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The Influence of Maslow's Humanistic Views on an  
Employee's Motivation to Learn

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### Abstract

Continual employee training and learning is critical to the ability of organizations to adapt to an ever changing national and international business environment. What motivates employees to learn? Abraham Maslow has had a significant impact on motivation theory, humanistic psychology, and subsequently, adult learning in the workplace. This paper will discuss the development of Maslow's humanistic views and trace their impact on past trends in business training as well as the implications for current challenges that managers face in motivating employee learning in the workplace.

## The Influence of Maslow's Humanistic Views on an Employee's Motivation to Learn

Continual learning has always been essential to the ongoing success of organizations. Managers and employees must acquire new knowledge and skills to adapt to a changing national and international business environment. The pressure for the acquisition of new knowledge comes from many sources including changing technology, changing job requirements, competitive pressure for new product development, and international competition to increase effectiveness and efficiency. The capacity of an organization to learn is a “key strategic weapon” (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998, p. 628).

Motivating employees to be receptive and open to acquire new knowledge and skills remains a challenge. Even though continuous learning is essential for organizations, employees often resist this emphasis on training and upgrading skills. Theories and techniques explaining adult motivation to learn have been a topic of much discussion (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Vroom, 1995; Wlodowski, 1985). Less has been written about the development of those theories that have influenced the development of current theories and techniques used to motivate people to learn. One individual who has had, and continues to have, an important influence on motivation and learning is Abraham Maslow, one of the founding fathers of the human relations movement (Linstead, 2000).

Abraham Maslow is well-known for his writings, theories, and views on humanistic psychology, education, and motivation. Many of his educational views have had direct and indirect implications for the motivation to learn and, more specifically, employee learning in the workplace. What can contemporary managers learn from Maslow that can be applied to the problem of employee motivation to learn? To begin, a short history of Maslow and his influence on the schools of psychology will be presented. Second, an introduction to some basic

humanistic principles and theories will be given along with a discussion of the roles of motivation and learning in humanistic thought. Finally, the paper will examine the influence of Maslow's humanistic views on past trends in business training and current challenges to motivate employees to learn.

### Abraham Maslow and Humanism

Abraham Maslow, who is considered the father of humanistic psychology, was born in 1908 and passed away in 1970. He was first introduced to psychology in 1927 when he read Sumner's *Folkways* and in 1928 when he was introduced to John B. Watson's behaviorism theory (Lowry, 1973a). He received his B.A. in 1930, his M.A. in 1931, and his Ph.D. in 1934 all in psychology and all from the University of Wisconsin. During this time he came in contact with a number of European intellectuals including Alfred Adler, Erik Fromm, and Karen Horney, as well as Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and other Gestalt and Freudian psychologists who were immigrating to the United States. In 1935 Maslow went to Columbia University to do research with Edward L. Thorndike, a behaviorist who had been known within American psychology for many years. Maslow credited two anthropologists, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, as having influenced some of his writings and humanistic views.

In 1951 Maslow met Kurt Goldstein who introduced him to the idea of self-actualization. This was approximately the same time he began his own theoretical work. It was then that he began his crusade for a humanistic psychology, "the third force", as he called it (Arkes & Garski, 1982; Boeree, 1998; Maddi & Costa, 1972). In 1962, the Association of Humanistic Psychology was established and the humanistic movement began to influence psychology, education, and the workplace. According to Boeree (1998), "Maslow was one of the pioneers in the movement to bring the human being back into psychology, and the person back into personality!" (p. 6).

### *Main Schools of Psychology*

In the 1950's there were two main schools of psychology. The first was the whole cluster of psychologies that originated in Freud and in psychoanalysis. The second was the behaviorist group which was objectivistic, mechanistic, and positivistic. Even though behaviorism was the attraction Maslow first had with psychology, he quickly moved away from this theory. In a 1968 journal entrance, Maslow wrote that

Behaviorism has done a lot. It was the beautiful program of Watson that brought me into psychology. But its fatal flaw is that it's good for the lab and in the lab, but you put it on and take it off like a lab coat. It's useless at home with your kids and wife and friends. It does not generate an adequate image of man, a philosophy of life, a conception of human nature. It's not an adequate guide to living, to values, to choice...If you try to treat your children at home in the same way you treat your animals in the lab, your wife will scratch your eyes out. (Lowry, 1973a, p. 5)

Maslow's humanism, and particularly his hierarchy of needs, was an alternative to the determinism of Freud and Skinner (Gwynne, 1997). It was a positive view of psychology, man, and life that made an impact during his time and has continued throughout the years.

### Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow refused to believe that behavior was predetermined by the environment or subconscious, but he believed it was the consequence of human choices. He believed that people are inherently good, are free to act, and possess unlimited potential for learning, growth, and development. Individuals have the freedom and responsibility to become what they are capable of becoming and are, therefore, responsible for learning. People act to fulfill needs.

Maslow is best known for his hierarchy of human needs which he called his theory of motivation. In addressing the influences in its development, Maslow (1954) wrote, that "this theory is, I think, in the functionalist tradition of James and Dewey, and is fused with the holism of Wertheimer, Goldstein, and Gestalt psychology, and with the dynamicism of Freud, Fromm, Horney, Reich, Jung, and Adler. This integration, or synthesis, may be called a holistic-dynamic theory" (p. 35).

Maslow's theory explained that every person is born with a set of basic needs 1) physiological, 2) safety needs, 3) belongingness or love, 4) self-esteem, and 5) self-actualization. He theorized that higher needs emerge as the lower level needs are met. In other words, as lower-level needs are satisfied, the motivation to meet the higher-level needs becomes active. Each level directs behavior toward the need level that is not being adequately met. Maslow (1954) identified some phenomena that, in large part, are determined by basic need gratification: the feeling of learning and knowing more and more, satisfied understanding, happiness, contentment, movement toward meta-motivation, and more incidental or latent learning.

### Humanism and Learning

Humanism takes a different look at education and learning. Building on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, an encouraging learning environment is the result of promoting the learner's needs more than the content of the materials, and by meeting diverse needs and expectations. Initiative and self-directed learning are also promoted. According to Maslow (1954), self-actualization should be the goal of learning, and education should focus on self-development. An individual's perceptions are centered in experience, and learning can be drawn from this experience (Kramlinger & Hubert, 1990; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Maslow wrote in his journal that a "good way of expressing the attitude of humanistic psychology: to study man as a cause, rather than as caused (as an effect, as determined). . . In which ways is the person a determiner; in which ways is he a determinee, a product" (Lowry, 1979, p. 689). Dupuis (1997) agreed that human beings are not determined by the circumstances of the environment but are free to choose their own course. The most important kind of truth is personal experience because it is the most relevant to a person's life and actions.

Maslow (1959) explained that humanism is a holistic look at human psychology and learning. He stated that

The humanist image is based on a different method of acquiring knowledge, which can be called a holistic one. It takes into account the totality of human experience, including not only the facts of the sensory order but the inner experiences, the results of imagination, fantasy, and thought. They attempt to grasp the total human situation with its transcendence, consciousness, self-awareness, and freedom. To establish knowledge, the humanists use not only logic and factual observation but empathy and intuition. (p. 200)

Humanists encourage learners to develop their own personal goals (Dupuis, 1997).

Humanism draws more from existential thought and views human beings as free individuals who have some control over their own destiny (Dupuis, 1997). They believe that learning contributes to psychological health. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) used Abraham Maslow and Carl Roger's views to compile the following list of motivating goals that result in effective learning: self actualization, the discovery of a destiny or vocation, the knowledge or acquisition of a set of values, the realization of life as precious, the acquisition of peak experience, a sense of accomplishment, the satisfaction of psychological needs, the refreshing of consciousness to an

awareness of the beauty and wonder of life, the control of impulses, the grappling with the critical existential problems of life, and learning to choose discriminatively.

