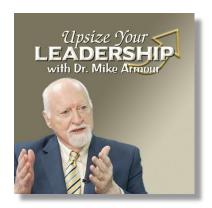# Dwindling Accountability
Contributing Factors
Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

Episode 77

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This is my second podcast in a series on personal accountability. The series grows out of a conversation which I overhear with greater and greater frequency. It's a conversation about what people see as a broad decline in accountability. If their perception is correct, what are the contributing factors? And as leaders, what implications do these factors have for us as we seek to gain responsible, engaged commitment from our people?

In the previous episode, I made no secret that I'm inclined to side with those who believe that accountability is dwindling. And I took the stance that historically, the family has been where a child's sense of personal accountability was instilled.

One reason for our dwindling accountability, I would argue, is the eroding stability of the American family for at least three generations. Over that period of time, the fabric of both marriage and family has steadily grown weaker and more frayed. In a moment, I will share up-to-date statistics which validate my point.

After decades of working with broken families in various church ministries, I'm convinced that it's particularly difficult for children to learn healthy, personal accountability when they grow up in an unstable, dysfunctional family. More on that shortly.

But first, let me tee up today's topic by returning to a point which I made at the end of the last podcast, a point which deserves further clarification. Then, we will examine several factors – not just family instability – which aggravate problems with accountability in our culture. In this one program, time will limit how many of these contributing factors I can address. Therefore, I will take up additional ones in the next episode.

And how are such topics relevant to a podcast on leadership? In more ways than you might imagine. Almost daily I'm in conversation with leaders who express their frustration with the lack of accountability which they confront regularly in the workplace. They can't make sense of it. As a result, they are at a loss as how to counter it.

My hope is that this series of podcasts will help all of us gain more insight into why the sense of personal accountability seems to be in marked retreat. Once we recognize the root causes, we are better equipped to respond proactively, constructively, and with more understanding to co-workers and employees whose level of personal accountability leaves much to be desired. Just

gaining such understanding and insight can be instrumental in helping you upsize your leadership.

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I concluded last week's podcast by talking about the connection which I see between weak personal accountability and a low sense of self-worth. After the podcast aired, I reviewed it online to verify the final technical quality. As I listened, I realized that I should have been a bit more explicit in explaining how accountability and self-worth are connected. So, I want to begin today by expanding a bit on that relationship.

First, in the event that you've not yet heard the previous podcast, let me briefly restate the perspective on self-worth which I offered. Even though people commonly use the terms "self-worth" and "self-esteem" synonymously, they are not the same. They find their source in two different aspects of our existence.

Self-esteem is rooted in what I THINK about myself. Self-worth is rooted in how I FEEL about myself. Self-esteem is a product of what psychology describes as the cognitive domain. That's where we analyze, reason, and perform computations, among other things. Self-worth stems from the affective domain, the emotional, motivational, and subjective side of our being. As its name implies, self-worth embodies the value judgments which we make about ourselves. It fundamentally answers the core question, "Do I feel that I have genuine worth?"

In answering this pivotal question, we weigh our answer to three other critical 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?

The first is a question about my Personhood. The second about my Productivity. The third about my Potential.

You will hear more about these three questions in a later podcast. They have major implications for leadership. They play a determinative role in how best to lead people who lack proper accountability due to inadequate self-worth.

For now, our focus is on the baseline connection between self-worth and accountability. I could explain the connection in a variety of ways. In the interest of time, let me restrict myself to a single illustration. And to do so, let me turn to that first question, "Is there any value to who I am?" In terms of accountability, it is the most consequential of the three questions. I've reached this conclusion based on close observation of people over 23 years of coaching, and before that, an even longer period in pastoral counseling.

Here's what I've seen. When adversity strikes, the people best equipped to handle it are those who have a resonating conviction that there is value to who they are. In general, they fare far better than people who view their self-worth primarily, if not exclusively, on their performance or potential. Here's why.

