Accountability
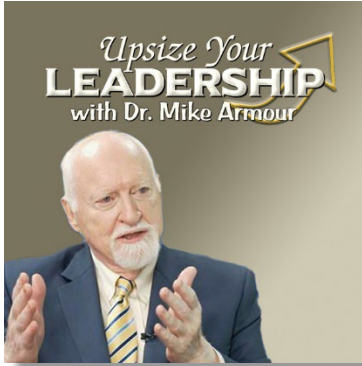## Is It in Retreat?

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

Episode 78

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This is the third program in a series on the broad recognition that personal accountability is declining in American culture. The episodes thus far have focused on social, political, and family trends which have given us a world in which personal accountability seems to be in retreat.

Today I will wrap up that analysis, then move next time to how we as leaders can best respond in light of this decline. To this point, I've paid attention to three factors which have contributed to receding accountability: first, the side-effects of family breakdown; second, the growth of a victim mentality; and third, massive urbanization.

In this program I want to add three more factors to our list. Even then I will not have exhausted the possible inventory of cultural tendences which weaken our sense of accountability. For our present purposes, however, these six factors will adequately demonstrate the debilitating forces with which accountability must contend.

And once you recognize the adverse impact of these forces on accountability, you can design leadership approaches which counter their influence more effectively. Enhanced accountability makes every function in a company more impactful. Thus, anything you do to shore up accountability in your organization is sure to Upsize Your Leadership.

Some will be joining this podcast, I know, without having the benefit of the first two episodes in this series. Let me start, therefore, by briefly recounting our conversation thus far. In the first two episodes I've underscored the importance of instilling a sense of accountability in children. And I've stressed the vital and historic role of a child's home in fulfilling that mission. In record numbers, however, children now grow up in broken or dysfunctional homes. And homes in disarray have a poor track record of producing children with a healthy sense of accountability.

Then, last week we looked at the victim mentality which has taken root in recent years. Increasingly, people excuse their misconduct or irresponsibility by claiming to be a victim. Yet, the more extensive the victim mentality, the less robust the sense of personal accountability.

And we concluded last week by looking at how a century of relentless urbanization has produced a widespread feeling of social anonymity. We know very few of the people we

encounter on a typical day, and they likewise do not know us. There is no sense of relationship between us. Unfortunately, this very anonymity easily gives rise to indifference toward one another. And this indifference yields a minimal sense of accountability for how our actions or inaction produce harm or neglect.

Let's now add a fourth factor to our list – a major factor. I'm speaking of political polarization. As a historian by training, I tend to look at contemporary events against the backdrop of decades past, sometimes centuries past. And when I do that, it's apparent that our nation is more polarized today than it has ever been in its history. That's not to say that we haven't had times of sharp polarization before. After all, it's hard to imagine any greater polarization than what led to the Civil War. But polarization today has taken on a different stripe.

Until recently, polarization tended to center around a single issue. Slavery. The gold standard. Women's suffrage. In the early twentieth century, the war in Europe. Two decades later, another war in Europe. Then, the struggle over civil rights and integration, followed shortly by horrendous rifts about the Vietnam War.

Today, however, political polarization no longer attaches itself to one or two issues. It latches on to a myriad of them. Resolving one issue does nothing to reduce the polarization around a dozen others. And technology now makes it a simple matter for each side to harness the power of mass communication to keep its loyalists agitated and stirred up against the opposing side. The net result is broad distrust of anyone who takes a position contrary to our own. Unfortunately, humans find it difficult to maintain a high sense of responsibility or duty toward those whom they distrust. In settings like ours, duty, responsibility, and accountability take a beating.

In our long history of polarizing developments, one of the most unique moments has been the COVID experience. Historically, with the exception of the Civil War, wholesale national challenges have served to unite us. Not at first, to be sure. But repeatedly, we have emerged from severe national challenges more united than we were when we stepped into them.

The Second World War is a striking example. After the wholesale death and destruction of the First World War, followed by the national trauma of the Great Depression, there was rampant opposition to engaging in another war between major powers. But once we were attacked, both sides of the political divide found a way to join hands and do what was necessary to win. As a result, we came out of the conflict far more united than when we entered it. This has been the prevailing pattern throughout our history.

That is, until COVID. We are exiting the COVID experience even more polarized than when it began. Distrust of government decision-making increased markedly during COVID. Trust in the medical profession took a severe bruising. And any effort to find middle ground on divisive issues came under an immediate artillery barrage from partisans on both sides. We are more divided now than we were before most of us even knew the term COVID.

Polarization engenders animosity, not mutual responsibility. As a result, polarized atmospheres lend minimal support to the cause of mutual accountability. There's little sympathy when tragedy befalls someone on the other side of our polarized divide. In fact, gloating is more likely than genuine sympathy.

As I was stepping into adulthood a noted debater was asked about his strategy in an upcoming public debate with a well-known figure. "I have three objectives when I debate," he said. "First,

to destroy the opponent's arguments. Second, to destroy the opponent. And third, to destroy the opponent's organization."

His unfeeling, "scorched earth" approach to debate shocked even my friends who were among his most ardent supporters. They held to a common perspective sixty years ago. The purpose of debate, they believed, was to draw out the truth. And truth was best attained, they held, in a setting of mutual respect, goodwill, and honest dialogue. Debate was to test the strength of arguments, not to destroy the party advancing an argument.

But much has changed since that day. I'm not sure that his ardent supporters today would have questioned his language. Political debate especially has become vitriolic and shrill. Opponents sneer at one another's remarks. They mock one another ruthlessly. They resort to innuendo and ad hominem attacks to belittle their adversary. And on both sides, partisan supporters cheer them on.

