

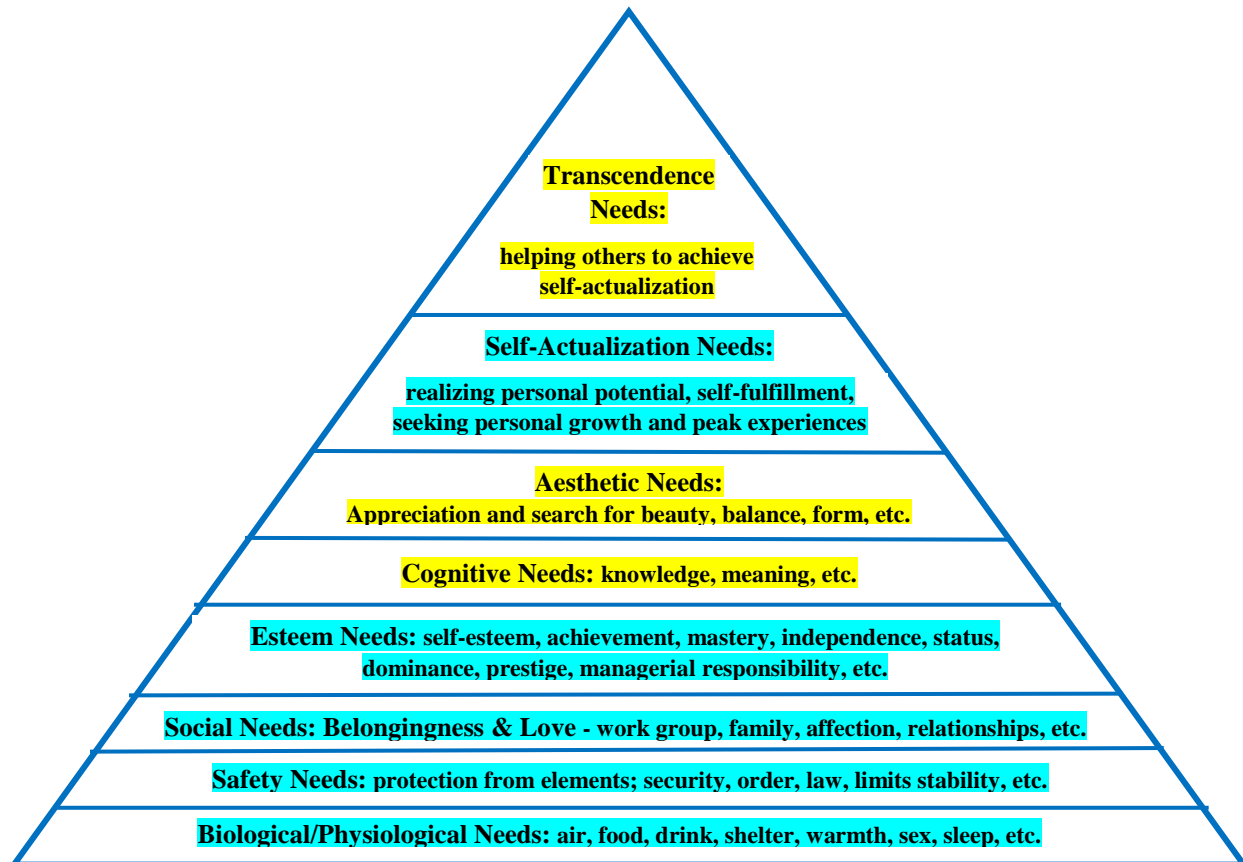
# VCI Seminars at Sea – August 21, 2014

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## 1 UPENDING THE PYRAMID THEORY-IS THE PEAK OF THE PYRAMID ALWAYS THE ONE AND ONLY PINNACLE?

In the 1950's, Abraham Maslow revolutionized (by defining and thus simplifying) man's understanding of basic needs by publishing his *Theory of Human Motivation*. His original 5-stage model (blue) was depicted in a pyramid with the most basic needs at the wide and largest bottom portion giving rise to the 'growth' needs that eventually lead a person to self-actualization, the uppermost pinnacle or top point of the pyramid. In later years, 3 more stages were added (light yellow):



Focusing on the positive behavior, Maslow felt that as fulfillment and personal growth was achieved, a person would rise or ascend to the pinnacle of self-actualization or transcendence (1943, 1954). Because this theory was in effect so basic, it has been used to parallel or explain the basics of multiple other factions of human life from architecture to zoology. In our discussion we will use it to consider both management of a team and a workplace environment constituting the hierarchical make-up of the pyramid as well as the educational aspects that can play into the pyramid.