### *Three Learning Theories Influenced by Humanism*

Maslow's views influenced numerous other learning methods and theories including andragogy, transformational learning, and self-directed learning. Malcolm Knowles attributed Maslow's humanism as an influence on his principle or theory of andragogy (Lawson, 1996). Andragogy has been defined as the art and science of helping adults learn. Kramminger and Hubert (1990) stated that andragogy is the application of humanistic principles.

In 1978, Mezirow articulated the transformational learning theory which explains how adults interpret their life experiences, and how they make meaning. "It is through engaging with the life experience to make meaning that there is an opportunity for a change in perspective" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 320). Some of the key transformational concepts, experience, critical reflection, and development are humanistic in nature. Maslow's work (1968; 1970) discussed a great deal about peak experiences. He explained that these experiences are extremely positive in nature and often cause an individual to change the direction of his or her future behavior. As behavior is redirected, change can occur and learning takes place as theorized in transformational learning.

Even though individuals throughout history have always used self-direction to learn concepts and skills, obtain information, and enhance their overall knowledge base—self-directed learning was first conceptualized in 1967. Self-directed learning is a process of learning in which people take the primary initiative for their own learning experiences (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The current utilization of these theories demonstrates Maslow's continued influence in today's education.

## The Motivation to Learn

The motivation to learn and change has important implications for improving employee performance. Can employees learn without being motivated? What relationship is there in the workplace between motivation and change?

### *Motivation*

Motivation has been defined as “those psychological processes that cause the arousal, direction, and persistence of voluntary actions that are goal directed” (Mitchell, 1982, p. 81). The study of motivation is the “study of direction and persistence” (Krech, Crutchfield & Ballachey, 1962, p.69). There is a relationship between internal arousal or tension, desire, effort and goal-directed behavior. Individuals direct their behaviors toward the acquisition of those objects that will satisfy the internal *driving forces* (needs) that brought about the initial tension or arousal. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory describes one set of needs that act as driving forces to influence human action.

Learning differs from motivation. Learning is the process by which a relatively permanent change in behavior occurs as a result of experience. Motivation theory, and particularly Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, can help explain why individuals are inclined to put forth the effort to change their behavior and learn new things. Motivation is one of several keys to effective learning. Motivation may serve as a cause, mediator, and effect of the learning process. Understanding and using motivation concepts can help to increase educational productivity (Fyans, 1978).

In tying learning and motivation together, learning is the goal toward which behavior is directed. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs points to the reasons why an individual would be inclined (aroused) to direct his or her behavior toward a learning outcome. Needs are the driving forces

that create the internal desire to participate in behavior that leads to the acquisition of new knowledge and skills that result in a change in behavior (learning). If the outcomes of learning can be focused on meeting the needs of the individual, then the *motivation to learn* will become internalized.

There is a distinction between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to factors that make certain activities rewarding in and of themselves. The term *extrinsic* refers to the kinds of rewards and reinforcements that are used by some external agents to direct behavior (Beck, 1978). These types of rewards or reinforcements can be positive or negative. Reinforcements that encourage desired behavior are positive while those that punish undesired behavior are negative. Managers have tended to draw upon extrinsic factors such as salary, job security, working conditions, promotion, termination and demotion to motivate employees to learn new skills. These extrinsic rewards and threats are limiting, transitory, and can even create antagonism between employee and manager.

On the other hand, intrinsic motivators internalize the desire to learn, and are more likely to last longer. Internalization of motivators can perpetuate individual motivation and greatly reduce the need for externally directed motivation. Maslow's need theory suggests that self esteem and self-actualization are important intrinsic motivators and have a more sustaining impact on behavioral change than extrinsic motivators.

Maslow wrote (1959) that ". . .the process of moment to moment growth is itself intrinsically rewarding and delightful in an absolute sense... being and becoming are not contradictory or mutually exclusive. Approaching and arriving are both in themselves rewarding" (p. 125). Closely related to Maslow's approach to intrinsic motivators, Houle (1961) identified three primary reasons that people want to learn: the love of learning itself, the desire

for social relationships, and the desire for practical information to use in solving immediate problems. Maslow also explained that goals are the centering principle in motivation—the functions, effects, purposes, or goals of the behavior (Lowry, 1973b).

