

C AUTION: MASLOW HAS IT RIGHT

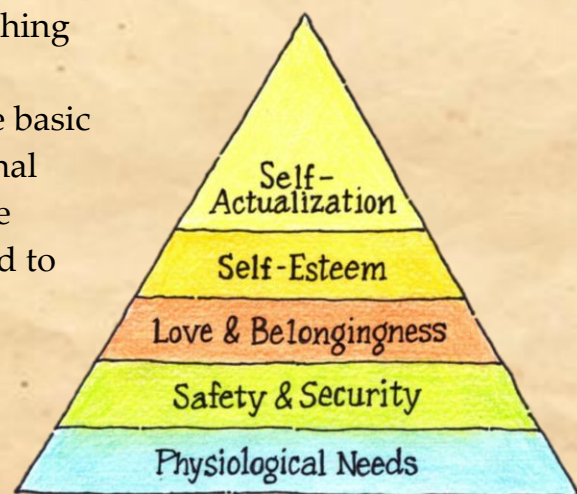
Remember learning about Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs? He postulated that humans faced the challenge of meeting a sequential series of needs: (1) physiological (air, water, food, shelter, sleep), (2) safety & security, (3) love and belonging, (4) status & self-esteem, and (5) self-actualization. Maslow's work has much to offer us as leaders as we strive to understand employees and foster their growth.

Outstanding leaders want members of their staff to embrace the opportunity to contribute to the success of their company, and to tie that contribution to their personal sense of self-worth. They want employees to feel they are part of something special, something bigger than themselves, something worthy of pride. Great leaders want to help employees view their work as much more than labor that must be endured to secure needed compensation; they are eager to have employees grasp that work is better viewed as an important and positive aspect of who we are.

Yet most experienced leaders will tell us that even with their best efforts to convey and promote this important attitude, many employees either miss or actively rebuff the message. Why? Here Maslow comes to our rescue.

Maslow teaches us that before we can hope to have employees value being part of something elite and to see their job is an important contributor to their self-esteem, their more basic needs must first be met. Until their personal lives are stable and secure, it is improbable that they are going to passionately respond to our inducements for professional growth. In short, **employees will be tone deaf to appeals to their sense of belonging, status, or self-esteem when and if their personal lives are in chaos.**

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Another use for Maslow's insight is when a previously high performing staff member shows a sudden decline. Leaders should consider whether a more basic need has become vulnerable or unmet. Attempts to address the "performance deficit" are likely to be less than successful without also addressing the more basic need deficit.

This insight will help leaders avoid the frustration associated with staff members who seem to be stuck with respect to professional growth. The problem could be ability, learned helplessness, or stubbornness...but it may also be motivation – a situation that Maslow's elegantly simple but powerful model helps us both understand and anticipate.

Finally, Maslow has something to offer us with respect to the type of training opportunities that we choose to offer staff members, i.e., why the best training programs have a more broad focus than just the development of job skills, i.e., a focus on the knowledge and skills that can help employees be more successful in life. If a company can provide training and support that transforms an employee's personal life from chaos to stability, the professional growth spurt that can then occur can be impressive.

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