

Motivation – Applying Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory

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The psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a theory that suggests we, humans, are motivated to satisfy five basic needs. These needs are arranged in a hierarchy. Maslow suggests that we seek first to satisfy the lowest level of needs. Once this is done, we seek to satisfy each higher level of need until we have satisfied all five needs. While modern research shows some shortcomings with this theory, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory remains an important and simple motivation tool for managers to understand and apply. **The Hierarchy of Needs is as follows:**

1. **Physiological Needs** (basic issues of survival such as salary and stable employment)
2. **Security Needs** (stable physical and emotional environment issues such as benefits, pension, safe work environment, and fair work practices)
3. **“Belongingness” Needs** (social acceptance issues such as friendship or cooperation on the job)
4. **Esteem Needs** (positive self-image and respect and recognition issues such as job titles, nice work spaces, and prestigious job assignments.)
5. **Self-Actualization Needs** (achievement issues such as workplace autonomy, challenging work, and subject matter expert status on the job)

With Maslow’s theory, an employee’s beginning emphasis on the lower order needs of physiology and security makes sense. Generally, a person beginning their career will be very concerned with physiological needs such as adequate wages and stable income and security needs such as benefits and a safe work environment. We all want a good salary to meet the needs of our family and we want to work in a stable environment. Employees whose lowest level needs have not been met will make job decisions based on compensation, safety, or stability concerns. Also, employees will revert to satisfying their lowest level needs when these needs are no longer met or are threatened (such as during an economic downturn). This places an extra obligation on managers to act humanely when difficult organizational decisions such as staff reductions have to be implemented. Callous implementation of difficult decisions will cause the remaining employees in the organization to feel threatened about the ability or desire of the organization to continue to meet their physiological and security needs.

Once these basic needs are met, the employee will want his “belongingness” (or social) needs met. The level of social interaction an employee desires will vary based on whether the employee is an introvert or extrovert. The key point is that employees desire to work in an environment where they are accepted in the organization and have some interaction with others. This means effective interpersonal relations are necessary. Managers can create an environment where staff cooperation is rewarded. This will encourage interpersonal effectiveness. Ongoing managerial communication about operational matters is also an important component of meeting employee’s social needs. Employees who are “kept in the dark” about operational matters and the future plans of the organization often feel like they are an organizational outsider. (This last point is especially important for virtual employees whose absence from the office puts an extra obligation on managers to keep these employees engaged in organizational communications.)

With these needs satisfied, an employee will want his higher level needs of esteem and self-actualization met. Esteem needs are tied to an employee’s image of himself and his desire for the respect and recognition of others. Even if an individual does not want to move into management, he probably does not want to do the same exact work for 20 years. He may want to be on a project team, complete a special task, learn other tasks or duties, or expand his duties in some manner. Cross-training, job enrichment, and special assignments are popular methods for making work more rewarding. Further, allowing employees to participate in decision making on operational matters is a powerful method for meeting an employee’s esteem needs. Finally, symbols of accomplishment such as a meaningful job title, job perks, awards, a nice office, business cards, work space, etc. are also important to an employee’s esteem. The important consideration for managers is that they must provide rewards to their employees

that both come from the organization and from doing the work itself. Rewards need to be balanced to have a maximum effect.

With self-actualization, the employee will be interested in growth and individual development. He will also need to be skilled at what he does. He may want a challenging job, an opportunity to complete further education, increased freedom from supervision, or autonomy to define his own processes for meeting organizational objectives. At this highest level, managers focus on promoting an environment where an employee can meet his own self-actualization needs.

The basic idea of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is that our needs are constantly changing. As one need is met, we desire other needs. This makes sense. Will the raise we received 3 years ago motivate us for the next 10 years? Will the challenging job we began 5 years ago have the same effect on us today? Will the performance award we received last year completely satisfy our need for recognition for the rest of our lives? The answers to all of these questions is clearly, no. This is the beauty of Maslow's theory of motivation. Employee needs change with time. This means that managers must continually adapt to employees' changing needs if they want to keep their workforce motivated. Maslow understood these truths!