

Mastering Motivation

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There are 8,760 hours in a year.

Assuming you're getting the doctor-recommended 8 hours of sleep per day, you spend about 2,920 of those hours sleeping. If you work 40 or more hours per week, that means you spend at least 2,080 hours — or just over 35% of the time you're awake in each year — in the office, behind a computer screen, or otherwise engaged in work.

Add any time spent commuting, networking, or checking one last email at home, and it's easy to see how, whether you take a “work to live” or “live to work” approach to your career, in many ways, our work *is* our life. For decades, Maslow's hierarchy of needs has dominated the public understanding of what motivates us to get the most out of those hours, but the ongoing work of psychological scientists suggests that it may be time to give the pyramid a more modern look – or to let the way we conceptualize of workplace engagement take a new shape entirely.

A Stairway to Self-Realization

Maslow's hierarchy of needs – and its iconic pyramid diagram – is widely regarded as “one of the most cognitively contagious ideas in the behavioral sciences,” writes researcher Douglas T. Kenrick, a professor of psychology at Arizona State University, in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. The pyramid positions human motivation as existing within an intuitive hierarchy, such that basic needs, including hunger and belongingness, must be fulfilled before individuals can aspire to the lofty heights of esteem and self-actualization. The pyramid of needs remains a “robust cultural meme,” but a look back into psychological science's past suggests that Abraham Maslow may never have intended his theory to be portrayed as a pyramid at all.

As emeritus professor John Ballard (Mount St. Joseph University) and colleagues Todd Bridgman and Stephen Cummings (Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand) note in the *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, Maslow first published his theory of motivation in 1943 with the

caveat that any given behavior is likely motivated by a combination of needs. While it was true that a starving man “lived by bread alone,” Maslow believed such situations of true deprivation were relatively rare in the modern world, and that most people were able to focus on higher-level motives while their more basic needs were at least partially satisfied.

It wasn’t until over a decade later, in fact, that the hierarchy first appeared in pyramid form in the management textbook *Human Relations in Business* (Davis, 1957) — not as the streamlined triangle we know today, but as a stylized stairway depicting a businessman’s ascent from base hunger to heading a nuclear family unit and, in a nod to the battle of Iwo Jima, raising the American flag in a moment of patriotic “self-realization.” Three years later, the triangle we know today appeared in a business journal, *Business Horizons*, in the article “How money motivates men” by consultant C. D. McDermid.

This conceptual drift would continue for decades into the present, Ballard says, as textbook authors, motivational speakers, and other management experts packaged and repackaged Maslow’s hierarchy of needs for an executive audience. In that time, researchers’ empirical findings had begun to challenge the observational claims on which Maslow had built his theory, favoring everything from a two-level hierarchy, to the possibility that needs may differ in priority according to personality traits such as extraversion and introversion, as well as Clayton P. Alderfer’s Existence, Relatedness, and Growth (ERG) model (Alderfer, 1969).

Nonetheless, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs remains popular in management circles and entry-level psychology textbooks alike. The pyramid design firmly established the supposedly sequential nature of human motivation, Ballard and colleagues note — perhaps in part because of the way it has been used to position self-actualization as territory reserved primarily for upper management, researchers, and other professional elites.

“Senior executives who were providing research access and other resources for this kind of empirical research at this time would have found agreeable a theory that implied those at the top of the hierarchy had reached a more advanced state of human development,” Ballard and colleagues explain.

Remodeling the Pyramid

Although Maslow’s hierarchy of needs may seem a little dated today, that doesn’t mean it’s time to bring out the wrecking ball — these and other points of criticism have led Kenrick and colleagues to integrate recent findings from evolutionary, developmental, and cognitive psychology research in an effort to “renovate” the pyramid instead.

“We argue that the basic foundational structure of the pyramid is worth preserving, but that it should be buttressed with a few architectural extensions,” Kenrick and colleagues write in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

The researchers suggest two primary modifications to how human motivation is conceptualized in the context of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. In their model, motives that develop later in the human lifespan build upon, rather than replace, earlier developing goals such as physiological needs and self-protection, which remain in the background, ready to become reactivated when necessary.

Additionally, advances in research and theory on human evolution have led the researchers to replace self-actualization at the peak of the pyramid in favor of goals related to reproduction, whether that means having children or supporting the upbringing of relatives and other youths.

“The top of our hierarchy is defined by taking care of others — not pursuing that which gives one idiosyncratic pleasure,” Kenrick and colleagues write.

Kin care requires individuals to divert resources away from self-directed goals and toward the development of other people in their social network, the authors explain, something people can only afford, from an evolutionary perspective, only after they have at least partially satisfied their own needs.

Self-actualization may not function as a distinct need itself, but the researchers believe it still has a place on the pyramid as a part of the needs for social status, esteem, and mating — a stance supported by the popular notion of what it means to become the best “you” you can be.

In a survey of 725 participants ranging in age from 18 to 74 years old, Kenrick and colleagues Jaimie Krems (Oklahoma State University) and Rebecca Neel (University of Iowa) had individuals write about what they believed they would be doing at that point in their lives if they were “realizing their full potential.” Participants then rated the extent to which they associated a series of fundamental biological and social motives (e.g., self-protection, disease avoidance, affiliation, status seeking, mate acquisition, mate retention, and kin care) with those goals.

