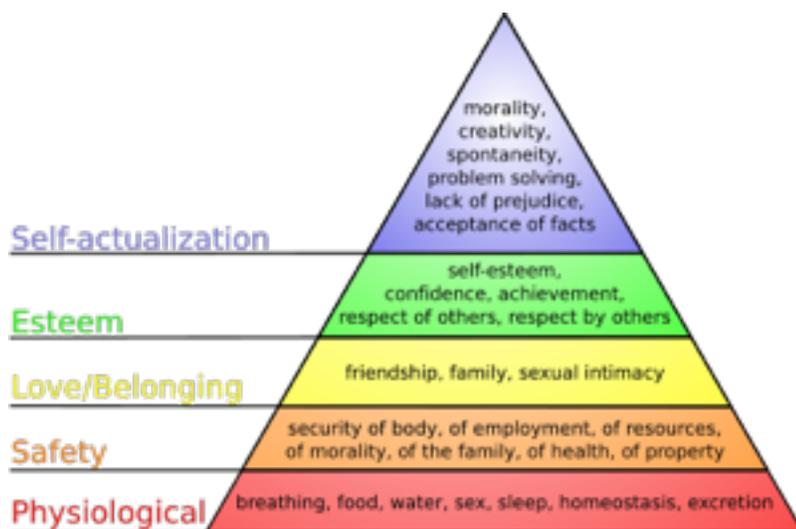


Chapter 3

The Psychological Meaning Of Work

What you understand as the meaning of work will determine how you motivate yourself and your staff to succeed. It is this background that shapes your perceptions of everything you observe in the work environment. Even when it seems that a person is simply working for a paycheck, work can have much more meaning than simply a means to getting paid. Let's look again at Maslow's hierarchy of needs; it is very useful to this discussion. From Maslow's perspective there are five dimensions/levels of need to consider. Each represent a different type of meaning as it relates to work. Each layer builds upon the one below it; each operates simultaneously and independently, making the "meaning of work" a very rich and complex psychological phenomenon.



Physiological Needs

Humans are different in many ways from other animals, but we are not separate. Without air we suffocate. Without food we starve. Without shelter we become hypothermic and suffer multi-system failure. Without water we eventually go into terminal hypovolemic shock. Worldwide, one in twelve people are malnourished. Starvation is the leading cause of human death worldwide, effecting children disproportionately. On average, six million children die annually of starvation.

There are some people who have enough money they do not need to work to support themselves, but for everyone else “working for a paycheck” corresponds to the *physiological* level in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs model.

Work = Survival

In more “advanced” countries, the connection between the paycheck we receive and the calories needed to survive has become abstract for most people. For those on programs like Food Stamps, the connection is clearer. The number of people who become homeless each year has grown enormously. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s June 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (2010 AHAR)¹, on a given night in January 2010, 407,966 individuals were homeless, sleeping in shelters, transitional housing programs, or on the streets. At that time 109,812 individuals were considered chronically homeless.

Homelessness is not death, but it can lead to death under some circumstances. Living in the elements with poor access to food and medical care can complicate and exacerbate many medical conditions. Exposure to the cold can be deadly. In New York City alone there were 80 exposure deaths between 2001 and 2003¹. At a minimum, homelessness is a severely negative experience for almost everyone who experiences it. This makes the possibility of losing a job a real issue of survival for those at risk of homelessness.

However, even when we do not live so close to the edge, on an unconscious level we still feel the ancient association between loss of work (the ability to hunt or gather the calories needed for survival) and potential death. Most scientific studies place the beginnings of modern culture, which is based on symbolic language and tools made of stone, at 50,000 years from the present day. For the most part, the bounty of civilization and its associated institutional protections minimize the chance of starvation occurring, but the fear is still there, rooted in millions of years of evolution.

Safety Needs

At the level of *safety* in Maslow’s hierarchy, “employment” is a prerequisite for a person to feel secure. For individuals to feel secure they must know that their employment can be

¹ Source: a report titled *The Health of Homeless Adults Living in New York City* issued in 2005 by the NYC Departments of Health and Mental Hygiene and Homeless Services.

counted on, that they are not at risk of losing it. Sometimes and an employee will seek out a temporary position because it meets their personal needs, but when this is not the case, a temporary position almost always creates a situation that makes an employee feel vulnerable and anxious. It is not an accident that unions quite often will forgo pay increases in return for increased job security for their members. They know that in a crunch, their membership would almost always choose guaranteed earnings with a cut in pay over job cuts linked to a pay increase.

The acquisition of Zagats by Google illustrates the emotional significance of temporarily vs. full time work. In the article, *How A Great Google Workplace Turned Into A 'Nightmare'*, Nicholas Carlson describes how betrayed full time Zagats employees felt when Google acquired their company and then made them temporary employees. They tolerated this downgrading of their status and security for awhile, on the assumption that they would eventually be made full time employees. Whether or not they were promised this change, when the change did not happen, they felt betrayed. Much more happened in the process of Google making attempts to make the Zagats acquisition work that made this experience a "nightmare" for the Zagats staff, but this safety issue was at the center of the staff's demoralization.

