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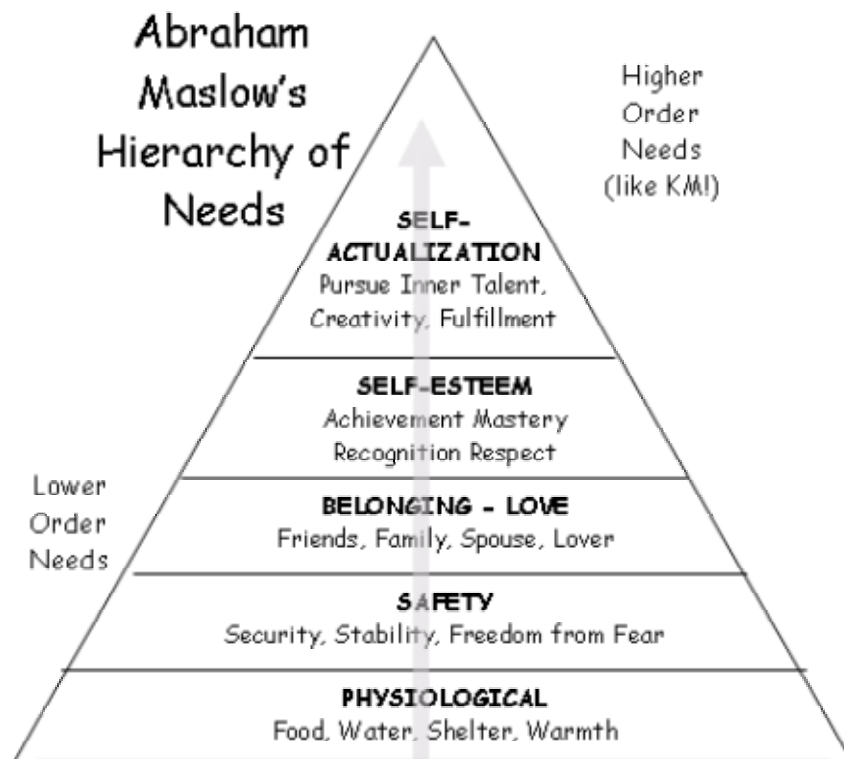
KM's Hierarchy of Needs

Mapping your knowledge program against Maslow's famous "Hierarchy of Needs" can help you predict--and avoid--disconnects.

by [Jon Powell and Jean Egmon](#)
Monday, November 04, 2002

When you were in school, you probably learned about a psychological model of human motivation developed in 1943 by Abraham Maslow, the Hierarchy of Needs. The gist of it is that there are five levels of ascending needs, from "lower-order" needs like food and shelter, to "higher-order" needs like belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization.

A key feature of Maslow's hierarchy is that until the lower order needs are satisfied, one cannot really focus on the higher order needs. We suggest that knowledge management activities thrive only when lower-order needs have been satisfied; or to put it another way, where higher-order needs are being addressed. In fact, true KM is pretty far up on the hierarchy. Hence, until employees feel a certain level of safety and belonging, the chance of their engaging in knowledge sharing and creation is pretty low. Most of what can be done at the lower levels is "brokering" information rather than the more risky work of knowledge creation and sharing.



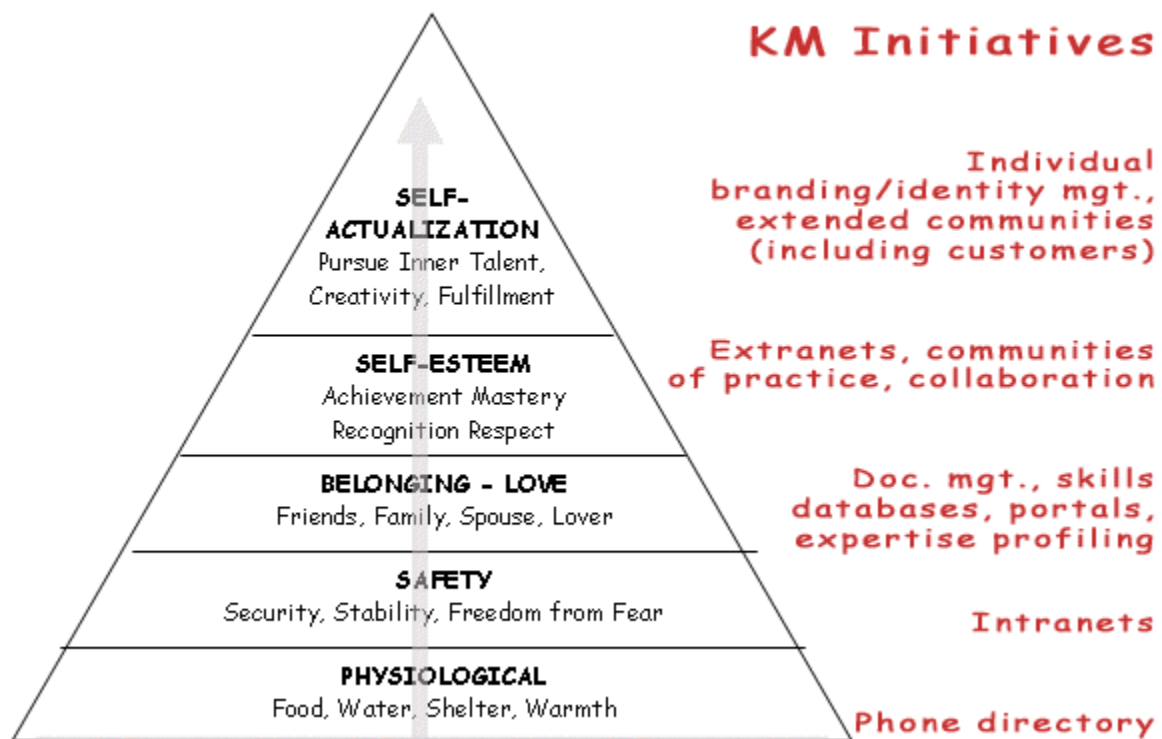
There is nothing wrong with beginning with information as a necessary but insufficient part of knowledge. For information to rise to knowledge requires that the information be laced with the business and employee's context (including what they already think and believe), and with the organization's business goals and the people's work and personal goals. When you add all of that to the mix, it is clear why knowledge is "sticky" and messy in the making.

