Maslow still rules in a post covid world – here is why
Engaging and Motivating a Post-Covid Workforce

Everything has changed, nothing has changed. Without doubt our world is different, the world of work is different, and it has yet to settle. A few months ago the conversation was all about remote working, closing down offices and the impact on the various sectors such as retail and hospitality in the centres of our large cities. More recently discussion, particularly amongst some of our largest companies has been about a return to offices and the benefits that accrue from bringing people together in a vibrant and creative workplace.

The answer of course will lay somewhere in between, workforces are not going to be fully remote or return fully to a pre-pandemic world. Our world pre-pandemic wasn't totally office based, there were already trends that encouraged remote working such as 'work from home days'. What is apparent is that Covid has accelerated an already present leaning towards a more complex way of working that is possible as a result of and dependent upon the use of collaborative tools such as SharePoint, Slack, Yammer, Teams, WebEx and Zoom, to name just a few.

One thing however that hasn't changed in the need to engage and motivate our teams to perform.

Our view is that we remain in a period of transition, we are not out of the pandemic yet and whilst things are moving in a positive direction in this country, elsewhere such as in India, Mexico and Brazil the situation remains desperately worrying.

It is the 'worrying' aspect that in terms of workforce engagement of which we need to be address. Job security for many sectors is still a concern. How people's jobs have already changed and will continue to change remains troubling for many. The future for millions of the workforce is largely still shrouded in the mists of uncertainty.

In complex organisations sometimes the challenge is who is responsible for what kind of message to the workforce. Where do you draw the line? Is it HR? Internal Comms? Line Managers? Business Unit Leaders or the Executive Leadership? Who is responsible for what kind of message?

The answer of course is that everyone has a role to play, what is important is that messaging is consistent, and everyone speaks with one voice.

At this point it is worthwhile calling on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and in terms of messaging to the workforce.
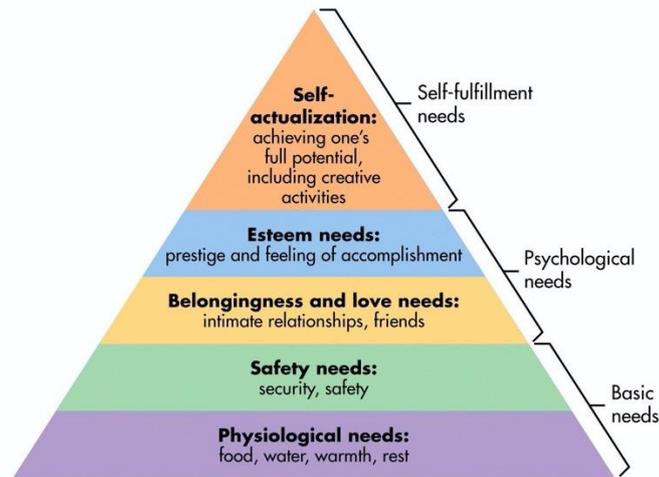
Maslow Rules OK

Maslow argued that there is a hierarchy of needs, each has to be satisfied before the individual is comfortable in thinking about the next thing. At its simplest – an incentive designed to boost sales and an individuals' sense of accomplishment will have a lot less chance of success if the participant feels that their job is under threat.

In a post covid world we can think about the needs of employees through the lens of Maslow and build our communications and programmes across the whole of the business to ensure these needs are addressed in a positive way.

Let's take them one by one.

Physiological needs

This is our basic need, to put a roof over our heads and food on the table and in relation to workforces it is all about job security. So, questions we should organisations should be asking themselves include:

- Have you kept your teams informed with regards to its performance during Covid?
- If you have needed to re-organise, does everyone understand their place in any revised set up? Has each individual been spoken to? Have you listened to their concerns?
- Have you shared your vision for the future? Does everyone know where the business is going?
- Have you asked the workforce how they feel? Do you understand their concerns? Are you able to address them?

Safety needs

Covid has been an extremely steep learning curve for everyone, the knee jerk reaction last March for most organisations was to shut down all the spaces, close offices and to work remotely. It was the quickest and easiest solution at the time. But now we have to think

about the future. In terms of Maslow, staff need to believe the organisation knows what it is doing and that they will be safe. It is easy to assume knowledge and understanding. The organisation should ensure that such knowledge, understanding and acceptance is tested.

- What are the protocols for returning to offices? Have they been shared with everyone? Have you asked staff how they feel about a return to physical offices?
- Do you have and communicated policies for staff who are concerned about any return? What is the mechanism for raising concerns?
- Have you addressed mental health issues? Do staff have a clear path for raising such matters with someone?

