McClelland's Theory of Needs

In his acquired-needs theory, David McClelland proposed that an individual's specific needs are acquired over time and are shaped by one's life experiences. Most of these needs can be classed as either achievement, affiliation, or power. A person's motivation and effectiveness in certain job functions are influenced by these three needs. McClelland's theory sometimes is referred to as the three need theory or as the learned needs theory.

Achievement

People with a high need for achievement (nAch) seek to excel and thus tend to avoid both low-risk and high-risk situations. Achievers avoid low-risk situations because the easily attained success is not a genuine achievement. In high-risk projects, achievers see the outcome as one of chance rather than one's own effort. High nAch individuals prefer work that has a moderate probability of success, ideally a 50% chance. Achievers need regular feedback in order to monitor the progress of their achievements. They prefer either to work alone or with other high achievers.

Affiliation

Those with a high need for affiliation (nAff) need harmonious relationships with other people and need to feel accepted by other people. They tend to conform to the norms of their work group. High nAff individuals prefer work that provides significant personal interaction. They perform well in customer service and client interaction situations.

Power

A person's need for power (nPow) can be one of two types - personal and institutional. Those who need personal power want to direct others, and this need often is perceived as undesirable. Persons who need institutional power (also known as social power) want to organize the efforts of others to further the goals of the organization. Managers with a high need for institutional power tend to be more effective than those with a high need for personal power.

Thematic Apperception Test

McClelland used the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) as a tool to measure the individual needs of different people. The TAT is a test of imagination that presents the subject with a series of ambiguous pictures, and the subject is asked to develop a spontaneous story for each picture. The assumption is that the subject will project his or her own needs into the story.
Psychologists have developed fairly reliable scoring techniques for the Thematic Apperception Test. The test determines the individual's score for each of the needs of achievement, affiliation, and power. This score can be used to suggest the types of jobs for which the person might be well suited.

**Implications for Management**

People with different needs are motivated differently.

- *High need for achievement* - High achievers should be given challenging projects with reachable goals. They should be provided frequent feedback. While money is not an important motivator, it is an effective form of feedback.
- *High need for affiliation* - Employees with a high affiliation need perform best in a cooperative environment.
- *High need for power* - Management should provide power seekers the opportunity to manage others.

Note that McClelland's theory allows for the shaping of a person's needs; training programs can be used to modify one's need profile.