

THE MOTIVATIONAL UNIQUENESS OF MASLOW'S THEORY: GUIDING AMBITIOUS PERSONALITIES TOWARDS SELF-ACTUALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding human motivation, particularly in relation to ambition and personal development. The theory posits that individuals are driven by a series of hierarchical needs, starting from basic physiological requirements and progressing toward higher psychological and self-fulfillment needs, with self-actualization at the pinnacle. Ambitious individuals, motivated by intrinsic desires for personal growth and purpose, tend to prioritize self-actualization, pushing through the lower levels of the hierarchy with greater intensity and earlier than others. While Maslow's theory has faced criticisms regarding its cultural bias, rigid hierarchy, and lack of empirical evidence, modern interpretations and flexible applications have preserved its relevance. Newer perspectives have emphasized the fluidity of Maslow's model, allowing for the simultaneous pursuit of needs across levels and recognizing cultural variations in motivational priorities. The theory's human-centered and personalized approach underscores the importance of intrinsic motivation and self-improvement, offering valuable insights into personal and professional development. This framework remains particularly relevant for individuals seeking to fulfill their highest potential by focusing on creativity, autonomy, and contributing meaningfully to society. In light of contemporary adaptations, Maslow's Hierarchy continues to inspire educators, leaders, and individuals to embrace self-actualization as both a personal goal and a broader societal aspiration.

Keywords: Motivation, Self-Actualization, Ambition, Maslow, Hierarchy, Needs.

Introduction

Understanding motivation is pivotal in deciphering human behavior, as it illuminates the internal drivers that propel individuals toward achieving goals, overcoming challenges, and engaging meaningfully with their environment. Motivation encompasses both intrinsic desires, such as the pursuit of personal growth, and extrinsic factors, like social recognition or material rewards. This dual nature is essential for educators, managers, and leaders aiming to inspire and engage others in meaningful ways, whether in professional, academic, or personal contexts. Insights into motivation can inform strategies to enhance productivity, mental well-being, and overall life satisfaction (Copley & Nortje, 2024; Suh et al., 2020).

Ambition, as a personality trait, is characterized by a strong desire for achievement, growth, and success. It manifests as an individual's drive to set and pursue challenging goals with determination. In today's world, ambition has become a central feature in both personal and professional life. The rise of entrepreneurial ventures, the gig economy, and the growing emphasis on career-driven success underscore the increasing value placed on ambition. More than ever, individuals are expected to carve out their paths, build their brands, and define their success, making ambition a key component of personal development and societal progress (O'Reilly & Pfeffer, 2025; Yager & Kay, 2023).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs stands out as a timeless and powerful motivational framework because it provides a structured way to understand human behavior in relation to personal development. His theory posits that human beings are driven by a series of hierarchical needs, beginning with basic physiological needs and ascending to more complex psychological and self-fulfillment needs. This sequential approach aligns closely with the life journey of ambitious individuals, who often pursue higher-order needs as they fulfill foundational ones. The hierarchical nature of Maslow's model reflects the reality that individuals cannot achieve their highest potential without addressing their foundational needs for security, belonging, and esteem (Kenrick et al., 2010; McLeod, 2025).

Despite some critiques, Maslow's Hierarchy remains particularly effective for guiding ambitious individuals. The model's focus on self-actualization offers an aspirational vision, encouraging individuals to continuously evolve toward their full potential. It is not simply about reaching the pinnacle of personal success but rather about realizing one's true purpose and capabilities. For ambitious people, the idea of self-actualization encapsulates the highest form of personal fulfillment, beyond material gains or external validation. While criticisms about the theory's applicability across cultures and the lack of empirical testing are valid, modern adaptations of Maslow's work have kept the model relevant by introducing flexible interpretations. These adjustments maintain its central message: the pursuit of self-actualization, while complex and individualistic, remains an enduring and motivating force (Copley & Nortje, 2024; McLeod, 2025).

Understanding Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, developed in 1943, is a psychological theory that suggests human motivation is driven by a sequence of hierarchical needs. It is often represented as a pyramid, where the most fundamental needs form the base, and more complex psychological needs are located higher up. The theory is based on the idea that individuals must fulfill

lower-level needs before they can address higher-level psychological needs, with self-actualization being the ultimate goal.

