Hierarchy of Needs – Abraham Maslow; 1943 (Content Theory)

What is the Theory?

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory in psychology proposed by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation". Maslow developed a theory that suggests we 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, stable employment, able to eat/drink/sleep well)

2. Security Needs (stable physical and emotional environment issues such as benefits, pension, safe work environment, and fair work practices; job security)

3. "Belongingness" Needs (social acceptance issues such as friendship or cooperation on the job; feeling part of a group/team)

4. Esteem Needs (positive self-image and respect and recognition issues such as job titles, nice work spaces, and prestigious job assignments; being recognised for achievements/improvements)

5. Self-Actualization Needs (achievement issues such as workplace autonomy, challenging work, and subject matter expert status on the job, the need for personal growth and development)

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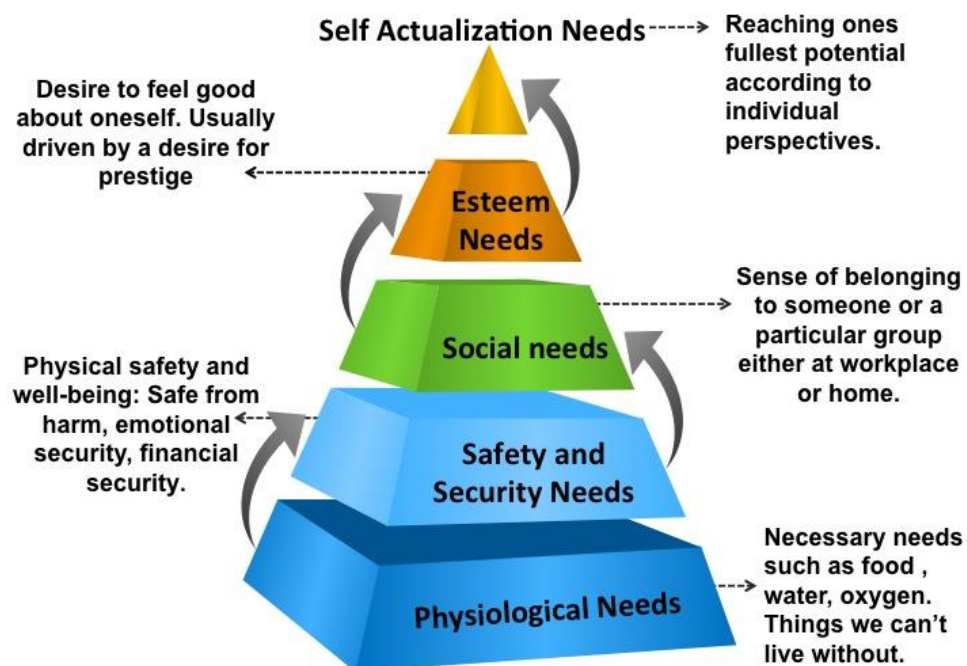
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How to Apply this Theory to the Workplace

1. Physiological Needs

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. Demonstrating to staff that you undertake regular salary reviews, benchmark them with similar industries, review your employee benefits etc. will show commitment to financial aspects of their employment.

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.

Abraham Maslow realized that people need to deal with the survival needs before they move on to any other level of needs. If they do not have the necessary food, clothing, water, shelter — or comparable elements to survive — they are not likely to be concerned about learning new skills to qualify them for future jobs. In the workplace, simple things like snacks, clean water (such as that from the watercooler) and coffee will go a long way in meeting your employees' basic physiological needs. Checking with employees that these are adequate will demonstrate that you are giving consideration to their psychological needs.

2. Security Needs

To address this level of the hierarchy, you must consider physical as well as psychological safety and security. As a manager you can do common sense things like make sure that the working environment contains no safety hazards; Ensure your H&S policy is up to date and that all employees are refreshed on its content, that Fire & bomb procedures are up to date and that staff undertake regular fire drills; that Fire Marshals know what to do and that everyone else knows who they are. You can also provide mental security by explaining the current working climate and the important roles they play in meeting the wider company strategy, therefore helping them feel safer in their position with the company.

3. "Belongingness" Needs

This level of Maslow's theory deals with love, acceptance, friendship, and companionship. As a manager, you can address the need that many people have to socialize and feel part of a group by creating a work environment that harbours opportunities for participation and interaction with others (e.g. through job shadowing; peer mentoring & coaching etc.) Start networking sessions before or after work. Happy hour can be a fun networking time — and it doesn't need to be at a bar. It could be at Starbucks or a local restaurant.

The level of social interaction an employee desires will also 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, but it's the managers job to know what's comfortable for that individual. So do they love being recognised and applauded in front of the whole team or do they prefer a quiet pat on the back and private thank you? Finding out how people are motivated goes a long way in meeting their individual needs.

Effective interpersonal relations are also a crucial aspect of 'belonging'. Managers can create an environment where staff co-operation is rewarded on both an individual and team level on a regular basis. This will encourage interpersonal effectiveness and improve team dynamics and performance.

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. Managing and dealing with change effectively and on an ongoing basis is critical to meeting these needs.

4. Esteem Needs

At this point of Maslow's hierarchy, the focus shifts to the personal ego; self-respect, achievement and receiving recognition for efforts given. Employees want to be respected and appreciated by their co-workers and their bosses. In a learning environment, you can address this need by deferring to someone's expertise or knowledge, recognizing accomplishments, and otherwise providing an environment where learners can feel the satisfaction of having others applaud their accomplishments. You can also build in little accolades during the working day in which participants recognise the efforts of someone who accomplishes something, offers a solution, goes the extra mile or otherwise does something worthy of yours or the team's recognition. A simple round of applause for a good response might be appropriate from time-to-time to meet this need.

Esteem needs are also tied to an employee's image of himself and his desire for the respect and recognition of others.

5. Self-Actualization Needs

Even if an individual does not want to move into management, he/she probably does not want to do the same exact work for 20 years. They may want to be on a project team, complete a special task, learn other tasks or duties, or expand their 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 (and not just financially based – remember that non- financial rewards can often go much further.)

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

To this effect, as a Manager, it's important that you identify where your employees hope to go as it relates to the level of achievement in your company and help them get there.

Summary:-

When applied to work, the theory implies that you as the employer must understand the current need level of each employee to know what will motivate them as individuals. A new hire who has been unemployed for an extended time for example, will likely be motivated by the need for basic survival. On the other hand, a long-term worker concerned with career advancement may be looking to achieve self-actualization, so assigning higher-level tasks may be in order. Finding out what each individual's needs are should determine what will motivate them.

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