### Trends in Motivation, Humanism and Learning

There have been a variety of trends in business throughout the past decades that can be related to the influence of motivation theory and humanism on increasing employee's motivation to learn. Motivation is thought to be important to learning even if the motive simply promotes practice. It does appear that motivation affects the performance of what has been learned as well as demonstrating its effect on the process of learning itself.

After World War II, education and learning in the workplace focused on simple procedures for developing behavioral skills. Employees were trained on exactly how to perform certain tasks so they could be as effective and efficient as possible. Maslow's theories were just beginning to be developed during this decade, and humanism had yet to be considered its own school of psychology. Because of this, humanism's influence was not clearly evident. Maslow did write, during the 1950's, that when learning focuses on behavior rather than on thought, an individual learns exactly how to behave while keeping his thoughts his own (Maslow, 1971).

The 1960's brought some changes to employee motivation and learning. In 1965, the United States Air Force developed the Instructional System Development model which was primarily for technical training and education in the workplace. The model was still very behavioral in orientation and employees during the 1960's were still not expected to become involved in problem-solving, and other *thinking* skills. During this time, however, humanism became more popular especially in the educational and psychological arenas. References to Maslow's work and theories began to be used in business literature (Peckman, 1960) although

most organizations did not begin to make changes to incorporate these humanistic views into the workplace.

In the 1960's needs theories, including Maslow's theory of motivation, dominated management research specifically related to improving the attitudes of employees by increasing their job satisfaction (Elliot & Williams, 1995). The thought was that motivation, positive work attitudes, and better performance would result if an individual's basic needs had been met. By doing this, the individual would become a better performer. Sensitivity training groups (T-groups) started to emerge during this time (Maslow, 1971). The goals and practices of these groups can also be directly linked to the introduction and implementation of Maslow's views on assisting individuals to reach their potential by improving communication and increasing motivation.

Humanistic psychology expanded its influence throughout the 1970's. During this time needs theories continued to dominate much of management research. Employee development, the process of guiding employees toward vocational goals which they have personally selected, was introduced. Myers (1970) drew from Maslow and stated that the level of need satisfaction is equal to the degree of motivation. "It would appear from the outset, he said, " That the level of skill would be independent of motivation. This is not true. Skill level is not wholly independent of motivation. In fact, to a certain extent, it is dependent upon motivation" (p. 35). He added that when the development of employees is not actively promoted by an organization, employee motivation and skill level are neglected.

Berg (1970) and Raudseff (1978) identified additional factors motivating employee behavior. These included career value, challenging and stimulating work, opportunities for responsibility and achievement, identification with company goals and objectives, recognition,

and confidence and trust in self and company. Many of these motivators include the element of the need to learn. Luce (1970) identified this element of understanding and learning as a motivating factor; and Williams (1970) explained that the employee's motivation to alter his own behavior is important in applying learning to a job situation. He began addressing the motivational benefits of providing on-the-job training for employees.

Some organizations began taking a look at individual needs and potential and used educational and training opportunities to facilitate growth. Employers began analyzing individuals by identifying the skills and talents they were capable of learning and doing. Humanistic training topics like communication and interpersonal skills were added to the previously behavioral-based learning opportunities. Employees were offered growth opportunities and many found these changes motivational.

Lusterman (1985) stated, in a research report titled *Trends in Corporate Education and Training*, that education and training programs had significantly changed during the first half of the 1980's. These changes were attributed to the introduction of new technologies and new strategies and goals organizations adopted in response to heightened global competition, deregulation, and other business changes. At this time, many top executives were increasing their support for training. The introduction of quality circles and similar programs to encourage and motivate wider employee participation also produced training improvements.

A changing workforce wanted work that was rewarding, stimulating, and meaningful. One study (Jurik & Winn, 1987) found that lack of learning opportunities was one reason why employees left their jobs. Lau (1984) explained that to keep employees motivated, a job should offer frequent learning experiences and career development opportunities. In earlier decades switching jobs and careers was not encouraged.