If this is the way our highest political leadership conducts itself, is it any wonder that public and private discourse on divisive issues has become strident, emotional, and ridden with bitter personal attack. Especially on social media. There is an intriguing concurrence of the rising influence of social media and the decline in personal accountability. It was social media, not politics, which gave rise to the verb "to flame" someone. That says volumes about the vitriol, viciousness, and disdain which permeate far too many discussions on social media. When we view others with disdain – or even worse, contempt – it's unlikely that we will feel much responsibility toward them. If we did, we would not flame them. And where we feel little responsibility toward others, we have minimal sense of accountability for how we treat them.

And to make matters worse, some of the ugliest and most strident voices on social media hide behind online pseudonyms or false names to mask their true identity. This seems to embolden them to be even more vicious than they might otherwise be.

In an earlier day there was a common phrase in America known as "civil discourse." Generally accepted standards governed was called "polite speech." These are foreign concepts today to generations raised in a world where vulgarity and crudity are considered acceptable even in popular music. Where people do not address one another with what prior generations called a "civil tongue," language serves to drive us apart, not bond us together. And when togetherness falters, a sense of responsibility and accountability toward others struggles to maintain a secure footing.

Which brings me to a fifth factor behind diminished accountability. And I hesitate to bring it up, because some will consider the very mention of it as controversial or even provocative. But I'm willing to take that risk, because I genuinely believe that this development has done grave damage to personal accountability in our culture.

I'm referring to the loss of a Christian consensus in terms of interpersonal behavior. There was a time in our country when general agreement prevailed on a concept that today is taboo. Namely, that standards of behavior should be governed by principles drawn from the Ten Commandments and the teaching of Jesus. Even atheists, secularists, and people who were not particularly religious concurred with this outlook. They, too, wanted a society based on such Biblical guidance as "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." Or "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Or "The one who is greatest is the one who serves others most fully."

Such tenets, accepted almost universally, were normative. They were drilled into children by reinforcing messages on every turn. And no one hesitated to identify them as rooted in Biblical concepts. Then came the Vietnam War and an anti-war movement which rejected historic American institutions, including its most influential religion. Within years, any mention of the Bible or concepts from Judaeo-Christian traditions was considered out of place in public discourse.

This was a far-cry from the nature of public discourse at the founding of our nation. Although the framers of the Constitution were proverbially wide-read and well-educated, and though they quoted freely from classical literature and the greatest political thinkers of the early modern era, their speeches in the Continental Congress alluded to passages from the Bible more often than from all other sources combined. This fact has been confirmed by numerous historical studies. But professors dare not mention that fact today.

During graduate school, I held a fellowship at a major state university. The grant called for me to teach two sections of the American history course required of all students. My lectures openly touched on how an unwritten Christian consensus had shaped the social compact which gave rise to the American ethos. No one questioned the appropriateness of my remarks. As an instructor, I had no concern with criticism or opposition either academically, socially, or politically for making such remarks.

Today those same lectures would get me censured, and most likely fired. For several decades, now, any mention of the historic Christian consensus has had no place in academia outside of religious institutions. In the place of that consensus, moral relativism has taken center stage. Holding people accountable is often skewered as judgmentalism. Calling people to account in light of accepted social norms is caricatured as elitism or cultural imperialism. The consensus beneath our social compact has broken down, and with it, clear standards of responsibility and accountability toward one another.

Well, my time for today is drawing to a close. But I would be remiss if I did not touch on one final factor which, in my opinion, has had an adverse effect on accountability. And this one is particularly relevant to those of us in management and executive roles. I'm speaking of The shortening of corporate lifespans.

The early course of American corporate history conditioned us to believe that successful companies would stick around for decades, even generations. But we now live in an era of disruptive technologies, hostile takeovers, and corporate raiders which have shredded any belief in corporate longevity. We're no longer surprised when even legendary corporations simply vanish from the landscape.

As an executive coach and business consultant, I'm approached regularly by potential clients who are building a company which they fully intend to sell in seven to ten years. And they are most likely to sell it to another company which will absorb it so completely that it disappears entirely as a separate entity. In all likelihood, many of its employees will also be discontinued as part of the acquisition.

But it's not just the smaller companies which have questionable extended futures. Major companies who thrive are also subject to abbreviated lifespans. Even S&P 500 companies. Simply appearing in the S&P500 demonstrates that these companies are proven and well-established. So, how long do corporations on this exalted list survive?

Last year, the McKinsey group researched that very question. Their findings? The average lifespan of companies listed in the S&P 500 is less than 18 years. That's the average! This means that hundreds of them do not last that long. To offer a point of contrast, when I entered high school, companies on the S&P 500 lasted an average of 61 years. Most would outlive me. Today they don't outlive a typical childhood.

Further, McKinsey estimated that 75% of the companies currently on the list will disappear by 2027, the result of either merger, acquisition, or bankruptcy.

How do shortened corporate lifespans impact accountability? It's easy to find out. Just take some time to interview workers in small and medium-sized companies. In my line of work, I do this all the time. And what I've learned is that workers generally question whether their company will even exist a few years from now. Or if it does, whether it will have the same ownership.

Workers no longer make a ready embrace of long-term loyalty to their company. Why not? Because they don't expect management and ownership to reciprocate with long-term loyalty to them. Loyalty typically enhances a sense of personal responsibility and accountability. However, when people do not feel loyalty toward their company, the level of accountability which they impose on themselves in the exercise of their duties suffers in the process.

Before I conclude, however, let me add that I'm guardedly optimistic that we can reverse the trends which I've outlined in these first three episodes. For a reversal to happen, however, leaders must play a decisive role. In the next program, I'll talk about how leadership can be a contributor. Be sure to join us as we continue this discussion.

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