In line with Maslow’s assertion that self-actualization takes different forms for different people, Kenrick and colleagues found that the ways in which people conceptualized their best selves depended on their life stage and history. Across age groups, participants reported status-seeking as most closely related to self-actualization in their professional and academic lives, whereas those with children also associated it closely with kin care. Single participants were more likely to emphasize mate acquisition in their responses, whereas partnered people focused more on maintaining their existing relationship.

This suggests that the desire to achieve one’s full potential may not be a distinct drive, but rather an unconscious by-product of other fundamental motives, Kenrick and colleagues write in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Even our loftiest professional, parental, and romantic achievements may be linked to these “baser” biological and social payoffs.

Regardless of where this sense of personal striving falls on the hierarchy of needs, Kenrick adds, it may not pay off in the way managers expect.

“Self-actualization seems to fit with an emphasis on individual accomplishment, something extolled in the American workplace, and central to an economically self-interested world view,” Kenrick said. “Ironically, though, I believe there is evidence that business leaders who focus on their own successes are less effective at achieving their organization’s goals.”

Building Something New

A pyramid isn’t the only shape our understanding of workplace motivation can take, of course, and bringing an empirical edge to how we approach employee engagement has taken some psychological

scientists in a relatively new direction: self-determination theory, which suggests that people are motivated to work not only in pursuit of a paycheck and other extrinsic rewards, but also to fulfill their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

In a *Psychological Science* study of 642 female students in Malawi, for example, Marieke Christina van Egmond (University of Hagen, Germany) and colleagues found that even in conditions in which access to basic resources such as food, water, and medical care was limited, students' self-reported motivation to complete schoolwork for its own sake was predictive of attendance, whereas extrinsic motivation (such as feeling obligated to attend school) was not.

Regardless of their level of deprivation, participants also reported similar feelings of relatedness, competence, and autonomy, which in turn gave rise to higher levels of intrinsic motivation and school attendance, suggesting that they were able to fulfill these psychological needs even as their physiological needs may not have been fully met.

In line with self-determination theory's view of humans as "active, growth oriented organisms," van Egmond and colleagues wrote, these findings suggest that although physical and psychological need satisfaction may go hand in hand, one is not entirely dependent on the other.

Fulfilling the needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy also plays a central role in encouraging employee engagement, says Arnold B. Bakker, a professor of work and organizational psychology at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

This sense of rigor and enthusiasm, Bakker writes in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, is often fostered in socially supportive work environments in which employees receive constructive feedback and have the freedom to make creative decisions about how they set and achieve professional goals. Within Bakker's job demands — resources model of engagement, these conditions can create a proactive cycle in which employees take more initiative at work, boosting performance and allowing them to "job craft" by molding their position to more closely align with their skills and needs, which in turn fosters further engagement.

In a study of 89 teachers working in Croatian secondary schools, Bakker and colleagues also found that employees were more intrinsically motivated when they felt challenged by their professional environment rather than hindered by it, leading to increased engagement and wellbeing at work.

Each of the teachers responded to an online survey at least twice over a 5-day period, reporting their feelings of positive affect, engagement, and intrinsic motivation, as well as the challenges or hindrances they encountered that day.

On days when teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by hindrances, such as unclear expectations or bureaucratic obstacles, including inflexible rules or paperwork, they also reported being less intrinsically motivated to complete tasks, undermining their ability to engage with their students. When teachers reported that they had the time and resources necessary to take on challenges, meet deadlines, and otherwise address their professional goals, however, they also reported being more intrinsically motivated, which was accompanied by increased engagement and feelings of dedication, meaning, and absorption in their work.

Striking a Balance

One person's hindrance may be another's challenge, and what qualifies as one or the other can vary from day to day for individuals as well — what matters is a person's sense of self-efficacy in a given situation. As Bakker and colleagues Maja Tadić Vujčić and Wido G. M. Oerlemans note in the *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, hindrances can lead employees to feel as though uncontrollable external factors are preventing them from meeting the demands of their job, while challenges seem to promote professional growth, learning, and personal development.

“Challenge demands can enhance employees' felt sense that the work they do is fun, interesting, and meaningful,” the authors explain, which encourages individuals to put in effort at work not only to accomplish the functional goal of getting paid, but also to achieve a sense of significance and fulfillment.

Teaching is among one of the most demanding professions a person can choose, Bakker notes — challenge, while motivating, can also be a double-edged sword, with engagement on one side and burnout on the other. Even tasks that an individual might perceive as rewarding under the right circumstances, such as working with a challenging student, can become a drain when a person lacks the time, resources, or freedom to address a task to the best of their abilities.

In fact, Bakker adds, it's possible that even engagement itself may be best in moderation, and that providing employees with opportunities to rest and recover throughout the workday could lead to increased productivity overall.

These and other findings suggest that, whether we look at motivation through the lens of self-determination theory or the pyramid of needs, success on the job is about more than just putting in the hours — it's about striking a balance between the psychological, physical, and environmental factors that allow us to put our best selves into our work.

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