Using a motivational theory to engage my team

Stephanie Boothroyd[1] investigates Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

How do we motivate our team?

Motivation is a key topic in most dental practices. How do we (as managers and leaders) keep our team members motivated, engaged and enthusiastic? Can we use motivational theories to engage our team, to receive more in return and promote a positive working environment?

I started by researching Abraham Maslow (1908–1970), one of the most prominent psychologists of the twentieth century, and one of many motivational theorists. Maslow created a 'Hierarchy of Needs', first proposed in 1943[1] and published in 1954.[2] It illustrates a pyramid representing how human needs are ranked with physiological 'survival needs' at the bottom, and the more creative and intellectually oriented 'self-actualisation needs' at the top. Abraham Maslow argued that the survival needs must be satisfied before an individual can satisfy the psychological needs higher up the hierarchy.

Author information

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Basic needs

Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Fig. 1) and starting with the physiological stage, I questioned as a manager why some individuals may be unmotivated within my team. Are their 'basic physiological needs' being met; if not, are there adaptations I can put in place to fulfil these? I confirm that the basic needs including drinking water, bathroom facilities and separate break areas are provided for all staff. So, I am off to a good start: my team's basic needs are being met according to Maslow's Hierarchy.

Security needs

Moving up Hierarchy of Needs, are my team members' 'security and safety needs' being addressed? I can demonstrate that a safe and comfortable working environment is provided with well-maintained equipment and regular maintenance checks are in place to prevent any physical risk or harm to anyone. I can demonstrate I provide regular safety training sessions – for example manual handling, control of substances hazardous to health (COSHH)[3] – to educate my team to potential hazards and emergency procedures. And I can demonstrate there is a reporting system is in place, such as Reporting of Injuries and Dangerous Occurrences Regulation (RIDDOR),[4] where workers can confidentially report any safety issues or incidents, to demonstrate my commitment to maintaining a safe work environment for everyone.

Belonging

Reaching the third level on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, 'belongingness and need', I question do my team feel their social needs are being met? I encourage a positive team culture by fostering teamwork and collaboration; as a leader I regularly plan team-building activities or events, such as group lunches or recreational outings, to promote a sense of togetherness among the team. Additionally, open communication channels such as suggestion boxes and regular meetings are held where everyone can share their ideas, concerns, and suggestions so improvements can be encouraged, and collaborative decisions for the practice can be made.

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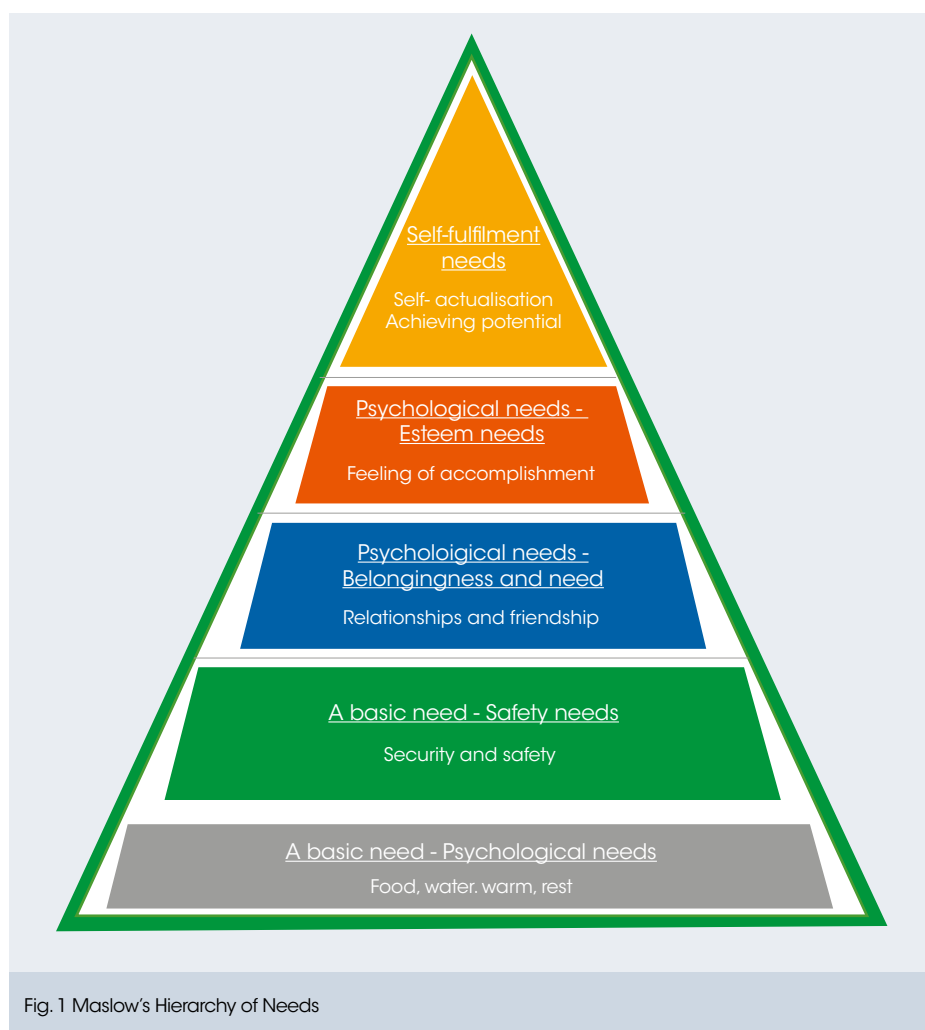
Esteem

The fourth tier of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs looks at 'esteem needs'. I look at each individual in my team and evaluate their achievements and contributions, then decide on how to celebrate these milestones to give recognition. It is important to implement a system to acknowledge exceptional performance and celebrate these achievements – firstly the time and effort put in by completing these achievements needs to be recognised and secondly it boosts self-esteem in those individuals, which then increases the drive and motivation to achieve more.

Within one-to-ones I look at individuals in the team and assess their knowledge, skills and professional goals and see what opportunities there are for skill development. This includes offering training courses and opportunities to gain qualifications which can lead on to further development and potentially lead roles within the team. I feel this encourages my team hugely and motivates them, to not only receive a sense of self-accomplishment but for them to be able to demonstrate their new skills in ways to benefit the practice as a whole.

Reaching the tip

Reaching the tip of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a long-term goal for any individual. The 'self-actualisation needs' are long term goals and achievements for individual team members.

Fig. 1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

'I encourage a positive team culture by fostering teamwork and collaboration; as a leader I regularly plan team-building activities or events, such as group lunches or recreational outings, to promote a sense of togetherness among the team.'

As a manager I offer opportunities for self-actualisation by empowering individuals to work towards their personal and professional goals.[5] Individuals have a personal development plan (PDP) which they constantly review and update with what they need/want to achieve next to reach the pinnacle stage or end goal.

I provide my team members with freedom within the workplace to become the best version of themselves, offering open communication channels to feel confident enough to voice their opinions and suggestions.

I encourage cross-training and job rotation, allowing my team members to gain new and enhanced skills, expanding their knowledge within different areas, to find what they enjoy doing within the practice – as enjoyment is a key factor in motivating staff.

It is important to remember that unless the team is on board, taking on extra responsibilities and enjoying what they are doing, leading them will be hard. Applying the correct management skills and leadership style (for your team) is key to motivating. Individuals within my team feel safe, valued and part of a supportive team which has created an environment in which there is enhanced job satisfaction and overall increased motivation. On reflection, all of the five areas of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be a guide to increase morale, motivation and job satisfaction within the team.

References

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