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McClelland's Theory of Needs (Power, Achievement and Affiliation)

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8-10 minutes

Mc Clelland's theory of needs is one such theory that explains this process of motivation by breaking down what and how needs are and how they have to be approached. David McClelland was an American Psychologist who developed his theory of needs or Achievement Theory of Motivation which revolves around three important aspects, namely, Achievement, Power And Affiliation. This theory was developed in the 1960's and McClelland's points out that regardless of our age, sex, race or culture, all of us possess one of these needs and are driven by it. This theory is also known as the Acquired Needs as McClelland put forth that the specific needs of an individual are acquired and shaped over time through the experiences he has had in life.

Psychologist David McClelland advocated Need theory, also **popular as Three Needs Theory**. This motivational theory states that the needs for **achievement, power, and affiliation** significantly influence the behavior of an individual, which is useful to understand from a managerial context.

This theory can be considered an extension to [Maslow's hierarchy of needs](#). Per McClelland, every individual has these three types of

motivational needs irrespective of their demography, culture or wealth. These motivation types are driven from real life experiences and the views of their ethos.

Need for Achievement

The need for achievement as the name itself suggests is the urge to achieve something in what you do. If you are a lawyer it is the need to win cases and be recognized, if you are a painter it is the need to paint a famous painting. It is the need that drives a person to work and even struggle for the objective that he wants to achieve. People who possess high achievement needs are people who always work to excel by particularly avoiding low reward low risk situations and difficult to achieve high risk situations.

Such people avoid low risk situations because of the lack of a real challenge and their understanding that such achievement is not genuine. They also avoid high risk situations because they perceive and understand it to be more about luck and chance and not about one's own effort. The more the achievements they make the higher their performance because of higher levels of motivation. These people find innovative clever ways to achieve goals and consider their achievement a better reward than financial ones. They take calculated decision and always appreciate feedback and usually works alone.

The individuals motivated by needs for achievement usually have a strong desire of setting up difficult objectives and accomplishing them. Their preference is to work in the result oriented work environment and always appreciate any feedback on their work. Achievement based individuals take calculated risks to reach their

goals and may circumvent both high-risk and low-risk situations. They often prefer working alone. This personality type believes in a hierarchical structure derived primarily by work based achievements.

Need for power

The need for power is the desire within a person to hold control and authority over another person and influence and change their decision in accordance with his own needs or desires. The need to enhance their self esteem and reputation drives these people and they desire their views and ideas to be accepted and implemented over the views and ideas over others. These people are strong leaders and can be best suited to leading positions. They either belong to Personal or Institutional power motivator groups. If they are a personal power motivator they would have the need to control others and a institutional power motivator seeks to lead and coordinate a team towards an end.

The individuals motivated by needs for power have a desire to control and influence others. Competition motivates them and they enjoy winning arguments. Status and recognition is something they aspire for and do not like being on the losing side. They are self-disciplined and expect the same from their peers and teams. They do not mind playing a zero-sum game, where, for one person to win, another must lose and collaboration is not an option. This motivational type is accompanied by needs for personal prestige, and a better personal status.

Need for Affiliation

The need for affiliation is urge of a person to have interpersonal and social relationships with others or a particular set of people. They seek to work in groups by creating friendly and lasting relationships and has the urge to be liked by others. They tend to like collaborating with others to competing with them and usually avoids high risk situations and uncertainty

The individuals motivated by needs for affiliation prefer being part of a group. They like spending their time socializing and maintaining relationships and possess strong desire to be loved and accepted. These individuals stick to basics and play by the books without feeling a need to change things, primarily due to a fear of being rejected. People in this group tend to adhere to the norms of the culture in that workplace and typically do not change the norms of the workplace for fear of rejection. Collaboration is the way to work for them competition remains secondary. They are not risk seekers and are more cautious in their approach. These individuals work effectively in roles based on social interactions, for instance, client service and other customer interaction positions.

Using the Theory

McClelland's theory can be applied to manage the corporate teams by being identifying and categorizing every team member amongst the three needs. Knowing their attributes may certainly help to manage their expectations and running the team smoothly.

The following two steps process can be used to apply McClelland's theory:

Step 1: Identify Motivational Needs of the team

Examining the team to determine which of the three needs is a

motivator for each person. Personality traits and past actions can help in this process.

For example, someone who always takes charge of the team when a project is assigned. The one who speaks up in meetings to encourage people, and delegates responsibilities in order to facilitate achieving the goals of the group. Someone who likes to control the final deliverables. This team member is likely being driven by power.

Another team member who does not speak during meetings, and is happy agreeing with the team thoughts, is good at managing conflicts and may seem uncomfortable while someone talks about undertaking high-risk, high-reward tasks. This team member is likely being driven by affiliation.

Step 2: Approaching Team According to their Need type

Based on the motivating needs of the team members, alter your leadership style to assign projects according to the need type of each individual team member. Challenging projects would definitely be a part of work portfolio of someone who enjoys power while relatively simpler projects go to the kitty of someone derived from affiliation. This information is crucial to influence while setting up relevant goals for the individual, monitoring, providing feedbacks, recommending the learning plan etc. If a particular need type does not fit the position of the individual, he/she can be made aware of the same, so that they can either work in right direction or accept their fate.

Comparative Theories

Another similar theory, Sirota's Three-Factor Theory, also proposes

three motivating factors that are close but not exactly the same as to McClelland, they are equity/fairness, achievement, and camaraderie.

A difference noted between Sirota's and McClelland's theory is that according to Sirota everyone starts a new job with enthusiasm and motivation to do good. But with time, poor company policies or any other conditions, causing employees to lose their motivation and effectiveness on work. While McClelland's theory, states that one leading motivator helps individuals perform, which is generally based on one's culture and life experiences.

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