Decision Making on Steroids

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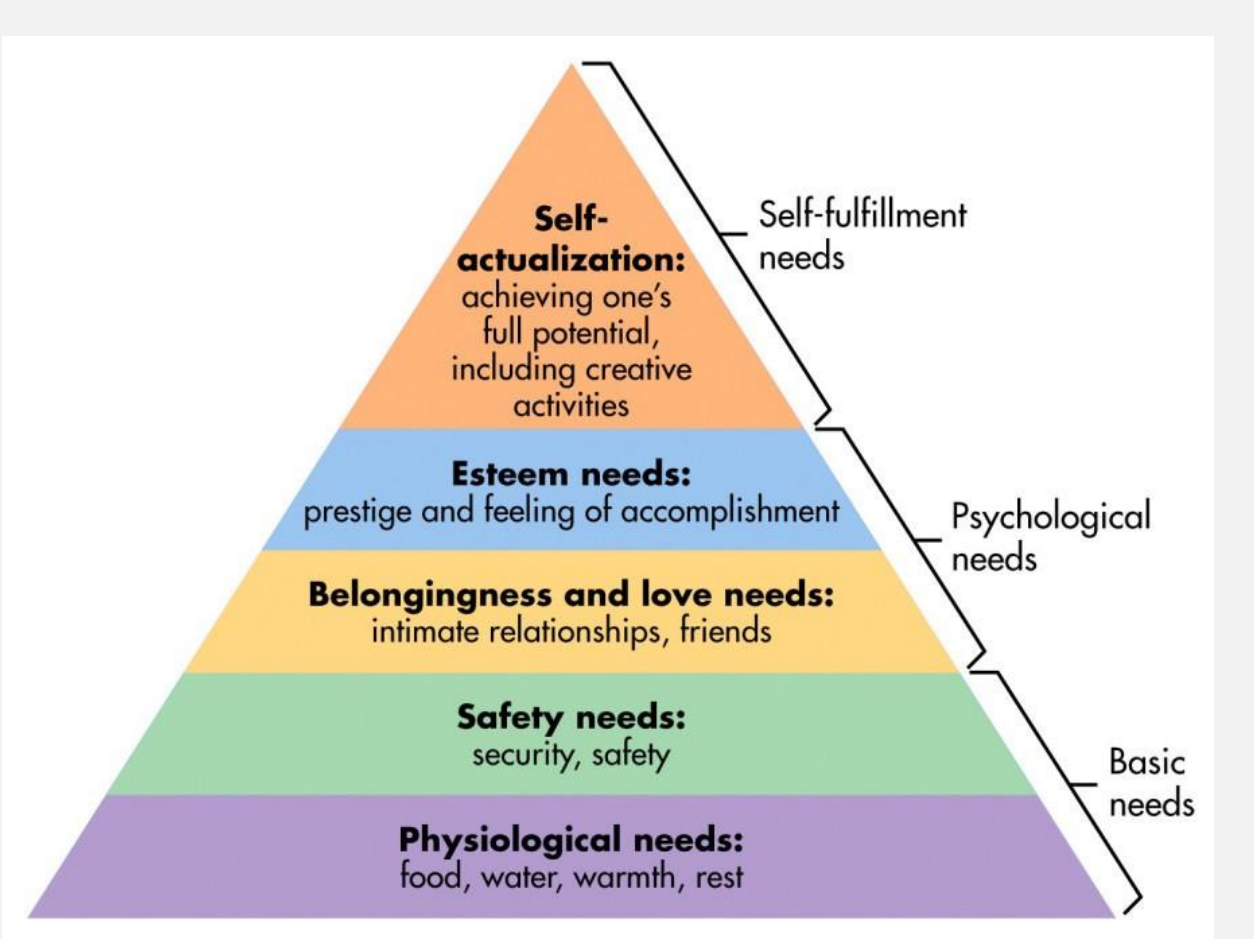
Before you continue, can you figure out which part of Maslow's hierarchy triangle, if achieved for all humanity, will cut modern global challenges by 75%?



