Summary

Abraham Maslow was a visionary who saw psychology as having great potential importance for management and organizational achievement. This article presents an overview of Maslow's life, together with a synopsis of his major concepts related to management theory. Maslow's unfinished projects are also highlighted, particularly his interest in methods of assessing self-actualization in the workplace. The author presents a new psychometric instrument for assessing self-actualization at work and offers empirical results with this instrument in Brazil. Finally, future avenues for research based on Maslow's unfinished legacy are discussed.

Maslow's Contributions: An Overview

Abraham Maslow was born in New York City in 1908, the oldest child of Russian-Jewish immigrants. Because his father was a successful small businessman, Abe—as everyone called him—worked only occasionally in positions such as delivery boy and hotel kitchen aide. He had plenty of leisure time in his teenage years, which he spent reading. Eventually, young Maslow developed strong idealistic notions to improving the world through science. After floundering somewhat at New York City College and Cornell University, he chose to major in psychology and transferred to the University of Wisconsin. There he earned his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.

At Wisconsin, Maslow was trained as an experimental psychologist. All his professors were fervent behaviorists who believed that meaningful theories of human nature could best be developed by studying lower animals like white rats in laboratory settings. Although Maslow adopted this view for a time, he decided that monkeys made better research subjects because of their similarity to our own species. His doctoral research examined dominance and sexual behavior in monkeys' social order. At Wisconsin, too, Maslow came to recognize the innate, biological influences that affect animal behavior, a perspective that remained central to his later humanistic theorizing.

Returning to New York City in the mid-1930s, Maslow gained a faculty position at Brooklyn College. He taught courses and continued his research on dominance, although he shifted his focus from monkeys to humans. His pioneering study of women's sexuality preceded Alfred Kinsey's famous sexological studies by several years. "I thought that working on sex was the easiest way to help humanity," Maslow later recalled, "If I could improve the sexual life by even 1 percent, then I could improve the whole species." In his viewpoint, Alfred Adler's approach to both sexuality and dominance was far more accurate than that of his arch-rival Sigmund Freud.

During this period, Maslow had the wonderful opportunity to become personally close with Adler, who had immigrated to New York City and been giving lectures and seminars to interested professionals. Adler strongly influenced Maslow in arguing that people have an inborn impulse to be caring, helpful and altruistic—what Adler called social feeling—and are not inevitably seething with repressed selfish, sexual, and aggressive impulses as Freud had contended. A humanitarian thinker, Adler insisted that modern civilization needed to create social institutions that strengthen social feeling. This was a view that Maslow found especially compelling after he conducted anthropological fieldwork sponsored by Ruth Benedict in 1938 among the Canadian Blackfoot native tribe.

After this experience, Maslow became convinced for
the rest of his life that humans are more alike than different around the world, and that universal (species-wide) criteria are discoverable for determining mental health as well as pathology. In his report to the foundation that funded his research, Maslow declared, “It would seem that every human being comes at birth into society not as a lump of clay to be molded by society, but rather as a structure which society may warp or suppress or build upon...I am now struggling with the notion of a ‘fundamental’ or biologically-shaped personality structure.” In seeking to organize all his observations into a single coherent theory of personality, Maslow studied the writings of such European psychologists as Adler, Erich Fromm, Kurt Goldstein, Karen Horney, and Max Wertheimer.

During the 1940s, Maslow steadily advanced a new explanation of human nature. Its foundation was his radical theory of motivation, which has come to be known as the “hierarchy of inborn needs” with its famous pyramidal structure. Maslow contended that we all have innate motivational needs—constituting a hierarchy—starting with physical safety, then belongingness, then self-esteem, self-respect, love, and finally what he called self-actualization; the desire to become all that one is capable of becoming in life.

In articles published in 1942 and 1943, Maslow outlined his theory. “It is quite true that man lives by bread alone—when there is no bread. But what happens to <our> desires when there <is> plenty of bread and <our> belly is filled? At once, other and ‘higher’ needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate <us>. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new and still ‘higher’ needs emerge, and so on. This is what we mean by saying that basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy.”

