

Building on Maslow to Meet Director and Staff Needs

by Susan Cannon

In early childhood we sometimes forget what successful businesses everywhere know: How you treat employees affects the bottom line. Employee interactions with customers are more positive and effective if employees have been treated well by their managers. The following quotations (www.customer1.com/blog/customer-service-quotes) affirm this fact:

“Our mission statement about treating people with respect and dignity is not just words, but a creed we live by every day. You can’t expect your employees to exceed the expectations of your customers if you don’t exceed the employees’ expectations of management.”

— Howard Schultz, CEO,
Starbucks Coffee

“Whether you are big or small, you cannot give good customer service if your employees don’t feel good about coming to work.”

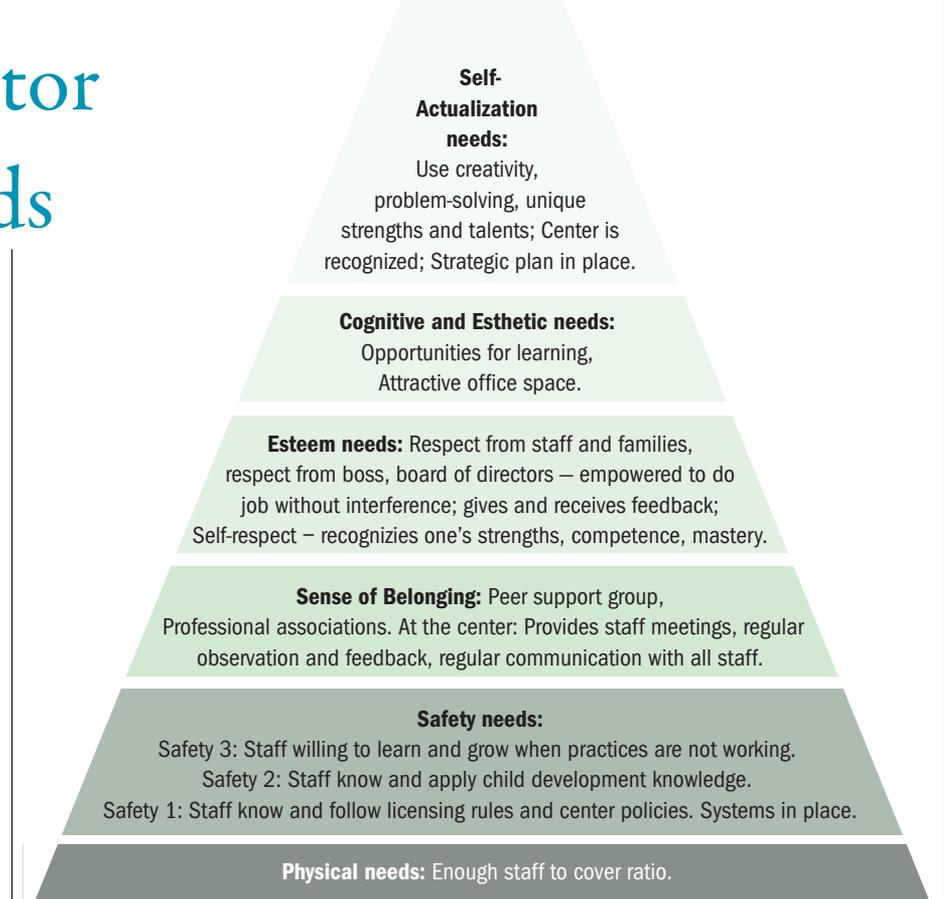
— Martin Oliver, MD,
Kwik-Fit Financial Services



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Hierarchy of Directors’ Needs (adapted from Maslow)



“Treat your employees the way you want your customers treated — maybe even better.”

— Shep Hyken, author,
The Cult of the Customer

In 2007 I began working as a coach for center directors as part of the Promoting Resilient Children project in our community. The aim of the project is to build skills in directors and teachers that will enable them to help children develop the social and emotional skills to succeed in school and in life. Since I strongly believe in the purpose of the program and I understand directors’ isolation and the challenges of leading a center, I was eager to enroll as many centers as possible.