Turning information into knowledge requires time, energy and learning, and that is tough to do when people are low on Maslow's hierarchy--that is, when they are scared, demotivated, have no sense of belonging, or see no reason to change the way they see things.

However, if you start with where your people are situated on Maslow's hierarchy, you can design a strategy for KM that helps people learn and move up the hierarchy for their own benefit and for the benefit of the organization. Getting straightforward information to people that does not impinge on an already uncertain workplace context can be useful first, second and third steps in bringing people up the hierarchy. In fact, the way you design and pace your KM initiatives can provide scaffolds on which employees construct new mental models for their work and roles (including knowledge sharing) in the organization.

Scaffolding, as an old term from the construction trade applied to learning, takes the practical approach of giving people something secure to stand on as they work their way higher when building (or repairing) a structure. KM can do the same thing for people in the process of building (or repairing) businesses, mindsets and work practices.

In some cases, this scaffolding approach to KM will be a more practical, cost-effective approach than orchestrating a full-blown cultural change initiative. Whether your goal is simply to choose the right level of KM that will work under the current organizational conditions, or to leverage KM to help the organization to change, you will likely see more immediate and desirable resorts if you synchronize your KM initiatives with where your organization is on Maslow's hierarchy.



Here's some rules of thumb you can use to in figuring out where you are, as well as picking the right KM initiatives:

How do you know where you are? Ask people at what level their needs are being met in their jobs? Where would they place the "X" in the diagram? They'll tell you exactly where they are, especially if it is a need for explicit knowledge or information, because they can feel the frustration of not having it.

Also, pay attention to what people are saying and doing in their everyday conversations. If people are asking for more explicit knowledge (i.e., information that can be codified, captured and shared directly like phone directories and references), they are likely operating within the lower two or three levels of the hierarchy. If, on the other hand, they are talking about more abstract realities like leadership, customer relationships and the business environment, they are talking in terms of implicit and tacit knowledge (i.e., knowledge that is difficult to capture and articulate; often learned through social interaction, observation and practice).

Communities of practice, branding and self-directed work teams are examples of KM initiatives that map to higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy and rely on implicit and tacit knowledge.

When your KM initiative gets ahead of the hierarchy, it lacks energy and encounters passive resistance. If you get too far ahead, you'll encounter active resistance. People will push back because you are asking them to give too much without the proper scaffolds on which to build.

Don't give up. KM can actually help satisfy needs for belonging, as well as higher order needs to learn, grow and contribute.

Different individuals and groups within your organization may be at different levels of the hierarchy. That is one more reason why KM is generally more successful if calibrated and tailored to local groups and letting it "catch on" rather than trying to push "one best way" of KM across the firm or company.

Find the people who are empowered; victims make the worst KM participants. Form communities to share expertise and own processes. Give knowledge workers the tools they need, fight for their right to congregate in person and virtually, and help them convert others to the cause.

Share success stories from various levels of KM across the organization. You can share formally through talks, newsletters, etc., but you can also share informally through conversations and by tapping into what Malcolm Gladwell in *The Tipping Point* (2000) calls the information mavens, social connectors and idea salesmen within your organization. These are people who are definitely thriving in the belonging and self-esteem rungs of Maslow's hierarchy, and who will love to spread the word and ideas for you, helping it catch on as a "social epidemic" within your company.

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