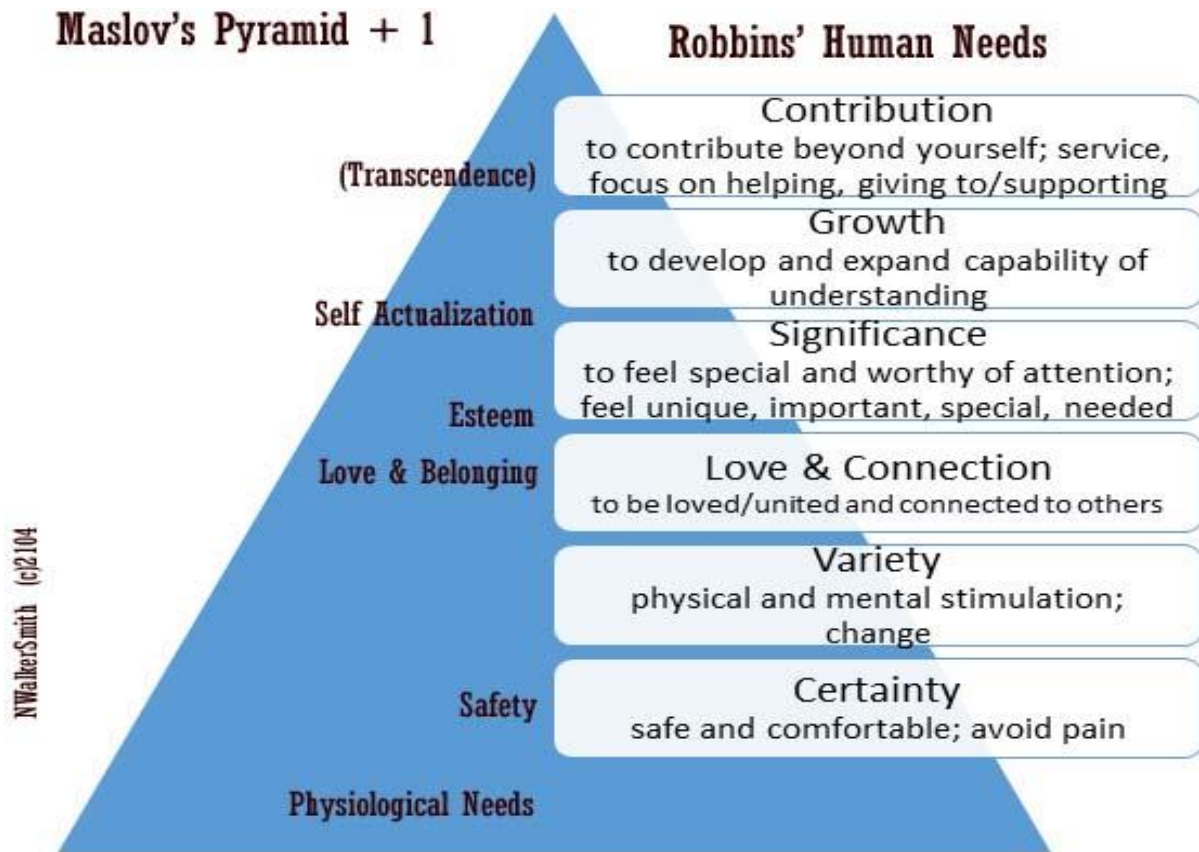
Business philosophers worldwide often utilize the 5 level Hierarchy in a pattern similar to the above where the practice would be divided into groups according to their levels on the pyramid. A Google Search on 'business pyramid hierarchy' will return a huge number of images and articles all tweaked to address the specific business topic. In veterinary medicine, several practice management consultants have added scientific indicators for economic practice growth to align a similar pattern of numbers of people required in each of the five levels of Maslow's original pyramid. For a very simplistic example: 1 executive, 2 leaders, 3 or 4 competent managers, 4-6 contributing team members, and 5-10 highly capable individuals. How many practices do you know that have 14-22 support team members PER veterinarian?

