

Simon Harrison reviews Maslow's hierarchy of needs and evaluates its usefulness in a business context

Abraham Maslow is most famous for his hierarchy of needs, outlined in his book *Towards a Psychology of Being* in 1952.

This hierarchy is part of an attempt to explain why people behave the way they do, and in particular what it is that motivates people to act. Maslow's theory is well known throughout the business world, and his ideas have influenced management styles and reward systems as organisations have sought to understand what drives their employees in an attempt to get the most from them.

The hierarchy of needs

Maslow argued that humans have seven innate needs, which he categorised as:

- **Physiological** — the most basic needs for survival: food, water, avoidance of extreme heat and cold.
- **Security** — the need to be free from danger. This takes the form of a need for shelter for predictability and stability.
- **Social** — the need for relationships, for friendship and a sense of belonging.
- **Esteem** — the need for achievement, for recognition, for prestige and reputation, and respect from others.
- **Self-actualisation** — the desire for self-fulfilment. This is the most complex and least understood of the needs, partly because Maslow never really defined it himself. He did, however, assert that it is the ultimate human goal and one that can

never be completely satisfied. He compared it with the need for a musician to make music — once you have started, the experience stimulates the desire for more of the same. Essentially, it comes down to trying to fulfil your potential.

- **Freedom of inquiry and expression** — the need for social conditions permitting free speech and a system of justice and fairness.
- **Knowledge and understanding** — the need to build up and systemise knowledge, and to be curious about the world around us.

The last two needs were separated out from the list as being pre-requisites for the other needs to be fully achieved. This leaves the five needs, which Maslow claimed were a loose hierarchy, with physiological needs being the most basic (see Figure 1).

Maslow argued that this hierarchy explained what motivated people to act, given certain assumptions:

- A need will only motivate once the

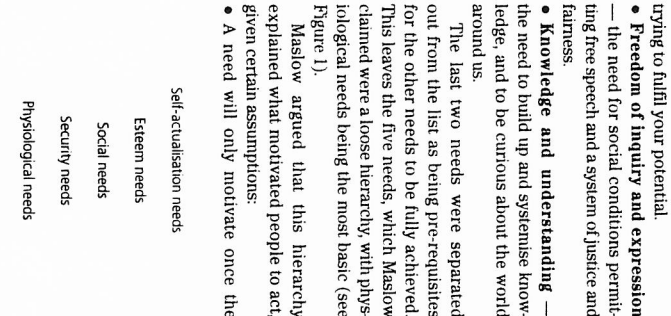


Figure 1 Maslow's hierarchy of needs

needs below it have been at least partly fulfilled. In other words, your need for friendship and relationships will not be the most important influence on your behaviour if you are lost in a desert with no water. So, individuals are assumed to fulfil their most basic needs first.

- Once a need has been fulfilled, it will no longer motivate. Once you have been fed, you are no longer motivated by hunger — you will look to meet other needs.
- Individuals have a natural urge to want to move up the hierarchy and to achieve higher and higher levels of need, with self-actualisation as the ultimate goal.

Maslow argued that self-actualisation was very different from the four preceding needs. The lowest four levels were termed 'deficit needs' as they would only motivate while there was a deficit. Once that deficit was removed, the need would no longer motivate; once you eat food, your desire for it becomes less. Self-actualisation was termed a 'growth need'. Unlike food, once you begin to fulfil it, your desire becomes more not less; once you begin to develop your potential, you want to develop it more. In contrast to the first four needs, self-actualisation is more a state of being. According to Maslow, it is not something that can be satisfied, but an ongoing quest and the ultimate aim for all individuals.

Nevertheless, Maslow accepted that there would be exceptions to these general principles. One level of need did not have to be wholly met before higher levels would begin to motivate, and different individuals might prioritise different needs depending on their past history. For example, individuals who have experienced deprivation and poverty may always tend to put greater emphasis on security needs than the population as a whole. Similarly, mountaineers put self-actualisation ahead of personal safety. The hierarchy is intended as a guide to the sorts of needs that motivate people, and a framework to analyse behaviours. Clearly, a simple model like this could not be expected to represent the motivations of every single person in the world, but it is an intuitively reasonable approximation of how many people act much of the time.

Maslow and the business world

Attempting to meet employees' needs through the workplace can help organisations to build a committed and dedicated set of employees. Applying Maslow's hier-

archy should help organisations to reduce labour turnover and increase effort and motivation levels.

