**McClelland's Human Motivation Theory**

**Discovering What Drives Members of Your Team**

Source: <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/human-motivation-theory.htm> (retrieved 2/25/2019)

Not everyone wants to stand out from the crowd.

One of your team members recently created a report that was so thorough and well-written that the board of directors asked you to make sure that she was praised for her efforts.

So, at your monthly staff meeting, you stood up in front of the group, and congratulated her on her achievement, and for the good impression she made for the team. However, instead of smiling and appreciating the attention, she looked embarrassed. She lowered her head, and as soon as she could, she left and went to her office.

What did you do wrong?

Managing a group of people with different personalities is never easy. But if you're managing or leading a team, it's essential to know what motivates your people, how they respond to feedback and praise, and what tasks fit them well. David McClelland's Human Motivation Theory gives you a way of identifying people's motivating drivers. This can then help you to give praise and feedback effectively, assign them suitable tasks, and keep them motivated.

Using McClelland's theory in the example above would have helped you structure your feedback for the person. You would have known that your team member's main motivational driver is affiliation, which means that she never wants to stand out in a crowd. So, your feedback would have been far more effective, and appreciated, if you had praised her in private.

In this article, we'll explore McClelland's Human Motivation Theory, and look at how you can use it to manage and lead your team more effectively.

**Note:**

McClelland's Human Motivation Theory is also known as Three Needs Theory, Acquired Needs Theory, Motivational Needs Theory, and Learned Needs Theory.

**Understanding McClelland's Theory**

In the early 1940s, Abraham Maslow created his [theory of needs](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_92.htm). This identified the basic needs that human beings have, in order of their importance: physiological needs, safety needs, and the needs for belonging, self-esteem and "self-actualization".

Later, David McClelland built on this work in his 1961 book, "[The Achieving Society](https://www.amazon.com/The-Achieving-Society-David-McClelland/dp/1891396390/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1386007535&sr=8-1&keywords=the+achieving+society)." He identified three motivators that he believed we all have: a need for achievement, a need for affiliation, and a need for power. People will have different characteristics depending on their dominant motivator.

According to McClelland, these motivators are learned (which is why this theory is sometimes called the Learned Needs Theory).

McClelland says that, regardless of our gender, culture, or age, we all have three motivating drivers, and one of these will be our dominant motivating driver. This dominant motivator is largely dependent on our culture and life experiences.

These characteristics are as follows:

| **Dominant Motivator** | **Characteristics of This Person** |
| --- | --- |
| Achievement | * Has a strong need to set and accomplish challenging goals. * Takes calculated risks to accomplish their goals. * Likes to receive regular feedback on their progress and achievements. * Often likes to work alone. |
| Affiliation | * Wants to belong to the group. * Wants to be liked, and will often go along with whatever the rest of the group wants to do. * Favors collaboration over competition. * Doesn't like high risk or uncertainty. |
| Power | * Wants to control and influence others. * Likes to win arguments. * Enjoys competition and winning. * Enjoys status and recognition. |

**Note:**

Those with a strong power motivator are often divided into two groups: personal and institutional. People with a personal power drive want to control others, while people with an institutional power drive like to organize the efforts of a team to further the company's goals. As you can probably imagine, those with an institutional power need are usually more desirable as team members!

**Using the Theory**

McClelland's theory can help you to identify the dominant motivators of people on your team. You can then use this information to influence how you [set goals](https://www.mindtools.com/page6.html) and [provide feedback](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_98.htm), and how you motivate and [reward](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_54.htm) team members.

You can also use these motivators to [craft, or design, the job](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCDV_36.htm) around your team members, ensuring a better fit.

Let's look at the steps for using McClelland's theory:

**Step 1: Identify Drivers**

Examine your team to determine which of the three motivators is dominant for each person. You can probably identify drivers based on personality and past actions.

For instance, perhaps one of your team members always takes charge of the group when you assign a project. He speaks up in meetings to persuade people, and he delegates responsibilities to others to meet the goals of the group. He likes to be in control of the final deliverables. This team member is likely primarily driven by the power.

You might have another team member who never speaks during meetings. She always agrees with the group, works hard to manage conflict when it occurs, and visibly becomes uncomfortable when you talk about doing high-risk, high-reward projects. This person is likely to have a strong need for affiliation.

**Step 2: Structure Your Approach**

Based on the driving motivators of your workers, structure your [leadership style](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_84.htm) and project assignments around each individual team member. This will help ensure that they all stay [engaged](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_83.htm), motivated, and happy with the work they're doing.

**Examples of Using the Theory**

Let's take a closer look at how to manage team members who are driven by each of McClelland's three motivators:

**Achievement**

People motivated by achievement need challenging, but not impossible, projects. They thrive on overcoming difficult problems or situations, so make sure you keep them engaged this way. People motivated by achievement work very effectively either alone or with other high achievers.

When providing feedback, give achievers a fair and balanced appraisal. They want to know what they're doing right – and wrong – so that they can improve.

**Affiliation**

People motivated by affiliation work best in a group environment, so try to integrate them with a team (versus working alone) whenever possible. They also don't like uncertainty and risk. Therefore, when assigning projects or tasks, save the risky ones for other people.

When providing feedback to these people, be personal. It's still important to give balanced feedback, but if you start your appraisal by emphasizing their good working relationship and your trust in them, they'll likely be more open to what you say. Remember that these people often don't want to stand out, so it might be best to praise them in private rather than in front of others.

**Power**

Those with a high need for power work best when they're in charge. Because they enjoy competition, they do well with goal-oriented projects or tasks. They may also be very effective in [negotiations](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCS_80.htm) or in situations in which another party must be convinced of an idea or goal.

When providing feedback, be direct with these team members. And keep them motivated by helping them further their [career goals](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_94.htm).

**Comparative Theories**

McClelland's theory of needs is not the only theory about worker motivation. [Sirota's Three-Factor Theory](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_57.htm) also presents three motivating factors that workers need to stay motivated and excited about what they're doing: equity/fairness, achievement, and camaraderie.

Sirota's theory states that we all start a new job with lots of enthusiasm and motivation to do well. But over time, due to bad company policies and poor work conditions, many of us lose our motivation and excitement.

This is different from McClelland's theory, which states that we all have one dominant motivator that moves us forward, and this motivator is based on our culture and life experiences.

Use your best judgment when motivating and engaging your team. Understanding a variety of [motivational theories](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/motivating-your-team.htm) will help you decide which approach is best in any given situation.

**Note:**

You may also see these abbreviations for McClelland's three motivators: Achievement (nAch), Affiliation (nAff), and Power (nPow).

**Key Points**

McClelland's Human Motivation Theory states that every person has one of three main driving motivators: the needs for achievement, affiliation, or power. These motivators are not inherent; we develop them through our culture and life experiences.

Achievers like to solve problems and achieve goals. Those with a strong need for affiliation don't like to stand out or take risk, and they value relationships above anything else. Those with a strong power motivator like to control others and be in charge.

You can use this information to lead, praise, and motivate your team more effectively, and to better structure your team's roles.