Physiological Needs: These are the basic, life-sustaining needs for survival. They include the need for air, water, food, shelter, and sleep. Without these, an individual cannot function effectively, as the body will focus on fulfilling these needs before anything else. These fundamental requirements are essential for human survival and form the base of the pyramid (Maslow, 1943).

Safety Needs: After physiological needs are met, individuals seek safety and security. This includes the need for physical safety (e.g., protection from harm), financial security (e.g., stable employment or income), health (e.g., medical care), and well-being (e.g., living in a secure environment). According to Maslow, if individuals feel insecure or threatened, they cannot move forward to meet their other psychological needs (Maslow, 1943; Kenrick et al., 2010).

Love and Belonging Needs: Once physiological and safety needs are satisfied, humans seek to establish social connections. This level focuses on the need for interpersonal relationships, including friendships, romantic relationships, family, and social connections. The desire for love, affection, and a sense of belonging is central to psychological health and well-being. Without these relationships, an individual may experience loneliness, social anxiety, or depression, which impedes personal growth (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Esteem Needs: Esteem needs reflect the human desire for self-respect and recognition from others. This includes feelings of achievement, competence, and self-worth. Maslow further divided esteem needs into two categories: *lower esteem needs* (e.g., the need for respect from others) and *higher esteem needs* (e.g., the need for self-respect and personal mastery). Achieving these needs is essential for individuals to feel valued, capable, and successful (Maslow, 1943; Ryan & Deci, 2002). When these needs are not met, individuals may suffer from feelings of inferiority, which can hinder their pursuit of higher goals.

Self-Actualization: The pinnacle of Maslow's hierarchy is self-actualization, the realization of an individual's fullest potential. At this level, individuals seek personal growth, creativity, autonomy, and purpose. This is not a static state but an ongoing process of becoming the best version of oneself. Maslow described self-actualization as the desire to become more and more what one is capable of becoming. Individuals who reach this level of development engage in meaningful work, creativity, and strive for deep personal fulfillment (Maslow, 1971; Ryff, 1989).

Later Expansion: Self-Transcendence

Later in his career, Maslow expanded his original theory to include the concept of self-transcendence, which he placed beyond self-actualization. Self-transcendence refers to the motivation to go beyond personal interests and to pursue goals that serve a higher purpose, often in the context of helping others or contributing to the greater good. This concept aligns with humanistic psychology's emphasis on personal growth and the ability to connect with something greater than oneself (Maslow, 1971). For instance, self-transcendence may involve

seeking spiritual enlightenment, making a positive social impact, or engaging in altruistic activities. This stage reflects a shift from a focus on self-fulfillment to an outward orientation toward community and the larger world (Frankl, 2006). Maslow's inclusion of self-transcendence acknowledges that the pursuit of meaning and connection to the collective is a significant aspect of human motivation, particularly for those who have achieved self-actualization.

Core Humanistic Viewpoint

At the core of Maslow's theory is a humanistic viewpoint that strongly emphasizes personal growth, fulfillment, and the realization of one's inner potential. Maslow saw humans as inherently capable of growth and self-improvement when given the right conditions. This perspective challenges deterministic views of human nature, focusing instead on the belief that humans are motivated by an intrinsic drive to become the best versions of themselves (Maslow, 1971). The theory suggests that motivation is not only driven by external rewards, but also by a deep-seated desire for meaning, purpose, and self-actualization (Schneider, 2007).

The humanistic approach emphasizes that motivation is not merely about survival or external validation, but about the pursuit of fulfillment and inner harmony. Personal growth, autonomy, and the development of one's unique potential are central to Maslow's perspective. This approach also highlights the role of positive emotions and experiences, suggesting that humans are motivated not just by fear or deprivation, but by the desire to seek meaning and fulfillment. For ambitious individuals, this theory provides a roadmap for understanding how personal aspirations can be aligned with deeper psychological needs, ultimately leading to the realization of their full potential (Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Diagram, self-actualization sits at the apex, embodying the pinnacle of psychological and emotional fulfillment. For ambitious individuals, this stage is not merely a destination, but a continuous journey of personal growth, self-discovery, and actualizing one's potential. It represents the highest form of fulfillment, where an individual transcends external rewards and focuses on internal development seeking meaning, purpose, and mastery in their endeavors.

Ambitious individuals, driven by a profound inner desire for growth, often move through the lower levels of the pyramid (physiological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem) more rapidly and with heightened intensity compared to others. Their pursuit of self-actualization begins earlier, as they are more likely to prioritize personal mastery, creativity, autonomy, and meaningful contributions to society over immediate material needs or social recognition.



Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Diagram visually represents the progression of human motivation, depicted as a pyramid with five distinct levels. At the base of the pyramid are physiological needs, such as food, water, and shelter, which are fundamental for survival. The next level addresses safety needs, including physical security, health, and financial stability. Above that are love and belonging needs, reflecting the human desire for social connections, friendships, and intimate relationships. The fourth level, esteem needs, focuses on the pursuit of self-respect, achievement, and recognition from others. At the top of the pyramid lies self-actualization, representing the realization of one's full potential and personal growth. The diagram emphasizes that individuals must fulfill lower-level needs before progressing to higher ones, with self-actualization as the ultimate goal. Additionally, Maslow's later expansion of self-transcendence goes beyond self-fulfillment to emphasize the importance of contributing to a greater purpose or community.

The Uniqueness of Maslow's Motivational Model

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is uniquely structured around the sequential fulfillment of needs, suggesting that individuals must satisfy lower-level needs before they can focus on higher-level ones. This means that an individual cannot prioritize self-actualization achieving their fullest potential unless their basic physiological needs are met first, such as food, water, and shelter. Once these foundational needs are met, individuals naturally progress through the pyramid, seeking safety, love and belonging, and esteem. The model implies that personal development is a process, not a single event; it is a gradual journey toward self-fulfillment. For example, an individual who is struggling with a lack of financial security (a safety need) may be unable to focus on building self-esteem or seeking meaningful relationships until their financial situation stabilizes. Maslow's hierarchy, therefore, offers a structured approach to personal growth, recognizing that human motivation is driven by a natural progression from basic needs to more complex psychological and self-fulfillment needs (Maslow, 1943). To visualize this progression, refer to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Diagram, where the individual starts at the base of the pyramid, fulfilling their most basic needs before moving up the hierarchy. Each level is dependent on the previous one being satisfied before the individual can progress to the next stage.

Focus on Self-Actualization

Maslow's model is particularly distinct because it culminates in self-actualization, which focuses on self-fulfillment and purpose. Unlike many other motivational theories that emphasize external rewards such as wealth, status, or material gain, Maslow's hierarchy emphasizes intrinsic motivations those rooted in the individual's inner drive for growth, creativity, and personal meaning. Self-actualization represents the realization of an individual's potential, whether through artistic expression, intellectual pursuits, or making meaningful contributions to society. Maslow argued that self-actualization is not an endpoint but an ongoing process of becoming, a continual striving to reach one's fullest potential (Maslow, 1971).

This concept sets Maslow's theory apart from other motivational models, such as Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Vroom's Expectancy Theory, which place significant emphasis on extrinsic motivators like salary, promotions, and job security for workplace satisfaction (Herzberg, 1966; Vroom, 1964). While these theories focus on the external rewards that drive behavior, Maslow's model highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation, which is central to the journey toward self-actualization. For ambitious individuals, the motivation to achieve self-actualization is closely tied to personal growth, inner fulfillment, and the pursuit of a meaningful purpose. This intrinsic drive transcends material or social rewards and is rooted in the desire for continuous development and the realization of one's true potential (Schneider, 2007).

Maslow's focus on **self-actualization** as the ultimate goal emphasizes that motivation is not solely about reaching the highest level of achievement but also about a continual process of self-improvement, creativity, and personal mastery. Unlike the extrinsic motivations highlighted in Herzberg's and Vroom's theories, which may provide short-term satisfaction, self-actualization offers lasting fulfillment through the ongoing pursuit of inner growth. Ambitious individuals, therefore, view self-actualization as a dynamic, lifelong journey rather than a fixed endpoint. They are intrinsically motivated by the desire to contribute meaningfully to their communities, engage in creative self-expression, and live authentically, ultimately finding satisfaction in personal growth and purpose rather than external validation (Maslow, 1971; Schneider, 2007).

