Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Its Relation to Learning and Achievement[1]

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Introduction

Learners in courses or training can be preoccupied—they worry about other courses, their home life, friends, extracurricular activities, physiological needs like food and sleep, and the list goes on. When learners are preoccupied with these concerns, learning and achievement are regularly put on the back burner. Why? According to one human psychologist, it's because current concerns are driving the learner's behavior. When learners are concerned about certain needs, their behavior is centered on meeting those needs. Other concerns will then take precedence over learning and achievement. So how do we get our learners to focus on learning? Instructors can help learners satisfy needs, so the focus can be on content, learning, and achievement.

Maslow's Hierarchy

Humans are fueled by a desire to achieve goals. Attaining goals helps humans satisfy specific needs and desires. Needs are categorized into a hierarchy, in which certain needs must be met before others (Maslow, 1943). Lower needs must be satisfied before higher-order needs can be reached. Behaviors will be centered on meeting the needs in the lowest order, and then will progress to higher orders as needs are satisfied.

Beginning at the bottom of the pyramid (Figure 1), physiological needs must be met first. Physiological needs include food, shelter, clothing, and sleep. If these needs are not met, then all efforts are focused on these needs. Physiological needs are the most important, and if they are not met, they will be the biggest motivating factor for an individual. If hunger is the issue, all other needs and desires will be suppressed in order to satisfy hunger. A learner may act out and cause disruptions or be insubordinate because the learner's first concern is not learning but rather obtaining food. In the same respect, learners may fall asleep instead of completing work because they did not sleep the night before, and thus sleep is the motivating factor for their behavior, rather than learning.

After physiological needs have been met, the next need that must be satisfied is safety. Safety needs are generally concerned with the environment and can be seen at home, at school, and elsewhere. If a child has a bad home life (fighting parents, addicted parents, absent parents, etc.) or lives in an unsafe neighborhood, the child will have trouble focusing on learning when he/she does not feel secure. Likewise, if a student does not feel safe at school, due to bullies or a feeling of dislike from the teacher, the student will also have trouble completing work and learning material, because the primary concern is safety. Learners also view safety through a predictable and orderly world—they have an undisrupted routine or rhythm. If learners do not have a routine, or the routine is in jeopardy, learners can feel anxious and unsafe. This will lead to underperformance by the learner.

Once physiological and safety needs are adequately met, love and belongingness needs become important. These needs include friendships and family relations. This sense of belonging is developed through participation in clubs, volunteer groups, churches, commitments, and others. When individuals feel deprived of love and belongingness, they hunger for affectionate relationships with people or strive for a place within a group. The need for love and belonging is often overlooked; however, this need can often be just as important as physiological needs.

The next need that must be satisfied is self-esteem. Self-esteem includes confidence, achievement, respect of others, and a need to be a unique individual. Most people desire to have a high evaluation of their self, which is based upon a realistic interpretation of their capacity and achievement from others. Self-esteem is often divided into two groups. First, a person will desire strength, adequacy, confidence, and achievement in the face of the world. Second, a person will desire a reputation or prestige, recognition, appreciation, and importance. When both groups of needs are satisfied, individuals feel worth, strength, capability, and adequacy. However, if they are not met, individuals will feel inferior, weak, and helpless.
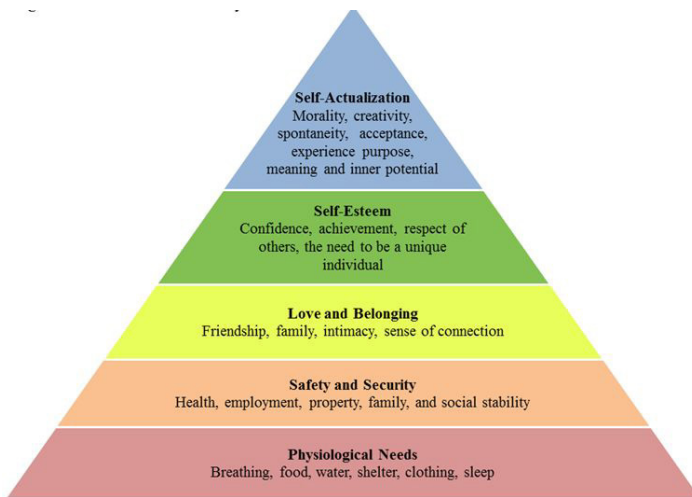

Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

The first four needs can be categorized as deprivation needs; the lack of satisfaction of these needs produces deficiencies that will motivate people to work towards satisfying these needs. Beyond the deprivation needs is one more need, self-actualization—the desire for self-fulfillment. This is the desire for one to become everything that one is capable of becoming. This need is not motivated by a deficiency but rather by a desire for personal growth. Maslow indicates that few people will ever fully reach this level. Self-actualized individuals are spontaneous, are problem-centered, have an increased perception of reality, and are autonomous.

Applying Maslow's Hierarchy

Now that we understand the basic tenets of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, it is important to understand how this knowledge can be applied to learning and achievement. First, we must realize that unfortunately we cannot meet the physiological needs of all of our learners. There is no possible way that a teacher or group leader can provide food, clothing, shelter, and adequate sleep for each learner. Fortunately, free and reduced lunch programs have helped combat the effects of hunger in schools. However, ensuring that learners have clothing, healthy personal hygiene habits, and adequate sleep is still a concern. Furthermore, based on this model, we know that when these basic needs are not met, learners will not be able to focus on learning. Unfortunately, we must deem this need as one that we cannot meet as teachers, but we can do our best to provide learners with access to programs within our school that address these needs.

In terms of safety needs, there are several factors that teachers and group leaders can consider to help make learners feel safe. As discussed earlier, a feeling of safety can be derived from a routine or a predictable world. As teachers or group leaders, it is important to establish a routine in your learning environment. Clearly define procedures and rules for your learners. Provide an agenda for the day so learners know what to expect. Learners will feel they have more control over the learning environment by simply being aware of what to expect during instruction. In addition, learners should feel psychologically and emotionally safe within your learning environment. As the teacher, you should provide an environment where learners feel at ease to take risks—answering questions, asking questions, or sharing their thoughts, without fear of ridicule from other learners. Learners will also want to establish trust with the teacher.

In order to help satisfy love and belongingness needs, as well as self-esteem needs, a learner will want to feel loved and cared about. They often seek this fulfillment from teachers or other personnel. As teachers or group leaders, we must ensure that our learners know they are valued as individuals. Teachers must take advantage of every opportunity to reinforce positive learner behavior and self-esteem. Let learners know that you appreciate the effort they are making during your time together in your learning environment. This reinforcement will aid in a learner's development of a favorable self-image.

Teachers and group leaders mainly deal with the four deprivation needs (physiological, safety, love and belonging, and self-esteem). Any efforts that you can make to contribute to these needs will greatly improve a learner's ability to learn and achieve in your learning environment. Make sure that you take time to get to know your learners and understand their knowledge level and level on Maslow's Hierarchy. By doing this, you will be in a better position to help learners move up the hierarchy. Often we must seek outside or governmental resources (for lower need-level learners) in order to help prepare learners for a learning situation. However, the more you understand the basic needs of each student, the more likely you are to help remove obstacles from learning so that learning can be enhanced and maximized.

References

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