

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Robert Brounstein

Week of October 21, 2019 – Maslow’s Hierarchy of Human Needs

I think it is safe to say that trying to understand why people do things has been a curiosity as old as time. In the field of S&H, rules and regulations have been written to help provide workers in the US and throughout the world with processes to help ensure, that when these rules and regulations are applied, workplace tasks can be performed so that the safety and health of those performing their work will not be compromised. Yet, we find that on a daily basis, workers continue to place themselves in harms’ way by bypassing regulations through shortcuts or just due to their perception, that a specific rule/regulation is merely an extraneous level of management and is not relevant to complete the task-at-hand.

The following story was first told by a Peruvian industrial hygienist to a group of S&H professionals to illustrate why people do things, even when they know they are placing themselves (and possibly others) in jeopardy.

The story takes place in Peru; what town, I cannot recall. It could have been in its capital, Lima, or possibly somewhere in a remote village near the Andes. Regardless of its location, the incident occurred in an electroplating facility. Electroplating operations involve highly corrosive or caustic chemicals, such as cyanides, acids and bases as well as considerable amounts of electricity. It was explained to the audience that the workers were part of the indigenous population where such safety gear as safety glasses, face shields work boots (or sturdy work shoes), aprons were either not provided or merely not worn due to the workers’ unfamiliarity or even refusal to wear such clothing (keep in mind, this is Peru; basically a third world nation – especially years ago when this event occurred). As the story was told, one day an overhead light burnt out and for operations to continue, illumination was necessary. This required someone to climb up a pole and replace the light. One person decided to take on the task. He was barefoot and no fall protection was used (either unavailable or simply not used). All work stopped as the worker was cheered on by his co-workers. When he reached the top, he dislodged the old light bulb and replaced it with a new bulb. Upon climbing down from the pole, the worker received a resounding roar of cheers and applause, making him the “hero of the day.”

Anyone can understand the serious safety hazards that this worker placed upon himself. These include fall from heights, electrocution as well as eye injuries and lacerations and puncture wounds to his feet. Yet, after receiving all the positive feedback from his fellow employees, should this same scenario occur once more, it is, without a doubt, that this worker – in spite of all the risks he will place upon himself – will once again be ready for a repeat performance!

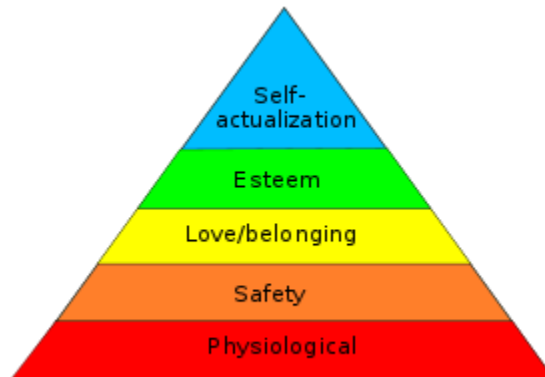
It is apparent that this workers’ motivation came from a desire to be recognized and even esteemed by his coworkers; even at the risk of his own safety. In the mid-twentieth century, the American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, intrigued with human behavior and the reasons for what motivates humans, presented his theory of hierarchy of needs as an explanation of how humans intrinsically partake in behavioral motivation. Maslow used five stages to describe the pattern through which he proposed human motivations can be described:

1. Physiological (physical wellbeing)
2. Safety
3. Belonging and Love
4. Social needs or Esteem, and
5. Self-Actualization (to become everything that one can become)



TerranearPMC Safety Share

Maslow presented these motivation stages as a pyramid with the largest, most fundamental needs at the bottom and the need for self-actualization at the top. Thus, illustrating that individuals' most basic needs must be met before they become motivated to achieve higher level needs.



This means that for motivation to occur at the next level, the previous level must be satisfied. It is important to understand that motivation to the next level is not based on reality, but rather in what the individual perceives. This explains why the worker at the electroplating facility placed himself at risk. That is, he did not perceive safety or physical well-being to be in jeopardy. He saw an opportunity to move from a level of simply belonging to now being esteemed or even admired by his peers.

Maslow's "Hierarchy of Human Needs" has come under criticism over the years; however, his basic concept of human motivation based on these five factors has remained intact.

Under typical circumstances, nobody wants to suffer an injury or workplace illness, nor do they want to cause a fellow worker to become injured or ill. Yet, workplace incidents continue and through incident investigations, so many times a workplace incident is the result of a personal decision. Such things as entering into a confined space without monitoring the atmosphere or entering into an excavation without proper cave-in precautions, have led to unfortunate outcomes. It is the same situation when working around electrical lines or power systems where bypassing certain steps in a procedure – to save time – has caused electrical shock and even electrocutions. Many times, an excuse has been that "I have been doing it this way for twenty years and nothing has ever gone wrong." This is a typical response. Not following a safety rule or regulation does not mean an accident will definitely happen, but rather that there is an increased risk of an unfortunate event to occur. And this is where the S&H profession can have its greatest effectiveness. That is, prevention by removing or reducing workplace risk. Nevertheless, according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs, when humans do not acknowledge a risk – either through not recognizing a hazard or simply believing that the hazard is not perceived as a credible risk, that is when we become susceptible to a workplace accident.

Things that we can do to keep our personal motivations in check is to continuously remind ourselves of the work tasks we need to perform as well as their associated hazards and the controls that have been established. Tailgate meetings, lessons learned topics, watching out for our coworkers and speaking up when we notice that something doesn't look right; are all available to us to ensure our motivational priorities stay intact.

He felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him see the works

Dashiell Hammett, from *The Maltese Falcon*