Although Maslow’s theory has become tremendously influential, it initially attracted little attention. Undeterred due to strong self-confidence, Maslow began exploring the traits of self-actualizing men and women. He believed that only by studying the emotionally healthiest, most highly achieving people in all creative fields ranging from mathematics and music to literature and law—can we really begin to understand our true nature and potential as humans.

“If we want to answer the question, how tall can the human species grow, then obviously it is well to pick out the ones who are already tallest and study them. If we want to know how fast can a human being run, then it is no use to average out the speed of the population; it is far better to collect Olympic gold medal winners and see how well they can do. If we want to know the possibilities for spiritual growth, value growth, or moral development in human beings, then I maintain that we can learn most by studying our most moral, ethical, or saintly people.”

In this research, among Maslow’s most intriguing findings was that such individuals reported the frequent presence of supremely joyful—even blissful—moments in their daily lives. For instance, these might arise during intensely creative work. Such episodes—which Maslow called “peak-experiences” were not necessarily religious at all, yet self-actualizing persons gave descriptions about these experiences that were amazingly similar to the verbiage of the world’s great sages and mystics. In Maslow’s eventual view, peak-experiences are natural psychological phenomena that are characteristic of excellent—even superior—mental health.

As chairperson of the psychology department of newly-formed Brandeis University, Maslow in 1954 wrote Motivation and Personality. It exerted a powerful impact on the growing field of management theory. Presenting such ideas as the hierarchy of inborn needs, self-actualization, and higher motivations, Maslow offered an innovative and optimistic approach to human nature.

“The science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side,” he insisted. “It has revealed to us much about man’s shortcomings, his illnesses, his sins, but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations, or his psychological health. It is as if psychology had voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction...We must find out what psychology...might be, if it could free itself from the stultifying effects of limited, pessimistic and stingy preoccupations with human nature.”

Douglas McGregor, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was among those influenced by Maslow’s work. McGregor’s landmark book, The Human Side of Enterprise, published in 1960, highlighted two distinct managerial perspectives: Theory X, which views people as inherently lazy and selfish, and Theory Y,
which regards them as innately productive and cooperative. In outlining Theory Y, McGregor clearly subscribed to Maslow's optimistic view of human nature.

During the 1960s, Maslow's name became closely linked with the burgeoning movement known as humanistic psychology—and in the business world as enlightened management. His books including Toward a Psychology of Being (1962), Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences (1964), and especially Eupsychian Management (1965) brought Maslow praise from America's leaders in management training and education. Eupsychia was Maslow's term for the ideal society or organization, and in this provocative book, he presented many innovative—and even visionary—ideas on such topics as communication, leadership, employee development, entrepreneurship, organizational health, performance appraisal, and synergy (a term coined by Ruth Benedict which he popularized for organizational theorists).

Although gratified by the international response to his writings, Maslow by the mid-1960s remained pragmatic about organizational development. He saw the humanistic approach as depending partly on good conditions, and that a sudden downturn in the international economy or markets might make the principles of enlightened management less tenable. But he was sure that "enlightened management"—based on encouraging employee growth and creativity—was the wave of the future.

Never vibrant physically, Maslow suffered a major heart attack in 1967. He was forced to curtail his extensive activities in lecturing, consulting, and writing. Elected at the time as President of the American Psychological Association, he tried to conserve his fragile health by taking an extended medical leave of absence from his position at Brandeis University. Maslow hoped that if his health improved sufficiently, he would be able to travel and conduct managerial research in foreign nations including Japan—whose successful emphasis on group achievement and harmony in the workplace interested him greatly.

