



Motivation Theory: moving beyond Maslow

One of the most well known theories of motivation is based on Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs". **Tony Crooks** argues that this model is of limited application to the management of teachers on the threshold of the 21st century.

Whenever two or three are gathered together in the name of human resource management in ELT, a fading OHT of the Sacred Pyramid is almost guaranteed to be displayed. Certainly, Maslow has had an enormous influence on Motivation Theory. However, in this article I suggest that the Hierarchy of Needs is of limited practical relevance to the ELT manager of today - that Maslow has been superseded by more recent models that are better suited to the management of professionals in a rapidly changing social and industrial environment.

Maslow's Hierarchy: a description

Maslow hypothesized that human motives are driven by five sets of human needs which emerge sequentially in a "hierarchy of relative prepotency" (Maslow 1943: 40). The five sets of needs, in the order in which - according to Maslow - an individual will seek to satisfy them are:

1. Physiological needs: the needs that must be fulfilled to ensure survival: hunger, thirst, warmth and other basic requirements. Income from employment allows people to satisfy these primary needs.

2. Safety needs: the need for security, stability, order and freedom from fear or threat. These are often

satisfied in organizations by such provisions as medical insurance, pensions and job tenure.

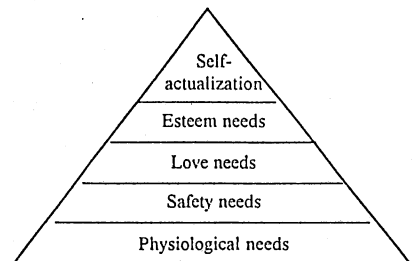
3. Love needs: the need for affection, support and a sense of belonging, which may be satisfied through social interaction in the workplace. Later commentaries on Maslow's Hierarchy (e.g. in McGregor 1960) generally prefer the term *social needs*.

4. Esteem needs: the need for, on the one hand, self-respect, independence and a feeling of adequacy, and on the other, status, recognition and appreciation. Such needs may be satisfied through positive feedback from colleagues or through organizational status symbols.

5. Self-actualization needs: the search for personal fulfilment, defined by Maslow (*art.cit.*: 44) as "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything one is capable of becoming".

People would only experience this desire, according to Maslow, when all other needs had been met, and few ever reach this level of the hierarchy (*loc.cit.*):

"Since, in our society, basically satisfied people are the exception, we do not know much about self-actualization, either experimentally or clinically."



Maslow's basic argument is that the lowest-order needs will be the central motivators of human behaviour until they are satisfied, at which point the focus of attention will move up the hierarchy to the next rank of needs, until these in turn are adequately fulfilled, and so on. A key assumption here is that once satisfied, a need no longer serves as a motivator. Maslow claims, furthermore (Maslow 1970), that this needs ascendancy process is instinctual and that the same types of needs can be almost universally observed across a range of cultures.

Influence of Maslow's model

The Hierarchy of Needs has exerted, and continues to exert, a significant influence on thinking and research on motivation. At the time he was writing, Maslow's needs model represented a significant departure from earlier theories of motivation in that it posited a range of non-physiological needs and

implicitly assumed that every individual has inherent growth tendencies. This reflected a more positive view of human nature than had been conveyed in most previous theories, such as the operant and drive theories in the behavioural tradition (e.g. Hull 1943) and the early psychoanalytic instinct theory (e.g. Freud 1925).

This growth-oriented view of the individual and the discovery of higher-order needs has provided an important impetus for the development of a number of innovative approaches to management theory over the past 50 years, from Theory Y (McGregor 1960; McGregor's theory is explicitly constructed on the foundation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs), through Schein's (1965) "complex man" model to High-involvement Management (Lawler 1986). At the same time, the concept of human needs continues to play an important role in almost all contemporary theories of motivation (Handy 1993; Bennett 1994).

Its influence on the development of motivation theory notwithstanding, a number of fundamental flaws have been pointed out in the needs hierarchy theory; some of these deficiencies have long been apparent, while others have only more recently come to light. Let us consider some of the most serious criticisms.

Shortcomings of Maslow's model

The most significant flaws in the theory are as follows:

1. The theory has been subjected to slight empirical testing and those tests that *have* been conducted do not show great evidence to support the theory (Salancik & Pfeffer 1977). A study by Wahba and Bridwell (1976) found no consistent support for Maslow's five needs categories or for his satisfaction-progression hypothesis.
2. Maslow has little to say about the origin and development of needs beyond hypothesizing that they are

instinctual and near-universal. More recent research suggests, however, that needs are socially acquired, and hence may vary between cultures (Bandura 1969). Maslow's ranking system, according to pride of place at the top of the pyramid to self-actualization and esteem needs over social and safety needs, may in actual fact represent not a universal motivation process, but a value system - the particular value system of the author's own social group (Hofstede 1980).