Maslow (1959) alluded to the importance of employee growth and development when he wrote that "capacities clamor to be used, and cease their clamor only when they are used sufficiently. That is to say, capacities are needs, and therefore are intrinsic values as well. To the extent that capacities differ, so will values also differ" (p. 122). While Skinner and other behaviorists emphasized individual performance through incentive systems and rewards, Maslow emphasized individual needs through career development and job enrichment (Bazigos & Burke, 1997). Maslow's humanistic principles laid the foundation, and influenced the practice, of training and development evident in the 1980's.

Throughout the early to mid 1990's, many companies offered employees more opportunities for education and training because of the rapid change in industry and greater accessibility to information. Distance learning became an important motivator for many employees in making learning more convenient. Some of the changes that may have affected employees during these years include business globalization, decrease of retirement benefits, instability of employment, technological advances and changes, half-life of knowledge, and more.

As humanistic principles became more widely utilized, some organizations began to offer learning related to a broader range of employee skills and interests. Benne (1990) said that "the greatest price persons pay lies perhaps in the suppression and denial of opportunities to develop themselves in directions that do not fit the specialized purposes of the association to which they have committed themselves" (p. 65). Campbell (1991) explained that "as the focus of training moves from the development of specific skills and knowledge toward the learning of broader principles and concepts, it crosses a hazy line into what is generally labeled education" (p. 13).

Many of the motivating factors that influenced learning in the early and mid-1990's were similar to the ones already mentioned in the 1970's and 1980's. Some additional motivators for employees during this time included the following: understanding expectations, sufficient resources, clear signals, priorities, logical job design, job redesign strategies, intrinsic satisfaction, leadership styles, competence, power, sensitivity to informal goals and social norms, job enrichment, career development opportunities and quality-of-work life projects (Rummler & Brache, 1995).

Organizations tried to find individual learning methods that met the needs of the employee as well as the objectives of the organization. Supervisors were encouraged to assess the effectiveness of their own motivational techniques in improving performance and rewarding and promoting employees for work done well. This included communicating to employees exactly what was expected, recognizing their needs, and developing mechanisms to address those needs. Benne (1990) explained that "people must see a need for change in their present belief systems before they can seriously entertain knowledge of person, group, or society alternative to the modes of explanation and interpretation they are currently employing to make sense of their lived worlds" (p. 72). Some organizations began again to look at Maslow's views on individual needs, providing an encouraging learning environment, and assisting individuals in reaching their potential by learning and changing to improvement their performance.

#### Humanistic Influences Continue

As the nature of work continues to change due to the dynamics of a global economy, a more diverse workforce, technological advances and so forth, there is a continued need to focus management efforts on developing work that motivates and inspires the worker. There is a

tendency to rely on out-dated forms of extrinsic motivators. Many of Maslow's humanistic views are as relevant today as they ever have been. Tischler (1999) stated that

... merely using the old approaches to worker motivation, coercion or bribery (pay and incentives), will no longer work; it is also becoming necessary for sustainable company growth to offer employees inspiring work and to help employees grow in ways that are best for them. In fact, a growing number of business leaders seem to be wanting to move us towards an era that emphasizes individual self-actualization as both the ultimate human end goal and as the best means to creating even more success and wealth for individuals and companies. (p. 275)

Maslow and the humanistic learning orientation still have relevance for improving employees' motivation to learn and, by doing so, increasing motivation to change. Maslow's humanistic views provide the foundation for many of the following suggestions given to organizational leadership on how to motivate employees to learn.

