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Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: An Important Historical Contribution

Although the first part of the chapter mentions the most important primary and secondary needs of humans, it does not relate them to a theoretical framework. Abraham Maslow, in a classic paper, outlined the elements of an overall theory of motivation.²² Drawing chiefly from humanistic psychology and his clinical experience, he thought that a person's motivational needs could be arranged in a hierarchical manner. In essence, he believed that once a given level of need is satisfied, it no longer serves to motivate. The next higher level of need has to be activated in order to motivate the individual.

Maslow identified five levels in his need hierarchy (see Figure 6.3). They are, in brief, the following:

1. *Physiological needs.* The most basic level in the hierarchy, the physiological needs, generally corresponds to the unlearned primary needs discussed earlier. The needs of hunger, thirst, sleep, and sex are some examples. According to the theory, once these basic needs are satisfied, they no longer motivate. For example, a starving person will strive to obtain a carrot that is within reach. However, after eating his or her fill of carrots, the person will not strive to obtain another one and will be motivated only by the next higher level of needs.

2. *Safety needs.* This second level of needs is roughly equivalent to the security need. Maslow stressed emotional as well as physical safety. The whole organism may become a safety-seeking mechanism. Yet, as is true of the physiological needs, once these safety needs are satisfied, they no longer motivate.

3. *Love needs.* This third, or intermediate, level of needs loosely corresponds to the affection and affiliation needs. Like Freud, Maslow seems guilty of poor choice of wording to identify his levels. His use of the word *love* has many misleading connotations, such as sex, which is actually a physiological need. Perhaps a more appropriate word describing this level would be *belongingness* or *social needs*.

4. *Esteem needs.* The esteem level represents the higher needs of humans. The needs for power, achievement, and status can be considered part of this level. Maslow carefully pointed out that the esteem level contains both self-esteem and esteem from others.

5. *Needs for self-actualization.* Maslow's major contribution, he portrays this level as the culmination of all the lower, intermediate, and higher needs of humans. People who have become self-actualized are self-fulfilled and have realized all their potential. Self-actualization is closely related to the self-concepts discussed in Chapter 7. In effect, self-actualization is the person's motivation to transform perception of self into reality.

Maslow did not intend that his needs hierarchy be directly applied to work motivation. In fact, he did not delve into the motivating aspects of humans in organizations until about 20 years after he originally proposed his theory. Despite this lack of intent on Maslow's part, others, such as Douglas McGregor in his widely read book *The Human Side of Enterprise*, popularized the Maslow theory in management literature. The needs hierarchy has tremendous intuitive appeal and is widely associated with work motivation.

In a very rough manner, Maslow's needs hierarchy theory can be converted into the content model of work motivation shown in Figure 6.4. If Maslow's estimates are applied to an organization example, the lower-level needs of personnel would be generally satisfied, but only a minority of the social and esteem needs, and a small percent of the self-actualization needs, would be met.

On the surface, the content model shown in Figure 6.4 and the estimated percentages given by Maslow seem logical and still largely applicable to the motivation of employees in today's organizations. Maslow's needs hierarchy has often been uncritically accepted by writers of management textbooks and by practitioners. Unfortunately, the limited research that has been conducted lends little empirical support to the theory. About a decade after publishing his original paper, Maslow did attempt to clarify his position by saying that gratifying the self-actualizing need of growth-motivated individuals can actually increase rather than decrease this need. He also hedged on some of his other original ideas, for example, that higher needs may emerge after lower needs that have been unfulfilled or suppressed

for a long period are satisfied. He stressed that human behavior is multi-determined and multi-motivated.

Research findings indicate that Maslow's is certainly not the final answer in work motivation. Yet the theory does make a significant contribution in terms of making management aware of the diverse needs of employees at work. As one comprehensive analysis concluded, "Indeed, the general ideas behind Maslow's theory seem to be supported, such as the distinction between deficiency needs and growth needs."²³ However, the number and names of the levels are not so important, nor, as the studies show, is the hierarchical concept. What is important is the fact that employees in the workplace have diverse motives, some of which are "high level." There is also empirical and experiential evidence supporting the importance of Maslow's various needs (e.g., Gallup survey research clearly indicates that Maslow's third level social needs are the single most important contribution to

SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Personal growth,
realization of potential

ESTEEM NEEDS

Titles, status symbols,
promotions, banquets

SOCIAL NEEDS

Formal and informal
work groups or teams

SECURITY NEEDS

Seniority plans, union, health insurance,
employee assistance plans, severance pay, pension

BASIC NEEDS

Pay

FIGURE 6.4

**A Hierarchy of Work
Motivation**

satisfaction with life and a lot of, if not most, high-achieving people feel unfulfilled because they have not reached self-actualization²⁵).

In other words, such needs as social and self-actualization are important to the content of work motivation. The exact nature of these needs and how they relate to motivation are not clear. At the same time, what does become clear from contemporary research is that layoffs and terminations (i.e., downsizing) can reduce employees to have concerns about basic-level needs such as security. Organizations that endeavor to reduce fears and other strong emotional responses during these moments through severance pay programs and outplacement services may be able to lessen the impact of individual terminations and layoffs, especially for those who remain with the company.

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in humanistic psychology and as will be discussed in the next chapter, positive psychology, of which Maslow was one of the pioneers. Throughout the years there have been attempts to revitalize and make his hierarchy of needs more directly applicable to work motivation. In particular, Herzberg's two factor theory covered next is based on Maslow's concept, and a number of others use Maslow for constructing various hierarchies or pyramids. One example is Aon Consulting's Performance Pyramid that starts with safety and security and moves up through rewards, affiliation, growth, and work and life harmony. There is little question that Maslow's theory has stood the test of time and still makes a contribution to the study and application to work motivation.