3. Even in modern industrialized societies there are too many obvious examples of behaviours that invalidate the hierarchy. The past 50 years have seen a dramatic increase in such societies in the general level of education, a greatly improved economic situation and a significant shift in societal values and attitudes. Due in large part perhaps to these changes in the social environment, two tendencies are more apparent at the present time than they were in the 1940s. On the one hand we have the "altruistic" behaviour of those such as volunteer aid workers - and, indeed, many working in ELT - who tolerate physiological and/or safety deprivation for the sake of meaningful employment. And on the other we have the distorted values of a consumer society, where the poor may be acutely conscious of higher needs (i.e. status symbols) even though their fundamental physiological needs have not been fully met (Bennett 1994).

4. Maslow defines the lower order needs clearly and precisely. Such clarity and precision is lost, however, as the needs hierarchy is ascended, and the concepts of self-actualization and esteem needs are vague and ambiguous. Now, in present-day industrial societies, fulfilment of physiological and safety needs is virtually guaranteed by government legislation. If we accept Maslow's contention that a satisfied need is no longer a motivator, then it is through satisfaction of the higher-order needs that modern managers will motivate

their employees. Maslow has little to offer, however, in terms of insights into such needs.

5. A further limitation of the theory in terms of industrial management is that it appears to overlook the fact that most individuals belong to more than one kind of organization (Handy 1993). Even if we accept the hierarchy, we cannot as managers assume that our employees will seek to fulfil their self-actualizing or esteem needs in the workplace.

6. A final shortcoming - and in terms of practical application a very serious one - is that there is no conceptual link in Maslow's model between satisfaction and performance.

A modification: Alderfer's ERG theory

In an attempt to overcome some of these deficiencies, a number of modifications of Maslow's theory have been put forward, of which perhaps the most interesting is Alderfer's ERG theory (Alderfer 1972). Alderfer retains the concept of a needs hierarchy and a satisfaction-progression hypothesis, but reduces the need categories to three: existence (E), relatedness (R) and growth (G). He also proposes a frustration-regression hypothesis, whereby an individual will seek further satisfaction of a lower-order need if the fulfilment of a higher-order need is frustrated.

ERG is a useful contribution to Motivation Theory, but in common with Maslow's needs hierarchy and with other content theories, it fails to address two important issues:

- (i) An individual's motivation is determined not by needs alone, but by an interaction of needs, incentives and individual perceptions. What is perceived by one person as a satisfying incentive (e.g. medical insurance, additional responsibilities) may not be satisfying for another. This subjective element to motivation is critical, since individuals respond to *perceptions* rather than to objective realities.

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(ii) Not only do needs vary, but so too do the behaviours that may lead to the satisfaction of those needs. Content theories do not address the issue of choice: how does an individual choose between alternative possible behaviours, any one of which might lead to the satisfaction of his particular needs?

Expectancy Theory

In response to these issues, **process models** of motivation have emerged, which account for the complexity of the relationship between the *what* of motivation and the *how* (e.g. Vroom 1964; Porter & Lawler 1968). Process or **expectancy theories** of motivation are based on the premise that individuals are motivated by the anticipated outcomes of their actions. The potential of a factor to motivate is contingent upon the perceived relationship between the value attached to a particular outcome (valence), the individual's ability to achieve the performance that will be rewarded by the outcome (expectancy) and the likelihood that the performance, once achieved, *will* lead to the outcome (instrumentality). An individual's behaviour is thus determined by a subjective evaluation of the strength of the correlation between

Effort → Performance → Outcome.

This approach differs from content theories in a number of significant ways:

- (i) There is no hierarchy of needs; the motivator is the individual perception of what is significant at a given moment.
- (ii) There is no classification of outcomes; individuals are motivated by their dominant value system.
- (iii) A macro approach becomes impossible; motivation is a subjective phenomenon.

Expectancy theory recognizes the complexities of human behaviour and views individuals as thinking, reasoning beings who have beliefs and anticipations about future events in

their lives (Hodgetts 1991). Process theories offer a more dynamic approach to human motivation than do content theories and are more forward-looking in their orientation. For these reasons they are considered by the majority of modern behavioural scientists (e.g. Hackman *et al.* 1977) and management authorities (e.g. Pinder 1984; Davies *et al.* 1990) to have largely superseded the more static, "collectivist" models of Maslow and the other content theorists.

Conclusion

The beliefs that managers have about motivation are important determinants of how they attempt to manage people. There is, accordingly, much truth in McGregor's (1960) assertion that assumptions about human motivation are at the core of any theory of the management of human resources.

As managers, we are acutely aware on a practical, commonsense level that the educated and intelligent individuals with whom we work differ widely in their needs and aspirations. In seeking to inform ourselves about Motivation Theory we should, therefore, be wary of models that purport to explain the *what* of motivation. It is time for ELT management to move beyond Maslow.

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