I quickly found that many directors were unable to keep appointments; I would arrive at a center and the director

wouldn’t be there. Many didn’t implement action plans or make the changes we’d agreed on. This contrasted sharply with my experience with other directors. I puzzled over why some directors seemed organized and accomplished, were eager to learn and grow and to make changes and implement strategies for center improvement, and others were not.

Meeting the Needs of Directors

I began to think in terms of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1968). Often, directors who canceled or interrupted appointments did so because they had to step in and meet the basic needs at their center: bathroom breaks for teachers, answering the phone, or stepping in to maintain staff:child ratios. The directors who appeared more organized and had higher scores on the

Program Administration Scale (Talan & Bloom, 2011) often had assistant directors and floaters (PAS item #6, strand 4). So I began to list directors' needs in a parallel fashion to Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs: Physical, Safety, Belonging, Esteem, Cognitive and Esthetic, and Self-Actualization. (Using his concepts but translating them into the child care setting, I have taken the liberty of using the term **physical** for the most basic level.)

Physical Needs

To cover **physical** needs, directors literally need enough staff to be in ratio and to be able to handle emergencies: from a sick or injured child to a child exhibiting challenging behavior, from a sick staff member to an upset parent. These needs can be met with an assistant director or a plan for floaters and substitute teachers (PAS Item #6, strand 1) (Talan & Bloom, 2011). Physical needs may involve other kinds of help: a substitute cook, a handyman, or a bookkeeper.

Safety Needs

This category of needs (often ignored, I noticed) requires knowledgeable staff. Teachers must know and follow licensing regulations, and be skilled in the practice of first aid and fire and storm drills. To meet this need fully, a director also needs staff who can protect the emotional *and* physical safety of the children. The more knowledge and skill the teachers have in supporting the developmental needs of the children, the less strain will fall on the director. If staff do not have a basic level of maturity and emotional health themselves, the stress level for the director, the children, and the staff themselves, will be higher.

Meeting safety needs could have three tiers:

- *Bottom level:* Staff know and follow licensing regulations and center policies.
- *Second level:* Staff know and apply child development knowledge in their practice.

- *Top level:* Staff are willing to change when practices are not working.

Belonging Needs

Once physical and safety needs are met, the director needs peer support outside of her center to meet her own need for belonging. If she is in an independent center, she may need to find a support group through her local Child Care Resource & Referral agency (R&R) or professional association. If she is part of a multi-site organization such as a chain or a large nonprofit, she may have peers she can consult with there. Some directors are in a large organization but have no peers who deal with the same issues they do, such as those providing services to corporate employees. A director also can meet his need for belonging through his relationship with his staff with frequent communication, observation, and feedback, including regular staff meetings.

Esteem Needs

To meet her esteem needs, the director must begin with self-respect. She needs to recognize her own strengths, competence, and mastery of the skills of administration and leadership. Leadership coaches can help here. She also will want respect from staff and families, and support from her supervisor, if she has one, and/or her board of directors. This respect is demonstrated when she is permitted to do her job without being micro-managed from above. Directors' skills, abilities, and efforts need to be explicitly recognized — in performance reviews, in public statements by the board or corporate employer, and by her being given the level of authority that matches her level of responsibility.

Cognitive and Esthetic Needs

As Maslow continued to develop his theory, he added levels for cognitive and esthetic needs. If directors are to

support staff in these ways, they need personal and professional growth opportunities for themselves. A director who is not allowed to leave her center to attend professional development programs or to share her knowledge and skills with others in the community is one who is not respected by her superiors. Unattractive and cramped office spaces may also be marks of disrespect.

Self-Actualization

Directors who are successful in meeting their needs use creativity, problem solving, and their unique strengths and talents to become "all that they can be." They are self-actualized leaders. Their centers are recognized in the community, attuned to emerging needs and family and community concerns, and engaged in ongoing strategic planning efforts.