This pyramid model lends itself to the visual perspective that the most important person is the one at the pinnacle or top of the pyramid. By terminology of the business hierarchy levels, the 'title' of that level gives the perception of importance of that person in the practice. It could be assumed then that if Maslow's pyramid and the business hierarchy take off were superimposed, then the executive has achieved the self-actualization point. However, in practice reality, we know this is usually far from the truth. In architecture, the pyramid is one of the most stable structures. A solid foundation of support, difficult to tip or move or topple. We will investigate the hierarchy pyramid further to see why it may not always be as stable structurally as an architect would have you believe. We will also investigate why the internal levels of the pyramid are the key to keeping the pyramid stable, and finally what is needed to reach the upper levels or the top of the pinnacle.

In Maslow's pyramid the very basic needs must be met prior to the ability of a person to rise to the next level. Fluctuation between levels could be fluid because the person's life changes and impacts the level. As one level is completed the drive to rise to the next occurs and pushes the person ever higher. By comparison, the practice model above could be seen similarly if the first level is the entry level volunteer or veterinary assistant. By mastering the first level the person decides to become a credentialed veterinary technician or head receptionist (level 2), then after a few years rises to a managerial role (level 3). Initially a manager role could be a shift supervisor to a team supervisor to a

team manager, all leading to a person who should be amassing effective leadership capabilities in order to be ‘promoted’ to the next level. Promotions should not be given just because the person has been at one level for several years or demands a raise/new title. Finally, the executive could be the veterinary technician specialist, practice manager, the CEO, the practice owner, or even the veterinarian if, in this model, our subject determined returning to veterinary school was the next thing needed to allow him/her to self-actualize.

We know that the levels all act upon each other and directly affect the success or failure of the others. In Maslow’s subjective research the fault lay in his subject pool and interpretation which led to assumption (McLeod, 2007). A person can survive without or with the bare minimum of basic needs and still achieve self-actualization. It may be difficult to realize for some, for others just a bump in the road because one of the other levels is able to supersede the effects of the missing level to allow success to continue to climb. These were the results of Tay & Diener’s (2011) massive worldwide, cross cultural study done to test Maslow’s original work. Anthony Robbins, a noted psychologist added his take to the pyramid theory as the 6 fundamental human needs and plugged them in to the original Maslow levels below:



**“The force of life is the drive for fulfillment; we all have a need to experience a life of meaning.** Fulfillment can only be achieved through a pattern of living in which we focus on two spiritual needs: 1) the need to continuously grow; and 2) the need to contribute beyond ourselves in a meaningful way. All dysfunctional behaviors arise from the inability to consistently meet these needs. When our attempts to reach fulfillment fail, we will settle for comfort—or for meeting our needs on a small scale. Look to replace

any dis-empowering ways of meeting your needs with things that empower and support you and others.” Robbins, A. (2014).

With Robbins’ update to Maslow’s levels the philosophy of a veterinary practice can be better understood. It is easier to see how the internal or central layers are still progressive to the transcendental state, but can and do fluctuate frequently giving us more of a ‘ventricular fibrillation wave pattern’ for achieving our pinnacle.



Hopefully, ‘settlement’ does not occur with regularity so that the progress to strive for fulfillment remains. If we think of the pyramid as our work where the levels are not completely separated, but, perhaps, separated by specific density so they can be mixed occasionally and then settle back to their place, we can envision how each portion helps to keep the pyramid together and solid with all needs being met. Should a leak occur, the fix should happen quickly as a stop gap and avoid a disproportionate leakage which would cause the pyramid to lose its’ shape and ability to function as well.

We’ve looked at how the pyramid theory shows a natural human want for progression to success or ‘climb the ladder’ if you will. We’ve also seen that that progression is not without its ups and downs. Similarly a practice may see the same activity on a wide overview of groups in the practice to the various levels. As good supervisors, managers, and owners it is now our reward to grow from our abilities and expand our knowledge back to our team pyramid to transcend.

## 2 REFERENCES

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