What Maslow Missed

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Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is one of the most popular models in leadership writing. Developed in 1948, the hierarchy of needs is pervasive across many disciplines, including business, management, marketing, parenting technology, education and psychology.

Simple, orderly, intuitively sensible, cognitively appealing and offering order out of chaos, the hierarchy of needs has only one problem: it is plain, flat, dead wrong.

A fascinating article by Pamela Rutledge in Psychology Today entitled "Social Networks: What Maslow Misses" (November 2011) points out that Maslow's model misses the role of social connection.

Maslow's model, as its name suggests, organizes groups of human needs into levels in a hierarchical structure, forming a pyramid. It's similar in some senses to video games in that you have to fulfill the requirements of one set of needs before you can get to the next level up.

Maslow's model is hierarchical. The human brain at the base is driven by a basic instinct to survive with food drink and shelter. The second level is made up of the safety needs. The third level in Maslow's model comprises the social needs like family, affection, relationships, work groups, and community. The fourth level comprises the ego-centric needs of achievement, responsibility,

and reputation. And finally, at the top is self-actualization, personal growth and fulfillment.

In reviews of research based on Maslow's theory, little evidence has been found for the ranking of needs that Maslow described, or even for the existence of a definite hierarchy at all.

"Here's the problem with Maslow's hierarchy," explains Rutledge. "None of these needs — starting with basic survival on up — are possible without social connection and collaboration…. Without collaboration, there is no survival. It was not possible to defeat a Woolley Mammoth, build a secure structure, or care for children while hunting without a team effort. It's more true now than then. Our reliance on each other grows as societies became more complex, interconnected, and specialized. Connection is a prerequisite for survival, physically and emotionally."

"Needs are not hierarchical. Life is messier than that. Needs are, like most other things in nature, an interactive, dynamic system, but they are anchored in our ability to make social connections. Maslow's model needs rewiring so it matches our brains. Belongingness is the driving force of human behavior, not a third tier activity. The system of human needs from bottom to top, shelter, safety, sex, leadership, community, competence and trust, are dependent on our ability to connect with others. Belonging to a community provides the sense of security and agency that makes our brains happy and helps keep us safe."

Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Maslow "rewired"
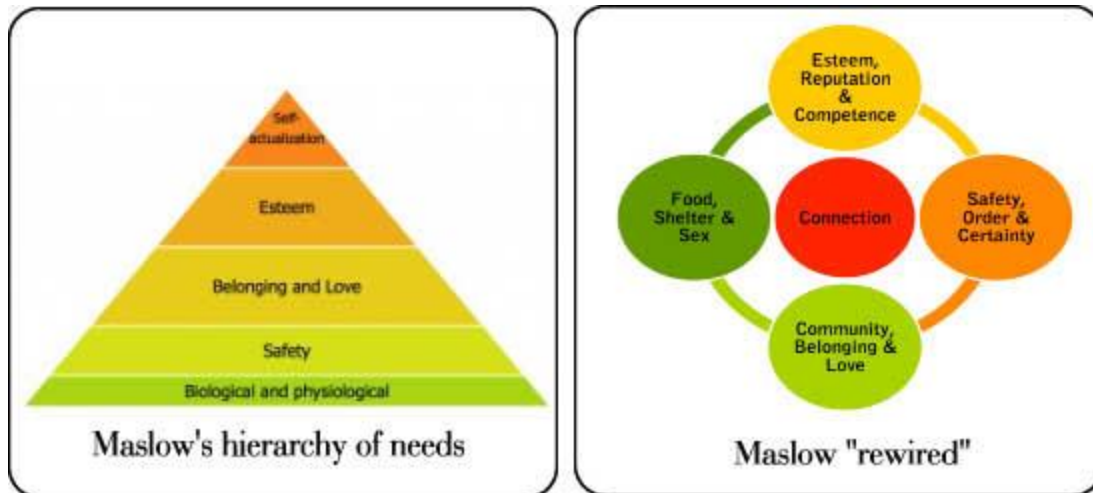
In some ways, life hasn't changed our fundamental human natures. Whether it's the ancient Savannah or today's Facebook and Twitter, social behaviors adapt to the environment to support that most basic of human needs. Social connection is ever-present.

What social media has done is make it infinitely easier for the social connection to take place. And today's young people entering the workplace, who have grown up in this inter-connected world, expect the workplace to reflect that. .

Implications for management

In 20th Century management, Maslow's hierarchy of needs was helpful to a certain extent in pointing out to managers why traditional managment—hierarchical bureaucracy with managers acting as controllers of individuals—was unlikely to meet the psychological needs of employees. But it offered an unrealistic route to meeting those needs: ascension up the hierarchy of needs towards self-actualization. The truth is that not everyone wants or needs or is able to be a self-actualizing artist or leader.

In reality, Rutledge's rewired version of psychological needs suggests a more realistic set of multiple paths, through social connection, to meet our varying psychology needs. What it implies, and the experience of radical management confirms, is that getting work done by people working together in self-organizing teams can meet most people's psychological needs without positing unrealistic goals of self-actualization as the be-all and end-all of life.