Belonging needs

Covid has been a huge disruption, people have been working remotely and not have they not physically met work colleagues but additionally in many instances they have also not met up with their own friends and relatives. The impact on mental health across our nation has yet to be quantified – but we know now there has been a huge impact from the consequences of the pandemic.

Over the last few months, we have all tried kahoot quizzes, online cocktail making, zoom team meetings. Teams have been fractured, we have had furlough, partial furlough and sadly in many cases redundancies. In Maslow terms 'belonging needs' extends in two main directions – a sense of belonging to the organisation – which is a two-way process and a sense of belonging to a team and with colleagues.

- Do your employees understand where they fit in the organisation? Are they reassured on the longevity of their position? Do they recognise where they fit into the scheme of things and how that is part of any bigger picture?
- Has their team changed over the last few months? Do they know where they fit within those teams?
- Have they physically met their colleagues? As we start to emerge from lockdown what are you doing to rebuild your teams? What will happen the first few days and weeks workplaces re-open?
- Can you create tasks for small groups to work on to bring them together – both remotely and physically?
- What is the plan for any return to offices? Do people know where they fit in to that plan? Has it been explained?

Esteem needs

People like to be publicly praised for their success. They like to bathe in the warm of being recognised for their performance success. This is particularly relevant to elite performers in organisations. Top salesmen are driven by being seen to be at the top. The requirement for public esteem however extends across the whole workforce. If a sense of belonging is about 'feeling loved', then esteem needs is all about 'feeling loved for what I do'.

There is an old adage in the world of motivation and performance improvement which is *'It is more about achieving than receiving'*. This recognises the importance of recognition over reward in terms of individuals contributing towards the achievement of companywide goals.

- What opportunities have you had to publicly recognise the success of both individuals and teams during the pandemic?
- What next? As we emerge from the pandemic what opportunities do you have to recognise the efforts of both individuals and teams? How can this be achieved in a public forum?
- How can team members recognise the support and assistance they receive from their colleagues and co-workers? Do they have an opportunity to praise someone for a job well done?
- Over the next few months, the opportunities to bring people together again will emerge, indeed likely to be expected by teams. What are your plans in this area – are you ahead of the game?
- How does recognition and reward fit in with the achievement of your business goals?

Self-fulfilment needs

The pinnacle of the Maslow Pyramid is an interesting concept in the context of the pandemic and how we merge from its grips. Without doubt in the depths of the lockdown last year a great many people had the time to reflect on what they really wanted from life and either acted for themselves or had life changing events such as redundancy, enforced role changes or more widely suffered the impact of the loss of a loved one.

We should recognise the disruption of the pandemic has for many 'changed the game'. Organisationally we should be cognisant the impact on individuals of changes that have been made and how this has impacted what might be changing self-fulfilment needs

Those individuals that are still standing, either in their existing role or are doing something different to what they were doing before the pandemic are likely to have a very different view on life now than from before Covid.

Self-fulfilment needs need not be life changing and can be relatively modest in nature, such as learning a language or to learn to play a musical instrument.

Organisationally this is both a threat and an opportunity.

- How well do you understand what is going on in the minds of your people?
- What opportunities arise in terms of succession and resource planning does better understanding of the self-fulfilment needs of colleagues?
- How can your reward offer help people to achieve their self-fulfilment goals? We are currently running a programme where winners can choose to spend an award fund virtually on anything they want – we have purchased a couple of guitars and lessons, helped a winner to restore a Lambretta scooter and helped another to take up sailing.

Engaging and motivating staff through well designed and though through recognition and reward programmes has never been so important. Covid has impacted all of our lives and disrupted our way of life. It will be those organisations that recognise the need to act, and act quickly, that will continue to prosper and grow.

Red e2 are specialist recognition and reward practitioners with over twenty years' experience in helping large corporates to achieve their business objectives, large and small. We are always happy to meet over a coffee, either virtually or physically, to chat through challenges that you may face. More often than not we are able to add value to any discussion and debate that may be taking place. If you would like to find out more about how we can help you to achieve your business objectives call Stephen Pope on +44 (0) 1452 733300 or email him at sp@rede2.com

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About the author

Peter Jackson is one of the Founders/Directors of Red Blaze Limited a fully integrated Incentive and Performance Improvement Agency. Peter first entered the world of Performance Improvement in the late 1980's, designing and implementing programmes in a range of sectors including Financial Services, Retail, Automotive and Capital Equipment. In recent years he has worked alongside global brands in the areas of Consumer Electronics, Business Equipment, Defence, IT and Telecommunications to help improve business performance through improved communication, structured improvement strategies and engaging recognition and reward systems.