The motivation world of employees: if mastery is not lacking (case analysis according to the theoretical assumptions of D. McClelland’s 3 categories of needs)

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Abstract

Almost half a century passed since psychology professor David McClelland published his first works on the 3 categories of needs theory. Until now, the mentioned theory remains widely researched and presented in the international high-level academia, it is permanently introduced in publications of higher education institutions. This article presents an approach towards D. McClelland’s human motivation theoretical assumptions based on the research carried out. A better understanding of essential (strategic) human needs prepares organisation managers for developing more effective employee motivation systems. The article features recommendations on how to make the most use of the mentioned theory in the work environment.

Keywords: human resources management, employee motivation, strategic needs.

1. Introduction

Having conducted various studies on the topic of human resource management, one have noticed that respondents are often critical of their manager’s capacity to properly motivate subordinates to improve their work performance. On the other hand, the majority of managers also suppose that “people are just not motivated when it comes to work” (Robbins, 2003). This opinion may be bolstered by many managers’ conviction that their employees can be driven only by good pay, flexible working hours and profit from health insurance and pension benefits, etc, while more appealing work activity, advancement, achievements and other alike are not considered requisite for productive work output. This point of view is not incompatible with that of those foreign and Lithuanian specialists, which find the current situation to be a result of unfit human resource management organisation (Kinni et al., 2005; Sakalas and Savaneviciene, 2003). Our research on the evaluation of how ready managers are to participate in the changes also testifies to the fact that managers are less skilled at motivating employees to be active participants in changes (Grazulis and Jagminas, 2008). Here it may well fit to mention the proposals of some specialists made several decades ago that it is up to managers to know what one or another employee prefers in terms of rewards and why some of their employees do not care to work with others and etc. Therefore, the manager must recognise different motives that drive individuals to be effective in motivating their staff (Mitchell and Larson, 1987). Personal motives and needs in today’s human resource management can have negative consequences for the entire organisation, making it likely that managers for whom this holds true will have a hard time driving their employees to produce efficient work output, which are prerequisites for attaining organisational goals.

Modern day life leaves individuals faced with various challenges, forcing them to constantly decide on their priorities and to compete with others for survival. Survival here should be treated as the capacity to adapt to a rapidly changing environment and to new technical requirements all-the-while satisfying one’s own needs, starting from physiological needs like food and accommodation and ending with the need for self-expression and growth. While some needs may be satisfied in the framework of one’s personal or private life - like...
the need to create a family, have children and friends - others can be fulfilled in professional activity, like securing a job position, getting a salary, co-operating, etc.

The discourse on employee motivation oftentimes discusses whether it is possible to make a reliable estimation on which needs are prevalent at a given moment in time; in other words, whether the level to which various needs are relevant at a given time can be measured at all, and, if so, how can this be done?1

Our many years of experience in surveying respondents has raised considerable doubts on whether most people are aware and able to correctly describe the true motives behind their actions, meaning that a respondent who chooses material rewards as the most important motive from the provided list may, in fact, make an unconscious mistake about true work motives and prevailing needs. Therefore, one must agree that it is not always possible to determine what motivates a person just by observing their behaviour.

On the other hand, without knowing the true driving forces of individual behaviour, one cannot make a reliable prediction as to how a person will respond to one or another motivational measure an organisation chooses to employ. McClelland (1987) agrees in his works that an individual who scores highest in a given survey on one specific motive should in fact be prompted to act by this particular motive. In order to curb the margin of error in a given study, most motivation theorists (Abraham Maslow, Frederick Herzberg, David McClelland, etc.) recommend surveying respondents in descriptive form. Moreover, testing has proven effective in terms of assessing the intensity of individual needs, i.e. when the importance of work motives can be deducted from a respective evaluation scheme. It should be noted that D. McClelland, analysing the phenomenon of collective motivation spoke out directly about the possibility and need of assessing motives by measuring their intensity. In his opinion, a public probe into motives could avoid the “circularity accusation only when motives can be measured and their contribution to what happened in society assessed independently of the events themselves.” (McClelland, 1987). One may therefore conclude that for the sake of analysing motives inherent in human activity one can determine their intensity, which allows us to speak of the intensity of specific needs. For example, a person who scores most points in a survey on motives related to the achievement motive (enjoys pursuing challenging goals, work can be no less satisfying than recreational activities, I relax after I successfully complete a work task, etc.) will most likely put most energy forth in situations where they expect to make an achievement.