Maslow's Unfinished Legacy

When Maslow died suddenly of a heart attack in 1970, he was at work on a host of unfinished projects. These reflected his self-described talent as an "idea person" who delighted in generating plans for original, never-before-initiated projects. Many of Maslow's unfinished pursuits were inter-disciplinary in focus—such as humanistic education and managerial training, cross-cultural factors affecting employee motivation, peak-experiences among various professions, and work styles of self-actualizing men and women. Maslow was convinced that maximizing individual and organizational achievement was a field in its infancy—and that among its most pressing tasks was to develop ways to measure self-actualization more effectively.

This was not an easy goal, and significantly, Maslow himself never developed an instrument of self-actualization. This was certainly not due to his lack of interest in psychometrics, for in the late 1930s and 1940s he had published several well-regarded personality measures: the Social Personality Inventory and the Security-Insecurity Inventory. In the 1950s, Maslow had also developed an experimental test for measuring artistic sensitivity. And, late in career, he had called for long-term, longitudinal psychometric research involving the most creative, accomplished students at Brandeis University where he taught. By carefully studying their intellectual, emotional, and social growth over a lifetime, Maslow was sure that psychology could develop tremendous insights about the motivations, needs, frustrations, and accomplishments of society's most talented members. As part of such research—which Maslow unfortunately did not live long enough to initiate—he emphasized the importance of developing accurate methods to assess self-actualization.

It is important to understand that Maslow did not view self-actualization as an either-or phenomenon. In this regard, his concept has often been misinterpreted. Rather, Maslow insisted that each person encompasses varying levels of motivations and needs—and that these levels can be assessed objectively and quantified. For instance, in a 1966 lecture, Maslow stated, "I have developed all sorts of mental exercises, and I have shared these with my college students over the years. I now think that it is possible for me to look at a person and clearly state without sarcasm, 'That man is a sage to the degree of 14%...I began to realize that everyone has at least some of these higher qualities. So the major question is: How much, to what extent does he or she possess these? How scared is he or she about these
Assessing Self-Actualization at Work

Based on Maslow’s concepts of self-actualization, I developed the Hoffman Scale of Vocational Self-Actualization (HSVSA) in 2001. It resulted from my review of the literature while writing Psychological Testing at Work (Hoffman, 2001), for in producing my chapter on self-actualization I discovered a lack of helpful measures regarding this important personality dimension. Aside from the Personal Orientation Inventory (POI), developed in 1963 by Everett Shostrom, nothing worthwhile existed. Though useful, the POI was not geared specifically to the workplace. Nor did it contain any items involving peak-experiences and higher motivations, such as the need for creativity. It also seemed much too weighted toward items involving self-esteem rather than respect and admiration for co-workers, mentors, and organizational teachers, leaders, and heroes—traits that Maslow viewed as basic to healthy personality functioning.

Developed closely on Maslow’s model of self-actualization as a pyramid of inborn needs and motivations, the HSVSA is an easy-to-administer inventory of 25 items using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Administration time is no more than 15 minutes. The items focus solely on the individual’s evaluation of one’s job and organization—and encompass all the motivational levels that Maslow identified. These encompass safety, belongingness, self-esteem and respect, as well as such higher qualities as joyfulness, experiencing growth and creativity instead of boredom and stagnation, having frequent peak-experiences, and feeling a sense of contributing to world betterment. Altogether, 12 relevant dimensions can be analyzed based on the the individual’s responses.

Within the United States, the HSVSA has been used fruitfully in career planning and counseling—such as during organizational “downsizing” and job reduction—as well as in staff training and development. In addition, the HSVSA has been used for research purposes.

Especially relevant is a cross-cultural study the author conducted in 2001, in Sao Paulo, Brazil. The sample comprised 50 city university students who held full-time or part-time jobs while pursuing their degrees. The majority were in their 20s, with ages ranging from 19 to 47. Translated into Portuguese, the HSVSA proved to be a meaningful instrument in Brazil as well as the United States. Results from this sample included the following:

1) Fully 96% rated important or very important vocational self-actualization as a personal goal. This finding is quite encouraging, and reflects the influence of humanistic values in Brazil today: a young, dynamic country. Yet, only 60% reported that they had somewhat or very much found their true avocation or “calling” in life. And only 50% reported that their current job gave them a sense of vocational self-actualization.

