

LEADERSHIP & CULTURE

The Key to Motivating Staff

By Leyla Hussein • 14 January 2019



I once gave two people on the same team the same pay rise on the same day. One was delighted. The other barely reacted, and a month later told me she was thinking of leaving. Same money, completely different effect. That is the whole puzzle of motivation in a single afternoon, and Maslow explained it decades before I lived it.

So ask yourself first: what actually motivates you at work? Climbing the ladder? A bonus? The satisfaction of knowing you are performing well? Your colleagues, your team, the work itself? Maslow pulled all of these drivers together into one theory, the [Hierarchy of Needs](#). His argument is that a person carries many needs at once, and therefore many motivators, and that the one in charge changes over time depending on where they currently stand. The theory is used to nudge [employers](#), [managers and teachers](#) to look closely at the individual in front of them and work out what they actually need and what is driving them to get it.

How it works

At the base of Maslow's pyramid sit the most basic needs. The higher you climb, the more specific the need becomes and the more content the person already is. Take someone struggling to afford food with a family to support. They are not chasing job satisfaction, because that is nowhere near their priority. Their priority is to earn as much as they can to cover the essentials: food, shelter, clothing. Solve that, and they and their family are secure, but with every need met a new one appears, and with it a new motivator.

Now that same person wants to secure their role. To do it they have to deliver what is expected, hit their targets, get on with their team, all of which impresses their employer and reinforces their security. Once that is settled, maybe they start wanting real job satisfaction, and they set their sights on a newly advertised promotion with duties they would genuinely enjoy. That promotion becomes the motivator that drives them to exceed expectations. People always have a goal, and always a motivator pulling them toward it, and in my experience the process never stops. Satisfy one need and another rises to take its place.

There are de-motivators too, and they often show up as a by-product of the effort. Say that person works themselves into the ground for the promotion and a colleague gets it instead. That can flatten them, and it can change their goal entirely. They may decide job satisfaction through promotion is not worth the pain, and start looking elsewhere to find it.

What to do with it

So the conclusion is simple to say and hard to do. Know your employees. Understand their goals and their aspirations. Know that, and you hold the key to motivating them. It is not one size fits all, and that is exactly Maslow's point. Each tier is broad and covers many needs, which is what makes the theory so transferable and so easy to apply, even to yourself.

For employers and managers, use it to [understand your people better](#). With the person from earlier, you might spark motivation by offering new opportunities inside the company, or delegating duties they would value, showing them they work somewhere aligned with what they need. For someone chasing job satisfaction, find out what that specifically means to them. Maybe they want a more creative role, or to sharpen their sales skills. Your job is to open a door to it. That does not mean overhauling their role or sending them on an expensive course, just doing what the business can genuinely bear. More often than not the opportunity itself gives the person real confidence in the company, and with it a great deal more motivation and productivity.

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