountability? Do I meet deadlines as a matter of course? Do I routinely honor commitments within the timeframe which I promised? Can people count on me to be timely in responding to their inquiries or requests? Do I openly accept responsibility for oversights which I make? When I invite feedback, do I genuinely listen to it? Have I overcome being defensive when people question my decisions?

Unless you can answer questions like these with a resounding “Yes!”, there’s work to do before you can model accountability. Perhaps considerable work. You may be prepared to talk about accountability. But you’re not yet prepared to model it.

Second, be highly visible with your people. Before they can learn from you as a role model, they must regularly observe you in action. I’ve coached a number of executives who were such introverts that they buried themselves in their offices for hours on end. And not just occasionally, but every day. Their people rarely interacted with them on a personal level. If workers learned anything from their example, it was to hunker down and make themselves inaccessible.

Third, to be an effective role model, you must identify what you want to exemplify precisely. You can’t model every desired behavior. You can’t be visible to your people every moment of the day. Thus, in the limited time that they can observe you directly, what are the most important things for you to model?

To answer this question, begin by asking another one: what leads me to believe that we need more accountability around here? What is it that I’ve seen people doing? What have I heard people saying? What counterproductive attitudes have I seen on display?

Write out what comes to mind. And you may want to keep your list open for a few days to capture other things which only come to mind later.

Once the list is complete, evaluate each item individually by asking how much it truly concerns you. I suggest this criterion, because you have challenging work ahead of you. And we are most likely to stick with challenging endeavors when we are tackling something which concerns us deeply.

Next, force-rank the items according to your concerns, from the most concerning to the least. In military parlance, you now have an order of battle. The lion’s share of your counteroffensive should target the issues of greatest concern.

Now, surveying these top-ranking issues, ask yourself, “Where can I be a better or more visible role model in mitigating these concerns?” Then determine specifically what you want to exemplify and how you can do it. If you’re going to effect greater accountability in your people, what attitudes and behaviors are most important for them to see in you?

Once you start thinking of yourself as a role model for particular behaviors in specific settings, you will experience a transforming effect. In those settings you will be exceptionally conscientious about practicing these behaviors in a stellar manner. You will be on your “very best behavior,” as we say. And it will happen naturally, almost without prompting.

For example, I find that I do my very best training when I’m conducting a class on how to be a good trainer. I know everyone in the room is measuring what I say against my delivery and how

I run the class. They are watching to see if I walk my talk. In situations like this, I'm not merely a trainer. I'm a role model. And very aware of it.

Before I leave this point, however, let me sound a loud warning. Your role model behavior must never be an act. It must be a legitimate manifestation of how you behave, whether others are watching or not. Otherwise, the pretense will eventually betray you and you will lose your credibility as a leader.

I'm not saying that you must perfect a behavior before you model it. After all, how do we perfect behaviors? By practicing them regularly and repeatedly. But when you present yourself as a model, it must never be an act, put on for show. It should always be an extension of who you are or what you're striving to become. In all things, be guided by the wise counsel of Mahatma Gandhi, who said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

Well, I think I'll just leave things at this point for today. Before we visit again, spend time doing a thorough assessment of how well you model accountability. Follow the step-by-step exercise which I outlined moments ago. See what perspectives this exercise might open to you. And do this even if you already give yourself high marks as a role-model of accountability.

I've always been amused by how Vince Lombardi began pre-season workouts with the Green Bay Packers. He stood before a room of professional athletes, held up a football, and declared in his most authoritative voice, "Gentlemen, this is a football." He then proceeded to reiterate the fundamentals of the game.

What he was saying, in effect, was, "No matter how professional you are, from time to time it's extremely worthwhile to go back to basics." And there is nothing more basic in leadership than leading by example.

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