Personalized and Human-Centered Approach

Another unique aspect of Maslow's model is its personalized and human-centered approach to motivation. Rather than focusing on external rewards or environmental factors, Maslow's theory recognizes the importance of individual internal drives and desires. The model emphasizes the belief that human beings are inherently motivated by a deep-seated drive for personal fulfillment and growth (Maslow, 1971). It's not merely about fulfilling basic needs or achieving external success, but about fostering personal development, creativity, and self-actualization (Schneider, 2007). By focusing on intrinsic motivation, Maslow's theory underscores the idea that true fulfillment comes from the pursuit of personal growth and the realization of one's potential, rather than external validation or material achievements (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Maslow's model places human needs at the core, recognizing that the path to fulfillment is personalized it differs for every individual based on their goals, values, and aspirations. For example, an individual may place a higher priority on belonging and social connection before pursuing esteem needs, while another may focus on self-esteem first. This flexibility in application makes Maslow's model applicable to a wide variety of contexts, such as education, personal development, and leadership (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The human-centered nature of Maslow's theory also stresses intrinsic motivation over extrinsic rewards. People are motivated not just by what they stand to gain from external sources but by what brings meaning to their lives whether that is through personal achievements, helping others, or contributing to a cause. This focus on inner growth is what makes Maslow's model particularly valuable for ambitious individuals who seek purpose beyond mere external success (Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

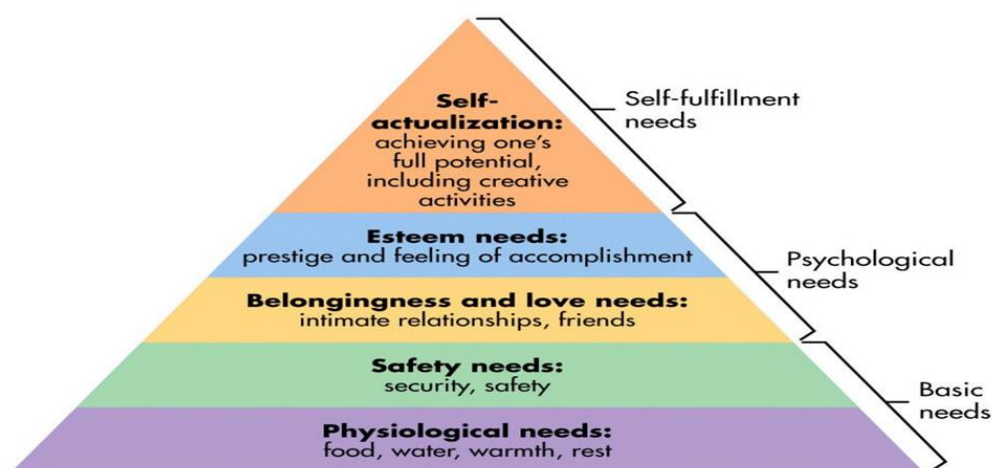


Figure 2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a structured yet flexible model for understanding human motivation. Its sequential fulfillment of needs allows for a natural progression in personal development, where individuals strive to meet basic needs first before focusing on more complex psychological and self-fulfillment needs. The model's emphasis on self-actualization highlights that true motivation goes beyond material success, focusing instead on the intrinsic desire for growth, creativity, and purpose. This personalized and human-centered approach makes Maslow's theory particularly relevant for ambitious individuals, as it aligns with their drive for long-term growth and fulfillment rather than immediate, extrinsic rewards.

The Connection between Ambition and Maslow's Theory

Ambition is a powerful and defining personality trait that drives individuals to set and pursue goals, overcome challenges, and aspire to higher levels of success and self-fulfillment. At its core, ambition represents the desire to achieve something greater, to improve oneself, and to make an impact. It can manifest in various forms, such as professional achievement, personal growth, or social influence. Ambitious individuals are characterized by their goal-setting capabilities, which help direct their efforts toward specific, measurable outcomes. This drive is fueled by a deep self-motivation, or self-drive, that propels them to push through obstacles and pursue their aspirations relentlessly. Aspiration in ambitious people often goes beyond material gains; it encompasses the desire for meaning, purpose, and personal growth.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs aligns well with ambition, as ambitious individuals are motivated to ascend through the levels of the pyramid, seeking higher fulfillment at each stage. For instance, a highly ambitious person may place significant emphasis on achieving esteem (external recognition and respect) or self-actualization (the pursuit of one's highest potential), once their basic physiological and safety needs are met. In contrast to individuals who may not exhibit as much drive, ambitious individuals tend to seek higher levels of satisfaction earlier in life. They are often propelled by a need to achieve both material success and psychological fulfillment, which aligns well with the stages described in Maslow's theory (Maslow, 1943; Ryff, 1989).