Meeting the Needs of Teaching Staff

Once I had sorted directors' needs into a Maslow-like hierarchy, I created a parallel hierarchy for teachers. As I spoke with professionals in my community, I learned that often the most basic needs of teaching staff are ignored. Much of what is included in the hierarchy for directors has been included in work focusing on teacher development as well (see References). However, it must be said again here: Many center staff do not have even their most basic **physical** and **safety needs** met:

- Many teachers are alone with a group of children with very few supplies and little equipment.
- Teachers may have little or no help when one child needs the full attention of an adult — a growing phenomenon as the rates of autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) continue to climb.
- Teachers are sometimes expected to supervise more children than is legally permitted.

These teachers can hardly have a sense of personal safety, let alone be able to provide high-quality services to the children in their care. Our children deserve teachers whose physical and safety needs are met, as well as teachers who are knowledgeable and well-supervised.

Physical Needs of Teachers

It should go without saying that teachers need classrooms and outdoor play spaces that are adequately equipped and supplied. Ideally, there would be an indoor gross-motor space for use on rainy days with enough equipment to rotate and create interesting challenges for the children. A teacher needs an assistant or co-teacher for those times when one child requires an adult's full attention.

I include bathroom breaks and regular paychecks under physical needs, because teachers tell me these are not always provided.

Safety Needs of Teachers

A Head Start center in Cincinnati with beautiful facilities had to close because of frequent shootings in the neighborhood. At another center in a different community, teachers were bruised and scarred, expected to endure physical harm from out-of-control children. Teachers need employers who work to ensure teachers' physical and emotional safety. They need directors who recognize the difference between supporting children and families (by securing adequate mental health resources, for example) and enabling children and families (by allowing inappropriate, even dangerous, behavior).

Employer-paid health insurance contributes to a teacher's sense of safety, as does a sense of security that comes from knowing the administration is competent and in tune with the needs of staff, children, and families.

Belonging Needs of Teachers

The director can go a long way toward meeting the belonging needs of teachers and other staff by having an effective orientation program and regular staff meetings, and by regularly communicating appreciation and timely feedback to each employee. When the director sets the climate for positive and supportive feedback to all staff, and provides adequate planning time and support to teaching staff, even the newest employee can feel included as part of the team. Positive interactions with parents, children, and other staff will develop a sense of community — and decrease harmful gossip and cliques (Bruno, 2009).

Teachers may need assistance in setting healthy boundaries, and to be supported by the modeling of the director and seasoned colleagues. A healthy understanding of boundaries will help a teacher stay clear about her role: She is a friendly professional to parents, but not a 'friend'? To keep professional boundaries clear, some centers have set policies prohibiting staff from babysitting for enrolled families, among other rules.

Esteem Needs of Teachers

Teachers need to recognize their own strengths and have occasions to build on these to develop competence and mastery. Like directors, they benefit from performance reviews, positive feedback, and opportunities to grow.

Cognitive and Esthetic Needs of Teachers

As with directors, teachers need opportunities for professional development that are matched to their interests and targeted areas for growth. Directors can play an important role in helping a teacher identify these by noting when

the teacher gets excited about something or where she puts a lot of effort. Directors who engage in reflective supervision support the cognitive needs of teachers.