Even though recently in the new EU countries much efforts are put to inquire into the characteristics of motivational processes, it still seems that because of the focus on assessing economic-type motives, most experts in post-communist states pay too little attention to other motives that are important for people in a working environment, leaving no less important motivators out in their research. One would think that the current situation mostly reflects the issues that arise with the research methodology in this particular field.

This publication is aimed at revealing and assessing essential (strategic) motivational priorities for employees in Lithuania’s current environment by using D. McClelland’s current environment by using D. McClelland’s works and a comparative analysis of D. McClelland’s works on 3-needs analysis and references to his theories by other scholars as well as research carried out by the authors.

David McClelland’s 3 categories of motives (needs) theory, the meaning for contemporary employee motivation process (the Lithuanian case).

2. Strategic human priorities – do they exist and how much do they matter?

Any analysis of motives behind human activity and needs expressed in work environment is usually limited to the concept of their impermanence, i.e. on the prevalent need at any given time. As a result, a rather significant aspect of analysing human needs is left outside of researchers’ interest, namely the notion that human needs manifest not just in the work setting, but influence one’s life in the general sense. This can be seen as resulting from the cultural and social environment. Harvard professor David McClelland was one to make a considerable contribution to classifying work

1 Henry Murray was one of the first to employ the expert method in researching the intensity of individual motives. However, as professor D. McClelland noted later, because experts’ opinion did not provide sufficient reliability, he managed to create only a partially scientifically based methodology of testing the intensity of motives.
motives into a certain system. Having spent many years together with his colleagues analysing the way humans react to different life situations and what motives drive them to behave in those particular ways, he discovered that a few innate motives (needs) determine a person’s behaviour throughout their entire life, or at least for most of it. The scientist concluded that cultural traditions in place in a specific society (family, school, church, etc.) and the social environment act on a person’s personality from the moment they are born. Because this takes place in a similar environment, the author deduced that in most countries, people follow one or two motivational patterns throughout their life. From his research, D. McClelland identified three higher level motives (needs) that determine an individual’s behaviour (McClelland, D. C., 1961):

a) The need for achievement shows a person’s desire to pursue the best results, both in terms of their activity in general and of their work;

b) The need for affiliation manifests through an individual’s constant desire to maintain good interpersonal relations with others, to belong to a community both in general and at work;

c) The need for power reflects an individual’s aim to influence the turn of events and those surrounding him as well as to control their actions.

McClelland’s achievement motive has a positive effect on employees, regardless of whether they are in the managerial levels or are part of the subordinate staff. The authors feel that an individual’s core innate drive and desire to achieve competence is of utmost significance for human resource management within an organisation.

The scientist ascertained in his researches that people with higher achievement motivation typically achieve their goals because they set realistic objectives and therefore they often succeed in achieving their purposes. People with high achievement needs are easily motivated by intriguing and competition fostering work assignments, therefore, they are prone to use horizontal career possibilities. For example the author has noted that the employees oriented to achievement needs are working harder in the case when they are sure that they will be personally praised for the efforts to seek the purpose, even if the level of risk of the carried out work is quite high. The attention must be paid to the fact that achievement need is satisfied not so much by stating the fact of personal advancement (success) as by the fact of personal responsibility and successful ending of the work. On the other hand, those with a highly expressed need for achievement do not care for situations that do not offer possibilities for personal growth and do not perform well under such conditions (McClelland, 1987).

D. McClelland found that the need for achievement could be developed for more effective work results. The author also cautions that regardless of how developed an individual’s need for achievement is, it may not manifest itself if the organisation fails to provide the individual with sufficient room to show initiative and to reinforce them for achievements (McClelland, 1970).