When self-worth is anchored in the value of who we are as a person, our self-worth remains in tack when we mess up. Even when we mess up royally. Messing up takes nothing away from

the value of who we are. We are therefore much freer to acknowledge our mistakes, accept responsibility for them, learn valuable lessons from them, and move promptly to corrective action. In a word, we maximize our freedom to act accountably.

Contrast this to people struggle to believe that they, as a person, have inherent worth. They tend to stake their self-worth on their performance. As a result, how they perform – and importantly, how others perceive their performance – is absolutely vital. Thus, they must do everything possible to keep their reputation for performance in good repair.

When they mess up, their first instinct is to protect that reputation. They turn immediately to shifting the blame. Scape-goating. Pointing the finger at others. Pleading that some unpreventable or uncontrollable circumstance created the problem. The last thing that they can afford to do is to accept responsibility for what happened. They therefore evade accountability.

With that explanation, I hope you have a clearer picture of how self-worth and personal-accountability are linked together Healthy self-worth sets the stage for healthy accountability.

And since childhood family experiences are pivotal in shaping our self-worth, let's take a quick look at how family-life realities today impact value formation in children. To do so, I start with a story. I had not originally planned to tell it. In fact, I've not thought of it in years. But as I was outlining this podcast, it suddenly popped to mind.

The story occurred 30 years ago on a flight from Atlanta to New York. Two women – mid-level executives – were seated directly behind me, conversing about a variety of things. The one seated nearest the window was talking so loudly that no one nearby could ignore her comments.

She was railing (that's the only word for it) at the principal of her child's school. The principal had asked for a parent conference, at which he told her forthrightly that her daughter was regularly misbehaving in the classroom and on the playground. He had urged the mother to help her child learn to become more responsible and accountable.

The woman had found this advice outrageous. To my surprise, she did not blindly defend the child's misconduct. Given her anger, that's what I might have expected. Instead, she turned her fury on the principal. "It's not my job to teach my daughter accountability," she said. "That's the school's job. I'm a busy executive. I'm flying all over the country. I pay my school taxes for that blankety-blank principal and his school staff to teach my daughter how to act. I don't have time for that. And I'm not about to do their job for them."

I've rarely overheard a more unbelievable conversation. Yet, as she continued, I gradually realized that she was not actually angry with the principal. She was frustrated to high heaven with the pressure of being a single mom in a high-demand profession, living on the verge of exhaustion most of the time. She was angry at her situation. She was simply venting her anger at the principal.

How many other children are being raised by a parent who knows this frustration first hand? In 2022, the number of children in the U.S. living with single parents numbered 18 million. Fifteen million with single moms. Three million with single fathers. That same year, the average length of a first-marriage was eight years. The average length of second marriages was only slightly better. Ten years.

To put it mildly, our culture is awash with broken homes. And children, caught powerlessly in the chaos of this brokenness, can do nothing to heal it. Yet, they suffer immeasurably from its consequences. Right out of college, I began working as a youth minister. Dealing daily with children from broken homes, I was appalled at how many blamed themselves for their family's breakup. They would say things like, "If my parents had not needed to support me, they would not have been fighting all the time about money." Illogical? Of course! But unfortunately, the child took it as fact. Now, imagine what this kind of self-blame does to the child's sense of self-worth. How can there be value to who I am if my mere presence in our home caused my family to disintegrate?

Back in those days of youth ministry, I heard a wise authority on family life say, "If you want to raise good, dependable, responsible kids, it only takes three things: a nice, predictable Mommy and a nice, predictable Daddy who like one another." And he emphasized that all of these qualifiers – nice, predictable, and liking each other – were absolutely essential. Sadly, we are in a world which produces fewer and fewer families which fit that bill.

So, what happens when these children with a damaged sense of self-worth enter adulthood? If they've not learned a high-sense of self-worth and accountability in their upbringing, is there any chance that they can become truly accountable adults? Happily, I can answer "yes." I've seen it happen time and again. It's not necessarily easy. But neither is it uncommon.