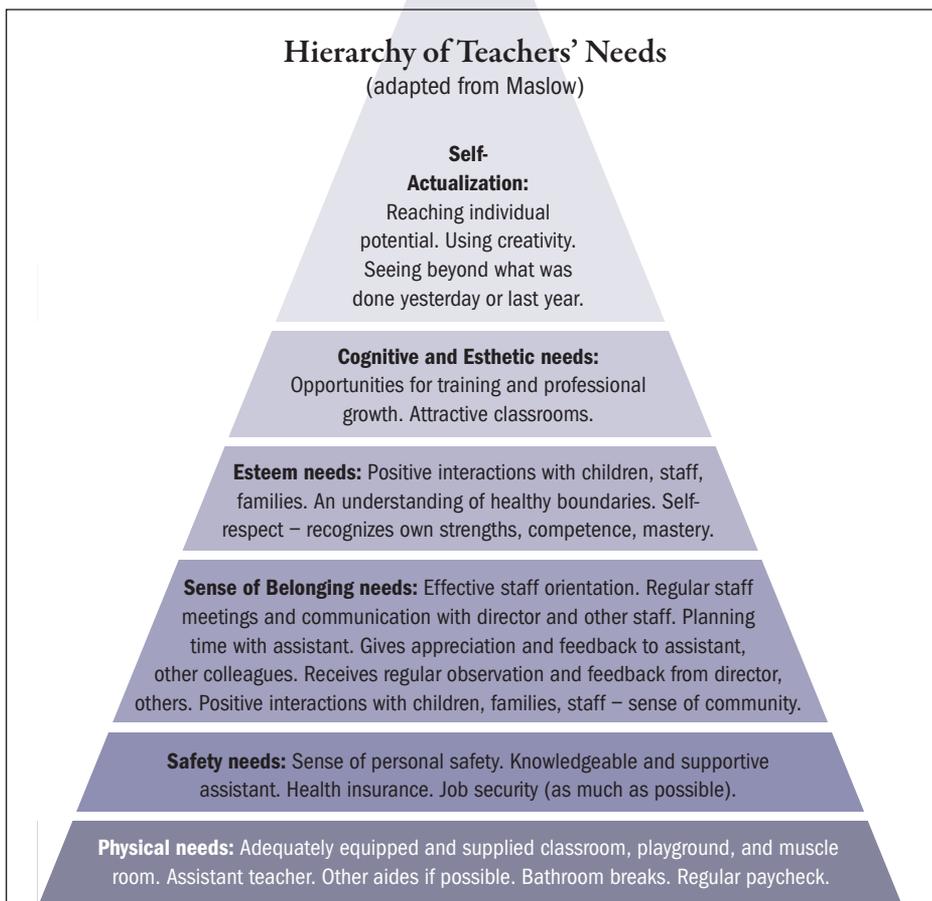
Esthetic values vary widely, so standards of classroom appearance vary as well. Teachers may want to consult recent research on classroom appearance to understand how to make their classroom inviting rather than overwhelming for children, as well as pleasing to themselves.

Self-Actualization Needs of Teachers

Some teachers repeat lesson plans year after year without reflecting on the needs and interests of currently enrolled children. Teachers like these are not at the self-actualizing level; their need for emotional safety may be their guiding principle. In some cases the corporation or administration may even dictate their lesson plans. In contrast, self-actualizing teachers need a high degree of independence in order to reach their potential. They will be creative, seeing beyond what was done yesterday or last year. Reflecting on their practice became a habit for them long ago.

It has become commonplace to say that we need teachers who are lifelong learners. In Maslow's thinking (1968), striving for growth or self-actualization is more likely to occur after our basic needs are met. If center administrators start at the bottom of the pyramid, considering their own needs, as well as their staff's needs, what will they discover?

- Could the hierarchy pyramid be used to develop a survey?
- What is missing at the bottom of the pyramid?
- Do staff at a given level perceive themselves as having the same or different needs?



- What changes could be made easily?
- If individual staff members have a chance to reflect on these ideas, what are the implications for training?
- Would identifying strategies to meet these needs be appropriate to include in a strategic plan?
- Could a life coach help the director and/or staff help plan ways to meet more of these needs?

We will serve our children best, when center owners, corporations, and boards of directors pay attention to both the basic and growth needs of all staff. Teachers whose needs are met are more likely to meet the needs of children than those whose needs go unmet; and directors whose needs are met are most likely to meet the needs of teachers and other staff at the center. When we do meet needs, we are in a position to exceed the expectations of our custom-

ers, the children and families who count on us every day.

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