Love and Belonging Needs

Maslow's third level of need is *Love and Belonging*. This level ties to Freud's definition of mental health: *the ability to love and to work*, but not work in the sense it was described above, but work as a means of feeling socially connected to others and to one's community, work that makes a contribution in some way. When this occurs a person feels productive. When it doesn't, they feel useless. When people feel suicidal it is most often because they feel either unloved, socially unconnected, or useless.

People feel productive when they observe themselves making contributions to the communities in which they live. Work does not need to generate a paycheck in order for it to be experienced as productive. In fact, it is often easier to connect the meaning of volunteer work to making a difference in the lives of others and our community than paid work. Volunteer work is a matter of choice, whereas paid work quite often is not. People choose what volunteer work they do on the basis of the meaning it holds for them.

School work is preparation for making a future contribution to our families, communities, etc. Many students understand this connection; they look forward to going to school.

However, school can be experienced as meaningless when parents, teachers, and others with whom the student affiliates do not communicate the value of this preparation or if it is not clear that the preparation being provided can truly lead to future opportunities to contribute. If parents have had no experience that education can make a difference to a child's future, their attitude is likely to be picked up by their kids and their kids will go to school feeling that preparation through schooling is pointless. Students may look at the environment in which they live and conclude that being a lookout for the local drug dealer is the most predictable preparation for their future productivity, even though they risk prison or death. Teachers who do not or cannot communicate the value of what they are teaching to their students will leave many students thinking that school is a waste of time. On the other hand, a great teacher can sometimes transcend the messages a student has received at home or in their neighborhood about education, inspiring a student to both think and act "out of the box." For them, school is experienced as a bridge to both a secure and a meaningful future.

Military work in the 21st Century is a far cry from what it was just a century ago. Soldiers in WWI were treated as cannon fodder, indistinguishable men hurled out of the trenches towards enemy lines simply to gain a few hundred yards of mud and debris. Recruitment tactics focused primarily on an appeal to male machismo ("Join Now and Test Your Courage"), retaliation ("Avenge the Lusitania"), or patriotism ("Protect the Nation's Honor"). Contrast this with today's military marketing which emphasizes individual skills, values, and ethics. Here is a description of being a soldier from various U.S. Military recruitment websites²:

- *To be a U.S. Army Soldier is to be a part of the strongest fighting force in the world. You'll spend your days training, working and serving together to protect America's freedoms. But you'll also have time after work for family, friends and personal interests. From recruitment to retirement, the U.S. Army provides a unique and diverse lifestyle for Soldiers.*
- *The values that define a Marine: courage, honor, and commitment. Marines are held to the highest standards, ethically and morally. Respect for others is essential. Marines are expected to act responsibly in a manner befitting the title they've earned.*
- *The core values of the U.S. Air Force: integrity first; service before self; excellence in all we do.*

Military officers (managers) who don't deliver on these values increasingly find themselves in hot water with their superiors because the retention of our highly trained military men and

² February, 2010.

women suffers. Re-enlistment is not just driven by opportunities for advancement, it is driven by a feeling of belonging to an organization where advertised values actually matter and their hard work contributes to success.

Participating in work that contributes to an organization's success is vital. Whether a person schedules meetings for a large white-collar business or pours cement for the foundations of buildings, people need to see the connection between what they do and the organization's larger objectives. When workers can see that the quality of the job they do is directly connected to the quality of the overall product or service their organization produces, they will experience their work and themselves as valuable to others. They will feel that they are productive and that they belong.

The successful manager communicates to staff that their work matters to the overall organization and to the manager personally. Both communications are equally important. You might think, "It's enough that my staff feel a connection to their team; the connection to me is optional." This would not be true. The manager is the embodiment of the group. Certainly there are some staff who will say to themselves, "The boss is awful. He doesn't understand what great work I'm doing. I'll just do my best to ignore him and keep doing what I'm doing because I know I'm making a difference." Some people can value their work without approval from above, but most cannot. They generally regard their boss' appraisal of their work as a very important, if not a critical indicator of their value as a productive employee. This is a heavy responsibility for management. It is also an opportunity to shape behavior and motivate a group to work together to achieve collective goals.

Self-esteem Needs

Positive *self-esteem* flows naturally from a person feeling productive. To communicate effectively with staff that their work matters, the manager needs to be specific about how the staff member's work contributes to the overall effort of the group. The more specific a manager can be, the better. For example:

Mark: your getting our Board meetings scheduled a year ahead of time means that we we'll have a high level of attendance at our meetings, which is critical. These are the meetings where our policy and budget decisions get made.

Abby: your tracking exactly what time every car rolls off each of our lines makes it possible for us to know not only how many units we're producing per day from each line, but how well our new

assembly processes are working. The company just invested \$90,000,000 to make these changes. We can't know whether this investment succeeded without the information that you provide.

Tony: clearing the brush from the southwest corner is now going to take you two full days since Pete is needed at our other site all week and won't be available to work with you. Sorry, it can't be helped at this point. We can't meet our deadline for this month if that foundation isn't done on Friday, so, thanks in advance for getting the brush cleared.