Later in this series, when we turn to our role as leaders in helping people become more accountable, we will devote time to the part leaders can play in helping people who are making this very transition. As I said, however, the transition is not particularly easy. Our world surrounds us with influences which discourage accountability rather than encouraging it.

One of these influences is the rapid expansion of a "victimhood" mentality. The last half of the twentieth century saw a steady proliferation of victim advocacy groups. Initially, their focus was on victims of profound neglect, profound abuse, or extreme tragedy. Support for such causes was almost universal. Today the U.S. outdistances all other nations combined in terms of non-profit organizations which underwrite care for victims.

But like many well-intended efforts, this one attracted certain followers who took the underlying intent to unhealthy extremes. They found more and more ways to classify people as victims. At times today, it seems that everyone is some type of victim. And the more you enlarge a victimhood mindset, the more you downplay responsibility and accountability. After all, how can we hold victims accountable for what happens to them or what transpires at their hands?

As a result, people wanting to escape the consequences of irresponsible actions have increasingly resorted to playing the victim card. And their defenders did the same. Just last month, after hundreds of teens rioted in Chicago, committing wholesale property damage and theft, the city's new mayor described them as "victims." He made no mention of the true victims, such as the shop owners whose stores were wrecked and looted by the teenage mob. When everybody is a victim, is it any wonder that accountability is dwindling?

Another factor which undercuts accountability is explosive urbanization. By and large, people live today in massive expanses of unbroken population. The result is a distinct sense of anonymity. In the course of the day, I see very few people whom I recognize or who recognize me. To them, I'm nothing more than another nameless face in the crowd, just as they are to me. Neither of us feels an interpersonal connection with the other. It therefore becomes easy to

divorce myself from responsibility for what happens around me. If a problem develops, someone else in the crowd will surely step forward and take care of it.

I grew up in a small farming community. Slightly more than 4000 people. You didn't live there very long before you knew or recognized just about everyone in town.

In my senior year of high school, on a beautiful Saturday afternoon, a tornado dropped out of the sky without warning. It swept across the entire downtown area, seriously damaging or destroying 85 homes and commercial buildings. I watched the entire thing through the south windows of the public library where I was researching a homework assignment.

As soon as debris quit falling from the sky, I rushed out of the building to a major grocery store just two blocks away. Several of my teenage friends worked there as sackers and stockers. I had watched the entire roof lift off of that building. Knowing that the store had been jammed with Saturday afternoon shoppers, I could envision my friends or dozens of neighbors and acquaintances trapped under fallen walls, shelves, or merchandise.

I was one of the first would-be rescuers to arrive on the scene. But within moments, dozens of others joined in. In no time at all, it seemed that the entire town was on the streets, looking for people to help.

I contrast that moment to what happens in the urban area which I've called home for the past 40 years. Over that time period, the region has experienced its share of destructive tornadoes. But rescue efforts are inevitably hampered by a caravan of gawkers who soon show up, not to assist, but simply to drive through and look at the damage. They feel no responsibility to stop and help. They are just there to satisfy their curiosity. In a word, urbanization tends to desensitize us to the plight of others who are not part of our immediate circle.

In addition, massive urbanization and rapid transportation mean that people increasingly work at major distances from where they live. They don't identify with the intervening neighborhoods. Their strongest identification is usually with the neighborhood in which they live and shop. They may also identify somewhat with the neighborhood where they work. But neighborhoods in between are more or less drive-through country. Or pass-through country, if they ride a commuter train. There's little or no sense of responsibility toward these neighborhoods. Thus, when calamity strikes one of them, people show up in mass to gawk, not necessarily to be neighborly.

Such a world dulls our feeling of responsibility to others. And where feelings of responsibility are blunted, the sense of accountability likewise recedes.

We've by no means exhausted the list of social influences which work at odds with accountability. In the interest of time, however, we will postpone other items on the list until our next program. Then we will follow with episodes on what leaders can do to reverse the trend of dwindling accountability. I look forward to sharing those perspectives 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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