

Employee motivation: implementing McClelland's three needs theory

[Business](#), [Employee](#)



EmployeeMotivation: Implementing McClelland's Three Needs Theory
Fundamentals of Management MGT 3371 September 30, 2010 ABSTRACT

What motivates employees to perform? Is it money? Power and prestige? Camaraderie? Personal achievement? On the surface, it is logical to assume that money motivates people to work. Money is needed to meet the basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. The more money you make, the more things you can afford to buy. Yes, money is a great motivator. But is it THE motivating factor that drives employees to perform? What about power and prestige?

Is that “ atilla the hun” type executive more influenced by his big paycheck or is it his need for control, recognition and status symbols that drives him? What about camaraderie? Some workers excel in work environments where there is a lot of human interaction and harmony within the group. Others prefer to work alone, rarely having to deal with other people. What about personal achievement? Take for example, two employees who go to work for the same company at the same time, same job, same pay. One stays on the same job for 20 years content with where he is.

The other, over the same 20 years, advances within the company to more and more difficult jobs with more and more responsibility until he reaches upper management where he finds himself not nearly as happy as the other guy. He is making much more money, yet he is unhappy. Perhaps, he never was “ suited” for a management position. Is there a way to know which employees are better suited for which jobs? David McClelland thought there was. He believed that if we could identify what it was that motivated

employees then we could put them into the appropriate jobs to meet those needs.

This in turn would produce a motivated workforce contributing to economic growth (Nohria ; Groysberg, 2008). McClelland developed a theory known as the three needs theory or the learned needs theory. He proposed that an individual's needs are acquired over time and are shaped by our life experiences. Most of these needs can be classified as either achievement, affiliation, or power. Motivation and effectiveness on the job are influenced by these three needs. Achievement The first of the three needs is achievement (nAch).

People who are achievement-motivated tend to look for ways of doing things better, making improvements. They are not gamblers, but do like some moderate risk. They enjoy tasks that are not too hard nor too easy. In their eyes, if it is too difficult, they risk failure. Too easy and they don't feel a sense of accomplishment, anybody could do it (Dowling, 1972). To the high achiever, achievement is more important than financial reward. Meeting goals is more rewarding than praise and recognition. Feedback is essential to achievement motivated employees.

It can be in a number of different forms. Meeting and/or exceeding goals and expectations (such as sales goals) is one way. Money is also a form of feedback, as it lets the person know that they are performing well. They see financial rewards as a measurement of success rather than a means to an end. They prefer feedback about their work over comments about their personal characteristics. People who are assessed as high achievers are

likely to be the employees who get things done. They are the ones who make things happen and get results.

They prefer jobs in which their success depends on their own efforts and abilities rather than chance and factors beyond their control. Achievement-motivated people are well suited for jobs in sales, real estate, business management and entrepreneurial roles such as owner of a small business.

Affiliation The second of the three needs is affiliation (n-Affil). Affiliation-motivated people have a need for friendly relationships and prefer interaction with other people. They like atmospheres that are cooperative, supportive, and friendly.

A sense of belonging and group conformity is preferred to working alone. The affiliation-motivated employee is your team player. They work well in customer service and client interaction situations (Yukl, 1989) People who score low in affiliation tend to be loners and may be uncomfortable in social situations. They often lack motivation to maintain social contacts so important in networking, group presentations, public relations, and maintaining personal relations with peers and subordinates. Therefore, low n-Affil do not make the best managers. **Power** The third of the three needs is power (nPOW).

Power, or authority-motivated people have a drive to be influential, effective, and make their mark. Personal status and prestige are important to them. There are two types of power included in the “ need for power” category, personal power and institutional power. People who are driven by a need for personal power have a desire to be in control, to direct others. They may

exercise their power impulsively. There is also tendencies toward being rude, drinking excessively, sexual harassment, and collecting symbols of their power such as fancy cars, big offices, etc. faculty. css. edu). Institutional or social power motivated people have a need to organize the efforts of others and further the goals of the company or organization. They make great leaders. They tend to use their power in ways that benefit others and the company rather than for personal gain. Money is secondary to the need for power. Institutional power motivated people can be found in top management positions. Measuring Needs How do we find out where we fall on the needs scale?

McClelland used the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) to measure the needs of individuals. During the test, the subject is presented with a picture and they have to come up with a story that explains the picture. The idea is that the person will inject his or her own needs into the story they come up with. For example, in McClelland's book "The Achieving Society", a picture is shown that depicts a boy sitting at a desk with an open book in front of him. To a low achiever, the picture may appear to be a boy who is just daydreaming or reading.

To a high achiever however, they may see a boy who is taking a one hour exam. He is almost finished and trying to think it through. He is upset with himself because he studied hard but still can't come up with all of the answers. This anxiety would indicate someone who cares a lot about achievement. The TAT has been shown to give fairly reliable results in assessing the needs for achievement, affiliation, and power. It can be a very

effective tool to use for identifying what types of jobs are suited to different people.

For example, if you are looking for someone to fulfill the role of management in a large organization, look for someone who scores high in nPOW, moderate in nACH, and moderate in nAFF. Owner/managers of small businesses typically will have scores of nACH-high, nPOW- moderate, and nAFF- low (faculty. css. edu). Conclusion Using David McClelland's " Three Needs Theory" can be a useful tool in identifying strengths and weaknesses of employees. By identifying those strengths and weaknesses, employees can be placed in roles that not only meet their needs, but the company's as well.

Happy employees perform better and produce more. They will stay with the company rather than going elsewhere to meet their needs. In today's economy, companies are under pressure to reduce costs and ensure that their employees have the necessary skills to not only compete effectively, but to ensure the companies survival (Derven, 2008). Assessing employee's needs is certainly one way to meet that goal.

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