To describe individuals who tend to be constantly motivated to improve their performance, McClelland later came up with an efficiency motive, which could be conceived in terms of the input/output ratio. Defining the efficiency concept, the author wrote that it manifests in better output providing the same input, and, better yet, in situations where a manager or their staff aspires to achieve higher results all-the-while reducing work-related costs (McClelland, D. C., 1970).

Most management experts agree that a person’s motivation for achievement for people in the Japanese culture is associated with the welcome need to constantly refine the surrounding environment, while for Americans it goes in line with individualism, which they value most of all, and which manifests in a person taking on full responsibility for their actions and results, controlling their fate and thus feeling achieved for making their individual contribution to conquering high altitudes (personal or team). Here one could agree with Brian R. Jewell, who argued that the need for achievement is the prominent one when it comes to human motivation (Jewell, B. R. 2000), and however question his conclusion that people with a strong need for achievement are poor team...
members. Our research shows that Jewell’s latter statement could hold true only in cases when an achievement-driven individual assumes the plant or resource investigator role from Meredith Belbin’s team roles model.

Evaluating the importance of realising the need for achievement both on the state and individual levels, McClelland concluded that the need for achievement drives social and economic upturns (McClelland, D. C., 1987). Also, the author stressed that failure to acknowledge this motive became the main cause behind the collapse of past and current civilisations.

Achievement motivation corresponds to the esteem and self-realisation level needs in Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, meanwhile, compared to Herzberg’s Two Factor Model, the need for achievement is a motivator factor as it is related to work content.

The need that D. McClelland named belonging to group or affiliation is very similar to A. Maslow’s ideas and reflects the desire some people have to have close and friendly relations with others, i.e. such individuals are oriented towards interpersonal relationships within a given group (community). It has been found that the motive to belong to a group and to act together for such people is very important for their psychological and physiological wellbeing and the sense of fulfilment. In the author’s opinion, such people perform much more efficiently when a manager takes notice of their need and willingness to co-operate and gives them room for free expression. Moreover, these individuals and their need for affiliation will be fulfilled if a manager gives them more attention and periodically assigns them to separate groups. In the opposite case scenario, people with the need for affiliation are known to become anxious if they cannot tell whether their colleagues like them or not, which can sometimes make them unpopular at work.

McClelland noticed that managers prone to belonging to group or affiliation are often faced with problems, because extra attention works to maintain good working relations within a group only if the group itself acknowledge and welcome this as something that can improve work efficiency. Also, the author feels that placing too much emphasis on the social aspect can be detrimental when high work results are pursued in routinely activities and when managers have a difficult time assigning difficult tasks to employees and supervising their implementation. As one can see, the need for affiliation can manifest as a motivator in some situations, but according to F. Herzberg’s two factors motivation theory can perform just the role of the hygiene factor. Belonging to group or affiliation needs in Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, it would be assigned to the social needs.

The power motive in D. McClelland’s theory explains the need some individuals have to influence other people and their organisation, to nurture those surrounding them, deal with the consequences of risk and pursue a career.

A strong need for power is linked with competitiveness and the desire to achieve a high hierarchical status and do everything to retain it. The author found that people with the need for power more often than others tend to be active and energetic, not afraid of confrontation and able to stand their ground. Moreover, the power motive can be linked with a person’s skills to perform both in cases of success and otherwise, which is why McClelland saw this need as a positive thing. Such individuals are usually good orators, are likely to demand more attention from others and have a strong sense of self-control (which they try to instil in their staff) and low affiliation motivation.

McClelland’s studies revealed that when it comes to people with high power motivation, the fear of failure motivates them just as much as the possibility of success would drive others. It has also been noted that people with a high need for power do not necessarily have to be power hungry careerists.