### *1. Collaboration*

Watkins and Marsick (1995) explain that organizations that have employees who are motivated to learn involve the total employee in "a process of collaboratively initiated, collaboratively conducted, collectively accountable change directed toward shared values or principles." (p. 4). The role of management is to provide a vision of the future that employees participate in and own as part of their goals. Collaboration helps ensure that employee and manager are meeting individual goals through shared organizational goals. The employee benefits personally and intrinsically when the organization reaches its objectives

## 2. *A Range of Options*

The narrow set of extrinsic rewards (salary, job security, work environment, positive boss-subordinate relationships) that managers have relied on in the past is no longer adequate for the contemporary worker. The younger, well-educated worker wants more. Watkins and Marsick (1995) wrote that

organizations which have a wide range of options for both recognizing and rewarding achievement, options for linking pay with individual and team needs and performance, as well as for funding learning, motivate continuous learning. Work redesign and experiments with self-directed or self-managed teams also may create the motivation to learn by making work challenging. Empowerment and employee involvement are also essential to change the structures which now prevent learning. . . more collaborative structures enhance the organization's ability to learn. (p. 4)

## 3. *The Structure of Training*

Managers need to take greater care in structuring learning opportunities that draw in the employee and capitalize upon their needs for social involvement, self-esteem, and self-actualization. This can be achieved by communicating the importance of training, scheduling adequate time for learning, providing training just-in-time, focusing on core competencies, involving employees in training design, letting employees make choices about their training, offering financial incentives to learn, using active training formats, using variety in training, providing plenty of social interaction, facilitating expertise-sharing, establishing a safe environment for learning, encouraging positive measurement, ensuring early success, making sure new skills are promptly used on the job, and recognize performance improvements (Spitzer, 1995). The correlation between these suggestions and humanism are fairly obvious. Looking at

the *human* and not just the *behavior* in designing learning opportunities provides intrinsic motivation to employees.

#### 4. *Training versus Development*

Training to develop a narrow set of skills may limit the motivational impact, and therefore, the extent of learning on the employee. The acquisition of knowledge and skills needs to have broader impact than solely the accomplishment of organizational goals. Employee *development* can focus on improving the total person and engage the employee more in learning and developing a more, well-rounded individual. If employees feel that they are improving the whole person and becoming more valuable to the organization in general, they will become more engaged and committed to learning. Maslow wanted to see the development of the full capacity of the individual, not just a narrow scope of skills. Maslow would have training and learning opportunities produce a *peak experience* in the participants, one in which the employee “realizes the very best of his capacity and expresses his inner self fully” (Odiorne, 1970, p. 246). This peak experience is not only the elation that comes from a success learning experience, but the accumulation of learning leading to increased growth and development. An employee experiencing this level of stimulation will not need continued, extrinsic motivation to learn. Employees will be self-motivated, internally driven to learn and grow.

#### 5. *Career Growth and Development*

Career planning is a critical aspect of employee learning and development. To plan effectively for the growth and development of human resources requires a clear understanding of the growth and development process itself. Here again, Maslow and humanistic principles play a significant role. Edgar Schein (1978) explained

The very language we use—‘we must develop people’— reflects an erroneous model, in that it implies that some external forces can develop a person. Instead, we must start with the recognition that the process of growth and development occurs from within the person and is controlled and limited by inner forces. What the environment can do is to provide opportunities and challenges on the one hand and accurate feedback or knowledge of results on the other. But in between, it is only the person who can accept the challenge, try out a new response, succeed or fail, learn something new, and thereby grow and develop. (p. 208)

Employee development programs must focus on providing a learning environment that allows employees to become engaged in their personal development in such a way that the goals of the organization are achieved. It is possible for employees to realize that their own goals for growth can mesh with the organization’s goals for productivity. The key to career planning is for organizations to provide the opportunities and systems for this to occur.

### Conclusion

This paper has provided a history of some of the *motivation to learn* trends that have existed in the decades during and after Maslow's humanistic views were presented. It is apparent that training in business has dramatically changed during the past fifty years and that many of the humanistic learning practices have been incorporated. However, with the continuing pressure for learning and adaptation within organizations, it is critical that these influences continue to impact management strategies to provide learning opportunities, not only for the success of the organization, but also to meet the needs of an ever-changing workforce. Motivation is one of the keys to learning whether it is in the home, community, or workplace. Maslow taught that when individuals strive to fulfill their potential, they are happier and more positive in nature. In the

future, employers that can meet the needs, and stimulate the development of potential, in their employees will be the most respected and successful. This recognition of individual worth is truly the key to success in building a workforce capable of adapting to the demands of the work place now and in the future.

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