If an organisation fails to ensure that employees' physiological and security needs are met, workers are unlikely to be focused on their job — they may be too worried, for example, about how their next mortgage payment is going to be made. Consequently, performance may not be great, and the individual may want to leave to find a better job. Unless an organisation feels that such employees are easy to replace and wants to keep them on their toes (which is common practice among some big employers in developing countries where workers are often hired by the day), then it will need to create structures through which these needs are met.

Physiological needs might be met if an organisation offers good pay and basic conditions, so that employees know that they will be able to buy the things they need to survive. Security needs might be met if an organisation provides safe working conditions and favourable contract rights (such as a long notice period before redundancy can be effected). The main impact of such policies should be a reduction in labour turnover — if employees feel that they have a 'good job', they are less likely to leave.

The problem, however, is that almost all organisations these days provide many of these benefits. Rising expectations among employees and rising living standards generally mean that large numbers of the working population are not concerned about these lower-level needs, and are instead focused on higher-level needs within the hierarchy. If organisations are to motivate such employees, they must also have policies in place to meet these higher-level needs.

Social needs might be met through organisational structures that encourage team-working, sports and social clubs — the provision of communal rest areas — the aim being to allow employees to build up social networks within the organisation. The result is that they are likely to be more reluctant to leave if they have important friendships within the organisation — work will become more important to them, increasing the chance that they will make more effort.

Esteem needs are likely to influence retention and motivation of staff. If employees feel valued by an organisation, they are more likely to want to make an

effort and to remain there. Regular positive feedback, involvement in decision-making and changes in job titles to enhance the holder's status, for example, may all make a difference.

Self-actualisation in a workplace setting is important for many positions and an organisation will want employees to fulfil themselves by making a difference to the organisation as well. Hence, the aim is to provide opportunities through which the individual's own drives and motivations can find an outlet within the organisation itself. This allows the organisation to benefit from creative, innovative and continually developing employees. But this will only be possible if appropriate structures and opportunities exist. An organisation is likely to have to provide challenging, creative assignments and a high degree of autonomy and decentralisation, so that employees really feel that the achievements are both their own and worth attaining.

Criticisms of Maslow

Many criticisms of Maslow are ill-founded. One criticism is that people will not pass through the stages in the way Maslow described. However, Maslow never intended the model to be interpreted so narrowly — it was simply intended as a guide to how people do in fact seem to operate.

Another criticism is that Maslow's hierarchy can not really be used to predict behaviour. The extent to which one need has to be satisfied before an individual can move to the next level is impossible to measure or quantify. Even if it could be measured, the inherent differences between individuals mean that they would in any case progress at different rates. The model is more useful, therefore, as an explanation of why people have behaved in a certain way rather than being a tool for predicting what they will do next.

In a globalised world, however, a more significant criticism is that Maslow's findings are only relevant to individualistic cultures, such as those found in the USA, the UK and, more generally, Western European countries. An organisation employing Maslow's hierarchy in other countries and cultures might not have the results it intended. Considerable research has been done which, although inconclusive, does suggest that Maslow's model would need adapting before it could be applied successfully to certain other cultures.

Maslow's view of people striving for personal achievement is extremely culture-bound, and has been described as 'UK/US centric'. Cross-cultural research, for example, has shown that while positive feelings in US students were associated with personal achievements, Japanese students tended to associate positive feelings with good relations with others, rather than their own personal achievements. This shows that self-actualisation in the way Maslow described it may be less important in Japan.

Some research carried out in Thailand has suggested that the extended family model, in which many individuals retain strong links with cousins, uncles, aunts and so on, means that job security is less important to them than in the West. The loss of a job would be relatively unimportant in the short run, because the extended family would provide. The importance of family and friends is such that some firms have reported that employees will simply disappear from work for several days without contact if a family member or friend has problems, without worrying about the consequences. In this case, Maslow's second level in the hierarchy is by-passed in the workplace — social/relationship needs are more fundamental than job security, because security has been provided through other channels.

Thus, although Maslow's theory may describe the hopes and aspirations of a good number of UK and US employees, multinational firms, dealing with many different cultures, may have difficulties in motivating staff globally if they rely narrowly on Maslow's assumptions.

Conclusion

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a useful explanation of the way in which many individuals operate, and provides a framework for organisations seeking to motivate employees. However, the hierarchy is simply a broad model, and it cannot hope to explain every individual's drives and goals. In practice, the best advice to managers is to get to know their staff, and to work out what really interests and stimulates them. Once managers have achieved that, then they really will have the key to motivating their staff effectively.

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