Analysing various measures for satisfying the need for power, D. McClelland notes that “Those

4 Our research shows that in order to boost workplace communication, managers should take note of their extravert employees. Some experts in support of D. McClelland’s stance on the importance of one’s belonging to a group, note the necessity of focusing on upping cooperation and communication ties, as they are a good platform for a person’s skills to manifest, which, in turn, would help the organisation keep talented individuals on staff (Cohen and Prusak, 2001).

5 Written sources suggest that people have been interested in the need for power since ancient Greece, as illustrated by Plato’s “Republic”. In the Middle Ages, this topic received attention from Machiavelli, the French school of philosophy, etc. All of them would stress the role this need played in state and human affairs.
individuals with the highest need for power that is not expressed in a win-lose, dominance-submissive style, but a more socialized form of influence, should be groomed for advancement into higher managerial positions. Personal dominance may be effective in very small groups, but if a human leader wants to be effective in large groups, he must rely on much more subtle and socialized forms of influence. [...] This positive or socialized face of power is characterized by a concern for group goals, for finding those goals that will move men, for helping the group with the means for achieving such goals, and for giving group members a feeling of strength and competency they need to work hard for such goals.” (McClelland, 1970).

According to McClelland, people that have high levels of the aforementioned needs are more likely to become leaders; however, their main weakness is that they can pretty much lose it in stressful and frustration-powered situations.

McClelland concluded that an individual goes through a few different stages before their attitude on authority is fully formed. For this reason, the author argues that by trying to convince a person to not act on or renounce a dominant need to influence others can in fact be more detrimental than beneficial.

McClelland’s research found that people driven by the power motive become great managers if they give priority to organisational instead of their personal goals. The scientist himself found a person’s need for power a good thing in itself, especially when power in pursuit of the welfare of an organisation becomes one’s lifetime challenge. Moreover, it has been found that managers who achieve high results for the benefit of their entire organisation are valued and appreciated by their staff.

McClelland used his research results for coming up with a typology of three managerial types:

- **Institutional managers**, who have high power motivation and a strong sense of self-control;
- **Personal power managers**, who exhibit a greater need for power than for belonging, however tend to be concerned with being liked;
- **Affiliative managers**, who have high affiliation motivation in comparison to that for power and tend to be open and socially active.

The author’s research has helped to establish that the first two types of managers, who tend to set difficult, but feasible requirements both for themselves and their staff, are much better at performing their duties and usually achieve higher results than affiliative managers.

McClelland’s power motive would appear between esteem and self-realisation needs in Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and could be equated to the needs for recognition, growth and responsibility in Frederick Herzberg’s factors leading to job satisfaction.

The essential differences among motivational needs of employees require a manager’s understanding as to why their staff have a different approach to their work. By understanding these differences, the managers can “speak the same language” with their employees, which facilitates more effective motivation schemes for their subordinate staff. From this approach, McClelland’s ideas are similar to the theoretical provisions in Herzberg’s theory.

Unfortunately, just as was the case with theories drafted by Maslow and Herzberg, the managerial environments in our domestic organisations do not feature any reliable information on employee motivation systems, which would take into account McClelland’s classification of work motives. A few different reasons may be accountable for this situation. To name one, not a single scientific or educational book is known to exclude the ideas promoted by Maslow and Herzberg, which cannot be said of McClelland’s 3- categories of needs theory, which nonetheless was subject to less if no serious criticism in literary sources. This fact undoubtedly accounts for this theory not making its way into working environments.

3. Hierarchy of human needs in the Lithuanian environment (case analysis)

A study on priority needs according to McClelland’s Needs Theory was conducted with a sample of 723 students in Lithuania’s universities and colleges, including those studying full and part-time and taking evening courses, over the years 2003–2009.

Respondents were asked to state their opinion on the following statement groups, i.e. rank them based on the extent to which they agree with them.

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6 As observed in this case, McClelland is speaking about the person’s need to climb vertical ladder of career.
What goals they set for themselves and how much effort they direct at putting into achieving them;

Whether they can be without friends and how they feel when in contact with people who are satisfied with life;

Whether they like to dominate in a working group and how they defend their position and influence others in such an environment.

