

Applying Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory of Motivation to Workplace Learning

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Dr. Abraham Maslow studied workplace motivation of employees in the years following World War II. His research has been referenced and adapted many times over the years. From a workplace learning perspective, you can use the five levels of motivation that Maslow identified to focus your efforts in encouraging learners to accomplish established learning goals and to reward them for successes.

The following are the five levels of need (from highest to lowest) in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs along with ways that you can address each level for your learners. As Maslow stressed, the basic needs must be fulfilled before any other level can be attained because the first level involves basic survival issues.

Basic/Physiological Needs

Maslow realized that people need to deal with the survival needs before they move on to any other levels of need. If they do not have the necessary food, clothing, water, shelter, and other crucial elements to survive, they are not likely to be concerned about learning new skills to qualify them for future jobs. Workplace learning professionals typically address basic needs by providing food and water throughout a session, allowing regular restroom or comfort breaks (at least every 60-90 minutes), and providing an adequate lunch period. They can also build training programs and class content that add value and that will help learners maintain their current jobs and ultimately move on to higher paying ones that will increase the amount of money they have available to satisfy basic needs.

Safety or Security

To address this level of the hierarchy, you must consider physical as well as psychological safety and security. As a workplace learning professional you can do common sense things like make sure that the environment contains no safety hazards, such as equipment wires that are not taped down, broken furniture, boxes that can cause accidents, or equipment that might fall and injure someone.

You can also provide mental security by stressing that the learning environment is a "safe" area in which they should feel free to ask questions, offer ideas, disagree, and explore issues that they have related to the topic without feel of intimidation, embarrassment or that someone will report back to their boss or human resources (assuming information disclosed does not violate policy or law or is not threatening). Also, explain how the material covered will assist learners to become more effective and efficient in the workplace or other situations, thereby helping to solidify their position in the organization as a knowledgeable, skilled employee or individual.

Social/Belonging

This level of Maslow's theory deals with love, acceptance, friendship, and companionship. As a workplace learning professional or facilitator you can address the need that many people have to socialize and feel part of a group by designing programs that have a number of opportunities for participants to interact with you and other learners. You can also include a networking period before or after training or class or have a group luncheon where learners can share ideas and commune. This might even be a "working lunch" in which participants are given assignments to find out things about others in the group to solve problems.

Esteem/Self-Esteem

When people are at this point of Maslow's hierarchy, they are focused on personal ego, what others think of them, self-respect, achievement, and receiving recognition for efforts given. Most people want to be respected and appreciated by others. In a learning environment, you can address this need by deferring to someone's expertise or knowledge, recognizing accomplishments, and otherwise providing an environment where learners can feel the satisfaction of having others applaud accomplishments. You can also build in little accolades during training in which participants cheer or applaud the efforts of someone who accomplishes something, offers a solution, or otherwise does something worthy or group recognition. A simple round of applause for a good response might be appropriate from time-to-time to meet this need.

Self-Actualization

This is what the old U.S. Army slogan of "Be all you can be" was all about several years ago. Their premise was "Join us and we will provide you with the tools and support to reach your maximum potential." To this end, as a workplace learning professional, you must identify where learners hope to go as it relates to level of achievement in your sessions. Then, help them get there. This can be done through instruction, coaching, mentoring, and providing tools and resources to allow them to succeed in implementing what they have learned in training on the job.

The key to successfully applying Maslow's theory or any other motivation concepts is to remember that what motivates one person does not necessarily motivate another. In fact, some motivators might actually de-motivate a learner. Consider all learners when designing and using strategies in your sessions. Make sure that you provide a wide spectrum of rewards, incentives, and opportunities so that you appeal to all levels of learning need.

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