How Ambitious People Progress Through the Hierarchy

Ambitious individuals tend to progress through Maslow's hierarchy in ways that reflect their intense drive for achievement and self-fulfillment. While Maslow's model suggests that individuals usually satisfy lower needs before moving on to higher ones, ambitious people often seek higher needs, such as esteem and self-actualization, earlier or more intensely than others. For example, an ambitious person may begin to focus on self-esteem needs (like respect from others) while still addressing physiological or safety needs, especially if those lower needs are minimally met. Their intense drive and goal-setting tendencies push them to achieve external recognition and personal success at an accelerated pace.

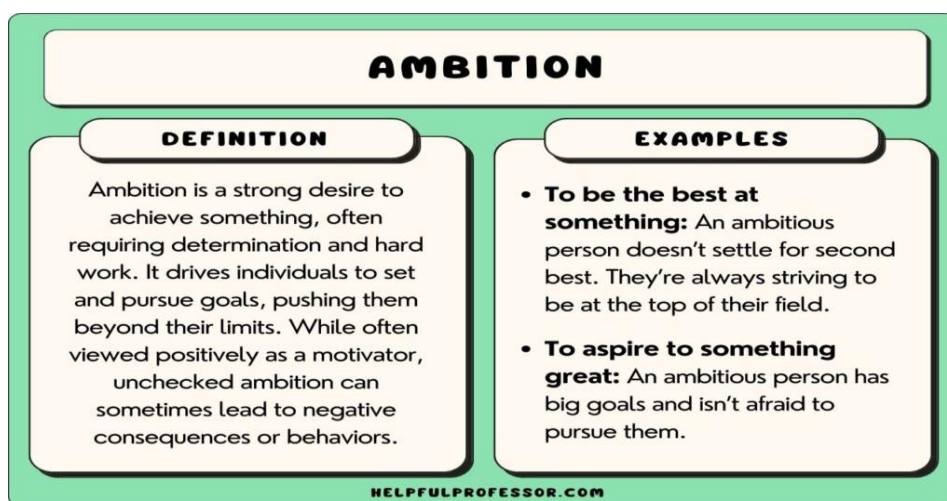


Figure 3: Further explain that ambitious individuals may prioritize self-actualization even when basic needs are not fully satisfied. For instance, a person may pursue creative endeavors, personal mastery, or a sense of purpose before achieving financial stability or social security. This behavior contrasts with individuals who are more focused on survival and basic comfort and may only shift focus toward higher needs once foundational needs are met. Ambitious individuals often *intensify* their pursuit of self-actualization, motivated not just by material success but by an inherent desire to reach their full potential and make a meaningful impact (Maslow, 1971; Schneider, 2007).

Self-Actualization as the Ultimate Goal of Ambitious Individuals

For ambitious individuals, self-actualization is not merely a theoretical ideal but the ultimate goal of their journey. It represents the pinnacle of personal achievement, where the individual realizes their fullest potential, engages in creative expression, and seeks purpose beyond

personal gains. The qualities associated with self-actualization creativity, autonomy, mastery, and purpose are key drivers for ambitious people. These individuals are not simply motivated by external recognition or material rewards but by an intrinsic desire for growth, self-expression, and fulfilling their true potential.

Self-actualizers are often characterized by their creativity in thinking, problem-solving, and expression. They seek autonomy, desiring the freedom to pursue their own path and make independent decisions. Mastery is another essential quality, as self-actualizers continuously strive to improve their skills and competencies in various areas of their lives, whether professionally, personally, or artistically. Finally, purpose is central to their drive, as they are motivated not only by personal success but by the need to contribute to something larger than themselves, be it through their work, relationships, or societal impact (Maslow, 1971; Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

For ambitious people, self-actualization is an ongoing process. It is not a fixed endpoint but a continual journey of personal development and meaning-making, driven by intrinsic desires and the quest for self-fulfillment. By recognizing that self-actualization is attainable through personal growth rather than external rewards, ambitious individuals align their goals with Maslow's hierarchy, ultimately seeking not just success but a purposeful, meaningful life (Schneider, 2007).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a robust framework for understanding ambition as a personality trait and its connection to personal development. Ambitious individuals, driven by intrinsic goals such as self-actualization, often progress through the stages of Maslow's pyramid at a faster pace than others. The focus on self-fulfillment, creativity, autonomy, and purpose defines ambitious people's motivations, aligning well with Maslow's ultimate goal of self-actualization. The personalized and human-centered approach of Maslow's theory reflects the deeper, intrinsic drives that guide ambitious individuals toward achieving their fullest potential.

