

Top leadership tips inspired by Maslow's Pyramid

By  [Michelle Moss](#)

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Although published in 1943, psychologist Abraham Maslow's paper, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, remains immensely popular, especially in the business world. It describes human needs as a pyramid consisting of five tiers of complexity, ranging from basic survival at the bottom to sophisticated self-expression at the top. It has become famously known as Maslow's Pyramid.



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However, it's also a great model for understanding the role leadership plays in needs fulfilment and how that can help us retain, develop and motivate employees. Since people are more likely to follow leaders who allow them to scale the Pyramid faster, it's an excellent idea to review it from that perspective.

The levels are: physiological (nutrition, shelter), safety (security, self-protection), love and belonging (family, friendship, community), esteem (achievement, recognition), and self-actualisation (living one's highest values).

In short, leaders who promise to satisfy these needs in exchange for performance will achieve better results if they focus on top-tier motivators. Yet, they cannot ignore the lower levels - people are not motivated by recognition, for example, if they feel underpaid.

On the **physiological** level, leaders might offer payment for work and nothing more. Unfortunately, their employees only follow them to satisfy their survival needs. They quickly move on as soon as they find a better pay package somewhere else. Not only can critical talent be lost but also the opportunity to develop it to the organisation's benefit.

Leaders at the **safety** level provide job security. They do well at winning new business and regulating cash flow. So employees are assured that their income will remain stable because of it. However, they can still be tempted away by better pay elsewhere that will help them climb the Pyramid.

In the **love and belonging** tier, leaders strive to develop a sense of inclusion, equality and affiliation between employees, themselves and the organisation. They are excellent team builders, resolve conflicts well and foster a culture of trust and camaraderie. So their employees are more likely to stay and develop their talents within the company.

Esteem-level leaders typically offer incentives for effort and rewards for good work. These could include shares in the company, recognition before peers, or greater autonomy in carrying out duties. So their staff enjoy a personal sense of competency and being a trusted contributor to the organisation's success. They feel important and able to develop their fullest potential because of their relationship with the organisation.

At the top level, **self-actualisation**, leaders empower their followers to realise, pursue and live their highest values, both inside and outside the business. Corporate goals therefore become aligned with deeply personal aspirations. So employees are fully engaged and satisfied, because in contributing to the organisation's success, they are effectively pursuing their own.

The best leaders champion self-actualisation in their staff without ignoring lower levels. They understand each is critical in its own right and neglecting just one can hamper an employee's full commitment to corporate goals.

Felix Dennis, a UK publishing magnate, illustrated this point perfectly. On hearing that one of his top directors intended to resign, he immediately offered him the opportunity to launch a branch in New York, with total control over its operations. He realised this rich, successful man yearned to create his own business masterpiece from scratch. Not only did Dennis retain that irreplaceable talent, but got one of his company's best performing branches in return.

How to achieve this

Of course, every organisation should hire and develop leaders with this level of empathy, and there are two essential ways to accomplish this.

The first is psychometric assessment, because leadership excellence starts with a deep understanding of strengths, weaknesses, personal values and natural competencies.

The second is to develop the necessary intellectual acuity to perceive the deeper needs of people and generate opportunities for them to satisfy their ambitions by achieving corporate goals. This skill is best accomplished with the help of a certified leadership coach. Like athletes, leaders need a dedicated trainer who offers impartial feedback and can provide practical insights based on their extensive exposure to many similar cases.

By leading from the top of Maslow's Pyramid, you will not only gain better performance from your motivated followers but also their backing in reaching your own highest values.

ABOUT MICHELLE MOSS

Michelle Moss is a director at Signium Africa (previously Talent Africa), a leading South African-based executive search and talent management company servicing sub-Saharan Africa.

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