The study results are interesting in a qualitative sense, as they help understand what motivates people in their surrounding environment. Figure No. 1 illustrates results of the study in question.

Research results revealed that priority, albeit not by a large margin, was given to the affiliation need across all respondent groups, with the average score for this motive at 38 percent. This need was marked as the prevalent one for almost 70 percent of the study sample. Most of the respondents were convinced that they feel best when they can communicate with other people, especially such that feel satisfied with life, and, on the contrary, they do not feel well if their group of friends becomes smaller or especially if it means being left without any. Faced with a choice between their beliefs and friends, most of these respondents would always choose their friends. The need for achievement was expressed somewhat less (36 percent); however, this need was the most important one for only one in four to five respondents. For this group of respondents it is very important to set ambitious goals for themselves and work to attain them, therefore, they work until they are fully satisfied with the results. Most of them would feel satisfaction even when they have to work on their own free time, given that they enjoy their job.

The need for power was least important for the respondents in this study (26.2 percent). Based on the test results, the need for power was most important for every fifth to sixth respondent. Such individuals enjoy organising the work process and dominating in the work collective, they always defend their position and tend to influence other people rather than yielding to influence themselves. Moreover, study results point to a difference in the strength of the power motive between students in non-university professional bachelor studies (25.6 percent) and those in university master-level studies (29.9 percent). This raises a question as to whether the results were accidental or, instead, reflect a person’s conscious choice of where to study. As college-type schools are more focused on preparing professionals in a specific field, it is our conviction that the results reflect a thought-out choice.7

Survey results revealed that even though one need proved to be more important than others, most people to some extent have features of all three needs. The study found that for some five to ten percent of people, two needs can be equally expressed. Moreover, according to the results, every 10-15 respondents had no need at all for pursuing power or to fret over failure to achieve something. Our study using McClelland’s model of motivation again went to confirm the notion that the motives for power and achievement are important for just a small group of people 8.

This study also aimed to determine whether respondent gender had an impact on the importance of an individual’s strategic needs. Figure No. 2 features results of this particular analysis. Figures presented in the picture show that when assessing human needs according to McClelland’s Theory of Motivation, the gender factor must be taken into account.

As one can see from the picture, the need for affiliation was pretty much the same for both groups of respondents. Compared with the male respondent group, women had a higher need for achievement (by almost 1.2 times), while the need for power proved stronger by a third among the male respondents. The provided figures show that even though men are more active in their pursuit of power, they tend to apply elements of authoritarian management when in power. Most women, on the other hand, pursue power in view of applying democratic measures to achieve set out goals.

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7 It has been found that among respondents that were surveyed in colleges and that scored high on power and achievement motivation some were prone to continue studies for a university-level master’s degree.

8 This conclusion completely correlates with respondent answers on their team roles according to Belbin’s Role Theory. The plant and shaper roles, which show the need to influence other team members, were far less important for the respondents than the rest of Belbin’s roles (Grazulis, V. 2006). The analogous results were received testing the respondents according F. Herzberg’s 2-factor motivation theory (Grazulis, V. 2009).
It has been earlier discussed that the social and economic situation both within an organisation and in its external environment has a considerable impact on the manifestation of a manager’s skills, whatever they may be. McClelland’s theory is aimed at ascertaining the level to which a person’s innate or consciously acquired higher-level needs influence their behaviour in the broad sense and reveals a person’s essential motivational stereotypes (strategic needs) that stick with them throughout their life or at least for the most of it. This leads to conclude that respondent answers to survey questions prepared to test McClelland’s theory do not necessarily have to match those drafted under Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory.

Conclusions

The heredity of personal qualities, family traditions and the social and cultural environment play a part in forming a person’s motivational stereotypes that stay with them from birth and throughout their life. The presented research has helped understand that throughout their lifetime, individuals aim to fulfil just a few essential (strategic) needs, which are manifested through their desire to achieve something, influence other members in a group or community and feel an affiliation with those surrounding them. By understanding a person’s strategic needs, organisation managers can create more effective systems to motivate their employees.
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