

Do we know what motivates us?

Most of us have heard and are familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs – physiological (our most basic needs), safety, love/belonging, esteem and finally self-actualization and this hierarchy of needs have been used in organizations as a guide to staff motivation.

Paul R Lawrence and Nitin Nohria, in their book 'Driven: How Human Nature shapes our choices', look at how people are driven by 4 emotional needs which form motivational strategies for organizations. Their 4 emotional needs do share some similarities with Maslow's, particular Maslow's last 3 needs ie Love/Belonging, Esteem and Self-Actualization. According to Lawrence and Nohria, the four emotional needs are:

1. Drive to acquire – tangibles as well as intangibles like status. This is related to our desire to own things – clothes, money and also travel and other 'products' or 'indicators' of success eg country club membership, bigger office space. The benchmarks for the acquisition is often based on what others have rather than what the individual needs. Can this be related to Maslow's need for Esteem – the need for self esteem, to earn the respect of others and to demonstrate one's achievement.
2. Bond – it is human nature to bond with others as we are social animals. Our fear of loneliness drives us to bond with others and develop a sense of belonging. In Maslow this is called a need for Love/Belonging.
3. Comprehend – the need to comprehend what is around us. This is related to our fear of the unknown. So we want to know the world around us and to make sense of it. At the same time we need to grow and learn and comprehend new things. Could this be related to Maslow's need for Self-actualisation? Does the comprehension helps us to self-actualise?
4. Defend – protect against threats. This feeling of defensiveness does not just refer to our need to be protected but also to protect. We defend what we know (comprehend and bond) and in the face of something unknown or uncertain (in a situation of change) we may become wary of the new things. Could this be related to Maslow's need for Safety? .

The 4 drives are independent and also related. Companies have attempted to meet the 4 drives through

- Reward system – particularly if it recognizes individual achievement and is performance based and is competitive.
- Culture of teamwork and camaraderie – foster mutual reliance and collaboration which is indicated under the Bond drive.
- Job design – ensuring a job is meaningful, interesting and challenging
- Performance management – transparency, equity and trust, allowing staff to grow, learn and develop.

The authors did a study of 2 global businesses in fortune 500. In summary they found that the way an organization focuses on the 4 drivers is most effective if it is a company wide initiative and at the same time also an individual manager's effort. They found that individual managers influence overall motivation as much as any organizational policy does. Employees recognize the efforts of individual managers. They expect their direct bosses to have some discretion even within an organization which does not have open policies or within company constraints.

(Based on article: "Employee Motivation, a powerful new model" in HBR July-Aug.08 pp 78-84)