

# Accountability In An Age Of Consumerism: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest

By David Irvine, Best-Selling Author and Leader's Navigator

**W**e live in a consumer society. Look up “consume” in the dictionary and of the many definitions, a few I find interesting include: “...to eat or drink something, especially in large amounts; to use something in such a way that it cannot be reused or recovered afterward; to destroy, squander, use up...” Something embedded in these definitions certainly rings true with the present state of affairs in our modern world. We buy goods and services with the attitude that we are entitled to the best because we pay for them. This transfers to a sense of entitlement in our workplaces – we “deserve” a good boss, a healthy environment, a large pay cheque – without accepting the accompanying responsibilities. We expect good governance from our politicians but don't believe we have personal accountability in return. Has this attitude brought us, as a society, more happiness and inner peace?

As we approach Remembrance Day, I think of my parents, Joyce and Harlie, growing up during the Great Depression, living through WWII, and never feeling entitled to anything. Raised without affluence, they understood that human rights must be coupled with obligations, responsibilities, and duties. They insisted that rights accompanied obligations and that society could not sustain obligations without rights. In fact, my mother introduced me to the writings of George Bernard Shaw, the Irish playwright and co-founder of the London School of Economics, who said, “We have no more right to consume happiness without producing it, than to consume wealth without producing it.”

Life is well lived when we are in balance between giving and taking. At times we *help*, and at times we *hinder*; at times we *lift* and at times we *lean*; at times we *contribute*, and at times we *consume*. How's the balance in your life between being a giver and being a taker? My parents, and others from their generation, engrained in me the significance of choosing contribution over self-interest. What I've learned since is the importance of balance, and to maintain that balance by choosing accountability over entitlement.

Here are three ways to foster accountability in an age of consumerism:

1. **Take ownership.** Every time you walk into a store, a service agency, or a workplace, make a decision to take ownership for the culture. See yourself as a contributor – a co-creator - of the culture. Through our perceptions and our choices we all create the culture

that we so often enjoy complaining about.

Remember: customers impact a company; citizens impact a country; employees impact the culture. Deciding that you have helped create the world around you - and therefore you are the one to step into healing it - is the ultimate act of accountability.

2. **Give what you expect from others.** If you want good service, *give* good service. Come early, be cheerful, take some pressure off the customer service person to enable them to better serve you. And if circumstances don't enable you to do that, then take accountability for your side of the customer service street. If you want more appreciation in your workplace, *give* more appreciation. If you want more respect in a relationship, start by taking actions that lead to self-respect. If you want more peace in the world, bring more peace *to* the world. *Be* the change you want to see around you.
3. **Be a force of nature with a renewed attitude.** By relentlessly choosing *service* over self-interest, *contribution* over consumerism, and *gratitude* and *generosity* over entitlement, you become a force in the world that changes the world. George Bernard Shaw knew this when he said, “This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”

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