Introduction

The Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) was a US psychologist and behavioural scientist. He spent part of his career in industry as well as working as an academic. His "Hierarchy of Needs Theory" was first presented in 1943 in the US Psychological Review and later developed in his book "Motivation and Personality", first published in 1954. His concepts were originally offered as general explanations of human behaviour but quickly became a significant contribution to workplace motivation theory. They are still used by managers today to understand, predict and influence employee motivation.

Maslow was one of the first people to be associated with the humanistic, as opposed to a task-based, approach to management. As people have increasingly come to be appreciated as a key resource in successful companies, Maslow's model has remained a valuable management concept.

The Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow saw human needs in the form of a hierarchy, ascending from the lowest to the highest. When one set of needs is satisfied it ceases to be a motivator; motivation is then generated by the unsatisfied needs in the hierarchy. The needs are: survival or physiological needs, safety or security needs, social needs, ego-status needs and self-actualisation needs. If managers can recognise which level of the hierarchy a worker has reached, he or she can motivate the employee in the most appropriate way.

Today the hierarchy is usually represented as a triangle, although Maslow himself did not present it in this way.
The hierarchy consists of five levels:

- **Survival or physiological needs.** The most primitive of all needs consisting of the basic animal requirements such as food, water, shelter, warmth and sleep.
- **Security or safety needs.** In earlier times these needs were expressed as a desire to be free of physical danger. This need has been refined so that its implications are now felt in terms of the social and financial, such as job security, rather than purely physical requirements.
- **Social needs.** To belong and be accepted by others. Man is essentially a social being and therefore seeks membership of social groups, such as work groups.
- **Ego-status needs.** To be held in esteem by both oneself and others. This kind of need is satisfied by power, prestige and self-confidence.
- **Self-actualisation needs.** To maximise one's skills and talents. This embraces self-realisation, self-expression and self-fulfilment.

There are certain conditions, Maslow wrote, which are immediate prerequisites for satisfying needs, such as the freedom to speak, freedom to express or defend oneself, justice, fairness and honesty. Danger to these is perceived almost as if it were a danger to the needs themselves.

The hierarchy is usually referred to as if it were a fixed order but Maslow explained that it is not necessarily rigid or universally applicable. While most people do have basic needs in the order indicated, there are a number of exceptions. Creative people, for example, are often driven by self-actualisation rather than by lower satisfactions.

The hierarchy is often presented in simplified terms, giving the false impression that one need must be fully satisfied before the next need emerges. In fact, Maslow explained, man is a continually wanting animal, whose basic needs are partially satisfied and partially unsatisfied at the same time. Needs continually overlap; for example social needs are felt by everyone, including those whose basic needs are not met. However, as soon as one need is satisfied it ceases to be a motivator.

Peter Drucker, in his book *Management: tasks, responsibilities, practices* (London: Heinemann, 1973), pointed out that while it becomes less satisfying to obtain economic rewards as one moves up the hierarchy, such needs do not become less important. This is because as their impact as a positive incentive decreases, their ability to create dissatisfaction and act as a disincentive increases. Economic rewards become entitlements and if they are not looked after can act as deterrents.

**Maslow in perspective**

Maslow is often mentioned in connection with his contemporaries, Douglas McGregor and Frederick Herzberg, who were also developing motivation theories at about the same time. Maslow admired McGregor, the author of Theory X and Theory Y, although he had strong reservations about the validity of Theory Y. Herzberg put forward the idea of separating hygiene factors - those that can lead to job dissatisfaction (for example working conditions, salary, or company policy) from motivators - those that lead to job satisfaction (such as achievement, recognition, responsibility, or advancement). Herzberg's hygiene factors can be compared with Maslow's levels one, two and three, and the motivators to levels four and five.

Academics have found little evidence to support Maslow's theory. His influence continues, however, through the work of later psychologists and writers, such as Chris Argyris or Blake and Mouton. Argyris looked at how individual initiatives and creativity can co-exist with organisational rules. Blake and Mouton were authors of the "Managerial Grid" which created the concept of the manager who balanced a concern for people with a concern for task.
Practising managers have found Maslow’s theory a valuable and sensible concept which clarifies their thoughts. It is often used as a basis for questionnaires and checklists to discover an individual’s level of motivation or as a basis for empowerment. Twyla Dell in her book *How to motivate people* (London: Kogan Page, 1988), listed the ten qualities which people most want from their jobs and included two questionnaires to help readers judge how many of the ten qualities they were receiving and giving in their work. She then matched the ten qualities to Maslow’s hierarchy.

Maslow’s theory only fully makes sense when applied to life in general rather than the workplace in particular. This is because some of the needs of the individual, particularly the higher needs, may be satisfied outside the workplace. This holistic view is important within the workplace as employers increasingly realise that individuals have a life outside their job which impinges on their performance at work.

Although Maslow’s theory is now over 50 years old, it is still referred to by managers and it offers them useful insights. Along with Herzberg and McGregor he is recognised as one of the founding fathers of motivation theory.

**Key works by Maslow**

The editions cited here are those held in, and available for loan to members from, the Chartered Management Institute’s Management Information Centre. These may not always be the first edition.

**Books**

*Motivation and personality* 2nd ed

*The farther reaches of human nature*
New York: Viking Press, 1971
Maslow on management
(New edition of Maslow’s work Eupsychian management written as a journal in 1962)

Further reading

Books

The right to be human: a biography of Abraham Maslow, Edward Hoffman
Wellingborough: Crucible, 1989

A H Maslow: an intellectual portrait, Richard J Lowry
Monterey, California: Brookes Cole, 1973

Humanistic psychology: interviews with Maslow, Murphy and Rogers, Willard B Frick
Columbus, Ohio: Charles E Merrill, 1971

Journal articles

Abraham Maslow and self-actualisation, Reva Berman Brown
Organisations and People, Jan vol 1 no 1, 1994, pp42-45

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