2) In terms of Maslow’s categories of belongingness and respect, 70% reported that they often or very often felt liked and accepted at their current job; and 64% reported that they felt somewhat or very respected. However, only 38% stated that they were somewhat or very much appreciated at work. This is an interesting, and potentially important distinction. It may suggest that these individuals definitely do not feel demeaned or insulted, but they are not praised enough, in their view, on the job. Within the United States, many studies have shown that a majority of employees feel unappreciated and insufficiently respected in their work.

3) Maslow emphasized that productive employees in successful organizations typically have a mentor as well as a hero. He felt it important that workers have at least someone who serves as a teacher and an inspiration. In this regard, it is fascinating to note that only 36% reported that they often or very often have a personal hero in their organization; and, 34% said that they never have a hero. This finding suggests that leadership seems to be lacking in Sao Paulo organizations, at least from the perceptions of this sample.

4) In terms of experiencing growth versus stagnation at work, the results exhibited wide variability. For example, 60% reported they often or very often felt...
personally growing at work, and 42% stated that they very often felt this way. Yet, 20% related that they rarely or never felt this way. In addition, 42% reported that they often or very often felt bored and stagnant in their jobs, and 20% indicated that they very often felt this way. So, clearly, while most workers considered themselves to be growing psychologically at work, about one-fifth definitely had a negative perception in this regard.

5) In Maslow’s view, the presence of peak-experiences is an important sign of self-actualization. Those who have many “peaks” involving a sense of joy, completion, and accomplishment are definitely in the right setting for their true personality or soul. In this sample, 10% reported they have often or very often have a “peak-experience” at work. Intriguingly, this data based on self-report, is compatible with current, rough estimates that approximately 15% of the United States workforce is at the “self-actualizing” level in Maslow’s pyramid: that is, driven by such higher needs as creativity, knowledge, aesthetics, and world-betterment. In this sample, the majority—involving 66%—reported that they sometimes or often have a peak-experience at work. So while encouraging, this finding reveals that enlightened managers and leaders for this sample still have much to do in optimizing peak achievement among their employees.

Avenues for Future Research

In this article, the author presented an overview of Maslow’s work and legacy for the management field today. In this regard, Maslow’s famous “hierarchy of inborn needs” has now stood the test of time for more than sixty years, and no alternative conception of human motivation and needs seems likely to overturn it. Such Maslovian concepts as self-actualization and enlightened management continue to inspire those seeking to maximize success in organizational life.

Yet, these notions have also been frustratingly elusive to managers and executives—partly because of the paucity of objective tools of assessment. This was a challenge that Maslow himself identified late in career, but unfortunately did not live long enough to solve. Recognizing the paucity of such instruments in organizational psychology today, the author has sought in his own psychometric work to fill this vacuum—especially by studying such phenomena as peak-experiences throughout the life-cycle and in diverse work settings. Certainly, there is much to be done in developing measures of self-actualization for a wide range of purposes, such as in employee recruitment and selection, training and development, and career planning. Aside from psychometric issues—but not unrelatedly—Maslow emphasized the importance of studying “peaks” for the knowledge they can bring concerning the heights of human experience and achievement. He liked to argue that even the most dynamic professional jobs can become repetitive and routine: often what makes them worthwhile are peak moments of epiphany, creativity, and insight. Social scientists need to learn much more about these moments to fully unleash the human potential that remains latent all around us.

Finally, Maslow stressed that expanded cross-cultural study is vital if we are to truly understand what it means to be human in the best sense. For example, he contended that Eastern insights about duty, responsibility, and self-actualization were necessary in order to complement Western viewpoints and thereby arrive at a comprehensive model. He was sure that ultimate answers regarding human achievement could be found only through an accurate knowledge of cultural influences that block and hinder—or nurture and develop—human potential. Today, with dramatic changes affecting organizations around the world, Maslow remains a key thinker for our time.

References


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