It is also important that you look for opportunities to praise staff's work from a perspective that aligns with what they see as important. You may value their being good at the details, but they may value their ability to see the big picture. You may value efficiency, but they may see more value in the intensity or difficulty of their effort. You may value communication and relationships, but they may value data and blueprints. Of course, all of these lists could be reversed. None of the values are inherently staff or manager values.

Self-actualization Needs

Woven into Maslow's pyramid is the concept of *self-actualization*.³ To be self-actualized is to feel fulfilled as a human being, having had the opportunity to express and put to use all of your abilities. Self-actualization is not a destination, it is a process, a desire, a motivation that drives us forward. It is "the full realization of one's potential, and of one's 'true self'". Maslow saw self-actualization as the pinnacle of individual development. For some of us, there is the opportunity in the workplace to achieve our potential as creative problem solvers and innovators who push the envelope of what is known. Whether we are building a faster computer, growing safer food, defending our country, or building more efficient office buildings, there are opportunities to feel that we gave the effort 100 percent, that we used all of our brain power, heart and soul to achieve something of value.

It is not necessary to be a manager in an organization to have an opportunity to feel self-actualized, but it helps. There is an advantage to having our work amplified through the work of those who work for us. To manage is to have a degree of power, control and responsibility that is greater than that of the individual workers who reports to us. This

³ The term, "self-actualization" was first used by Kurt Goldstein (INSERT REF #), who believed self-actualization to be our most basic drive. He would more likely have put this drive at the bottom of his pyramid (had he drawn one) rather than at the top as Maslow did.

increased degree of power and control generally gives us more freedom to do things our way, both in terms of content and style.

Although we get to set the rules for how we work and the agendas that guide our work, this power is rarely absolute. Almost all managers also have a boss who sets rules and agendas for them. However, to be a manager is to have a sphere of influence that allows us to shape the work environment in a more meaningful way than those who work for us. This a major incentive to become a manager - to see what we can achieve when *we* are in charge.

This can't be accomplished without taking risks. When we commit to a task, it is inevitable that our fallible intellectual abilities, our unreliable imaginations, our fickle and fluid emotions will sometimes lead us to fall short of the mark. Sometimes we will achieve what we thought was impossible. There are no five, seven, or twelve simple steps for eliminating these risk or the possibility of failure. Self-actualization is not a state of bliss. It is a state of effort and attitude that leaves us feeling, "I am myself and I am fully alive. Sometimes I know that through the joy I feel, sometimes I know it through the pain I feel."

A question you might be asking yourself is, "As a manager, should I expect that my work should necessarily lead to my feeling engaged on this level?" I encourage you to be honest in assessing for yourself just how fulfilling your work is. If your work is paying the bills and meeting your self-esteem needs, but not helping you to grow professionally, then it is important to evaluate the true non-financial costs of this situation. Evaluating just how unfulfilled you feel and how long you anticipate you will be locked into an unfulfilling job will make a big difference in what you decide to do next. I don't have a formula to help you make a decision. What I can tell you is this: over time, an unfulfilling position will wear you down, impacting your psychological and physical health. The same is true of work that is fulfilling, but takes so much of your time that other (non-work) needs are not being met.

Of course, it might seem to you that you really need a bigger house, a fancier caror whatever "to survive" in the social strata in which you find yourself. Again, I encourage you to be honest with yourself about this assessment. The cliché that money or prestige can't buy happiness is true. It can buy good healthcare of course, but this is healthcare you might not have needed if you hadn't worn down your immune system by working 60-hour weeks and/or sticking with a stressful and unfulfilling job. A meta-analysis of 485 studies conducted by Faragher, Cass, and Cooper in the *Journal Occupational & Environmental Medicine*, showed a significant link between job satisfaction and psychological problems as well as a modest, but still significant correlation with physical illness.

The concept of Wellness has relatively recently supplanted discussions of illness, illness prevention, and even health. As summarized by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the federal agency involved in promoting best practices related to behavioral health, “Wellness means overall well-being. It incorporates the mental, emotional, physical, ***occupational***, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of a person's life. Each aspect of wellness can affect overall quality of life, so it is important to consider all aspects of health.”

I have bolded and italicized the occupational dimension of Wellness to draw your attention to the relevance of the discussion of self-actualization to the topic of Wellness. The occupational dimension of Wellness is defined as “personal satisfaction and enrichment from one’s work.” This definition correlates highly with Maslow’s self-actualization level of need. In fact, the creators of the concept of Wellness drew heavily on his work. The image* below, provides a visual view, analogous to Maslow’s pyramid, of the Eight Dimensions of Wellness. Other authors have slightly different definitions of these dimensions and/or a slightly different number of dimensions, but the Eight Dimensions model is used most widely and isn’t much different than the other models.



- *1. Dunn, H.L. (1961). *High-Level Wellness*, Beatty Press: Arlington, VA.
2. Adapted from Swarbrick, M. (2006). A Wellness Approach. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 29(4), 311-314.

A discussion of the other seven dimensions of wellness goes beyond the intended scope of this chapter. The topic is well worth reading about, however. References provided below for those interested in doing further reading on this subject.

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