Addressing Criticisms of Maslow's Theory

One of the primary criticisms of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is its perceived Western bias. Maslow's model, developed based on observations of American individuals, has been criticized for not accounting for cultural differences in motivation. In many non-Western cultures, the emphasis on individualism and personal self-actualization may not be as pronounced as it is in Western societies. In collectivist cultures, for instance, social harmony, family cohesion, and group needs may take precedence over individual achievement and personal fulfillment. Critics argue that the hierarchical structure of the theory might not be applicable to cultures where community and social bonds are prioritized over personal autonomy and self-expression (Kenrick et al., 2010; McLeod, 2025). Moreover, the theory's rigid hierarchical framework, where one must satisfy lower-level needs before advancing to higher ones, has been called into question, as some individuals might simultaneously pursue multiple needs or jump between different levels depending on life circumstances or cultural context.

Lack of Empirical Evidence

Another significant critique of Maslow's theory concerns its lack of empirical evidence. Despite being one of the most influential motivational models, the theory has not been rigorously tested or validated through empirical research (Kenrick et al., 2010). Many aspects of Maslow's hierarchy, such as the idea that individuals cannot move to higher needs without first satisfying lower ones, have been questioned due to the absence of robust data supporting these claims. Critics argue that the theory is overly simplistic and does not account for the complexity and variability of human motivation across different individuals and situations. Furthermore, Maslow's reliance on qualitative observations rather than quantitative methods has led to concerns about the theory's scientific validity, as it lacks the rigorous testing required for a universally applicable model (McLeod, 2025).

Rebuttals and Modern Relevance

Despite these criticisms, newer interpretations and flexible applications of Maslow's Hierarchy have ensured its continued relevance in modern psychology and motivation studies. Scholars have adapted the theory to account for cultural differences, recognizing that individuals may not necessarily follow the strict hierarchical order Maslow proposed. For example, Kenrick et al. (2010) argue that the hierarchy should be viewed more as a dynamic and contextual process rather than a rigid structure, with needs being pursued in various orders depending on an individual's unique situation. These newer interpretations emphasize the fluidity of Maslow's model, which allows for simultaneous pursuit of needs at different levels and acknowledges the possibility of cultural variations in the experience and prioritization of these needs.

Additionally, the concept of self-actualization has been expanded beyond Maslow's original scope to include modern psychological constructs like self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which emphasizes intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence. This expansion has helped keep Maslow's theory relevant by connecting it with contemporary views of human motivation that emphasize personal growth, purpose, and contribution, rather than merely the fulfillment of needs. As the theory continues to evolve, it remains a valuable framework for understanding human behavior, personal development, and the pursuit of meaningful life goals, both individually and in a cultural context.

Conclusion

Maslow's hierarchy of needs continues to be a potent and flexible motivational tool, particularly for individuals seeking personal growth and achievement. By emphasizing the significance of fulfilling fundamental needs before striving for higher aspirations, it provides a straightforward route to self-actualization and enduring contentment. Despite criticisms, the theory's significance persists due to its focus on individual development and self-driven motivation. Teachers, leaders, and individuals have the power to create environments that encourage creativity, purpose, and personal growth. By taking this action, they enable individuals to transcend mere survival and lead fulfilling lives. Ultimately, Maslow's model continues to inspire individuals to live purposefully and contribute to societal progress.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the discourse on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:

1. Cultivate environments (workplaces, schools) that emphasize intrinsic motivations, such as personal growth, creativity, and mastery, rather than merely concentrating on external rewards. This approach helps individuals move toward self-actualization and greater fulfillment.
2. Design flexible systems that allow individuals to simultaneously address various levels of Maslow's hierarchy, respecting cultural diversity and varying personal circumstances. This ensures that both basic and higher-level needs can be met in parallel.
3. Promote well-being programs that address not only physiological needs but also mental health, social connections, and opportunities for self-expression and purpose. This holistic approach nurtures overall growth and readiness for self-actualization.
4. Integrate the concept of self-transcendence into professional and educational settings by motivating individuals to contribute to broader societal goals and align personal ambitions with meaningful community impact.

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