I recently attended a meet-up on transforming education and promoting vocations. On attendance were experts on the subject from public and private institutions. The panelists from different professional backgrounds (needless to say with advanced degrees) shared insights from different perspectives. It was intellectually stimulating to watch; and in the end we were left with (1) lots of Identified issues; (2) realistic potential solutions; (3) great metrics to measure the solutions.

Now it was time to make a decision. What pathway can we take to achieve meaningful transformation on education while promoting vocation given limited resources? If we can determine that pathway, when and how will we know if it was the right pathway?

What we all have in common

We will return to the story shortly. But, stay with me for a moment, as we walk through a few things we all have experienced when making decisions. If you ever worked (or are currently working) in an environment with tremendous amount of information flow (sterilized data), you will be familiar with the feeling it brings. An executive I know describes it this way, “it is like having a box full of designer clothes which are equally desired on Monday morning”. Most of you know the challenge with such an outcome. Finding what to wear (without long, hard and prior decision) on a Monday morning is daunting.

Some executives and business people have figured a way to handle this dilemma. They either standardize certain things in their dressing — for instance color of tie or shirt — or they hire someone to do the job of choosing what they wear.

This was exactly how it felt at that event. Lots of great stuff! But, no clear pathway forward. How did I know? I know because of my role. I was the repertoire! I had recorded the closet of their intellects (at least the parts they allowed me to see). So, I tried to make sense of the document before me. Frankly the path of least resistance was not obvious. Though the issues seemed unrelated, there were interactions both at issues and solutions levels. At that moment things became complex very quickly. I released the document to the convener (who was equally perplexed) and excused myself.

What happened next

I returned to my home office to do something else. To ask questions. Why are the issues interacting (even when they feel separate)? How are they interacting? Can I freeze or isolate some of the issues and their solutions? If I could, which ones should I isolate and still reproduce a document that mirrors the original document but with minimum complexity? Here is the controversial part; can I find a single issue that if solved all the others will be taken care of?

I have worked on decision support assignments where the challenge was too much information (not lack of it). I realized that this is one of those. My initial assumption was that the answer will fall around finding an issue (or a set of 3 issues) whose solution is adaptive and scalable. I made a note of that and moved to the next level.

Ecosystem of interaction

But, why was my first assumption around adaptability and scalability (given the matrix of information I was observing)? Will adaptability and scalability represent the original document? If that is the case, which issue (or set of issues) in the document are best candidates to choose from?

This is what I did! I processed each one of the issues and their solutions, to understand and extract the drivers of their performance. On the solutions side, I figured out their individual global optimum and the objective functions responsible.

I moved further to rotate the solutions around each identified issue to observe the following; (1) which solutions are performing optimally across all issues? (2) What are the drivers of high performing solutions across issues? (3) How active is each issue in its interaction with the entire system? (4) Which high performing solutions are mapped to issues with highest interaction?

What I figured out

I observed that highest performing solutions — Behavioral change and certificated apprenticeship — (given the problem space I was working on) are determined by their adaptability and scalability.

Their behavior was also nearly consistent across issues. I also noticed that two issues (again given the problem space I was working on) — destructive mental model and social stigma associated with vocations — are directly mapped to solutions above.

There you have it! The solutions are easier to deploy. You will readily find existing platforms and channels to deploy those including technological and institutional platforms. You can routinely measure their outcomes, and adapt your interventions in the face of new realities. A lot to unpack? Over simplification perhaps? It depends on what your experience is in making decisions in the face of too much information.

You don’t need to think through these steps each time (though it might help). Just find your optimal F(X) (notice the capitalization), observe their drivers and think of an approximation F(F(X)) that can describe the entire system under observation: which will let you make optimum decision. Especially given scare resource.

Mind the gap

However, buyers beware! Every domain has its peculiarities. This strategy works if certain things are held constant — in this example — I assumed that government policies, education system, and economic realities will remain constant prior to decision analysis. Nevertheless, I assume that if the sun rises in the morning, sets in the evening, and you understand your environment — this should work. I made this observation using complex system in a social context. Always know the domain you are working in.

Back to Maslow. Do you think you can use an aspect of that heuristics to accurately explain the entire hierarchy? Solve problems may be? Let us know if you were able.

Thanks for stopping by!