

David C. McClelland

- Achievement Motivation

Over the years behavioral scientists have observed that some people have an intense need to achieve; others, perhaps the majority, do not seem to be as concerned about achievement. This phenomenon has fascinated David C. McClelland. For over twenty years he and his associates at Harvard University studied this urge to achieve.

McClelland's research led him to believe that the need for achievement is a distinct human motive that can be distinguished from other needs. More important, the achievement motive can be isolated and assessed in any group.

Characteristics of people with a high need for achievement

McClelland illustrates some of these characteristics in describing a laboratory experiment.

Participants were asked to throw rings over a peg from any distance they chose. Most people tended to throw at random—now close, now far away; but individuals with a high need for achievement seemed carefully to measure where they were most likely to get a sense of mastery—not too close to make the task ridiculously easy or too far away to make it impossible.

They set moderately difficult but potentially achievable goals. In biology, this is known as the overload principle.

In weight lifting, for example, strength cannot be increased by tasks that can be performed easily or that cannot be performed without injury to the organism. Strength can be increased by lifting weights that are difficult but realistic enough to stretch the muscles.

Do people with a high need for achievement behave like this all the time?

McClelland maintains, only if they can influence the outcome.

Achievement-motivated people are not gamblers. They prefer to work on a problem rather than leave the outcome to chance.

With managers, setting moderately difficult but potentially achievable goals may be translated into an attitude toward risks. Many people tend to be extreme in their attitude toward risks, either favoring wild speculative gambling or minimizing their exposure to losses.

- Gamblers seem to choose the big risk because the outcome is beyond their power and, therefore, they can easily rationalize away their personal responsibility if they lose.
- The conservative individual chooses tiny risks where the gain is small but secure, perhaps because there is little danger of anything going wrong for which that person might be blamed.
- Achievement-motivated people take the middle ground, preferring a moderate degree of risk because they feel their efforts and abilities will probably influence the outcome. In business, this aggressive realism is the mark of the successful entrepreneur.

Rewards and achievement-motivated people

Another characteristic of achievement-motivated people is that they seem to be more concerned with personal achievement than with the rewards of success. They do not reject rewards, but the rewards are not as essential as the accomplishment itself.

They get a bigger "kick" out of winning or solving a difficult problem than they get from any money or praise they receive.

Money, to achievement-motivated people, is valuable primarily as a measurement of their performance. It provides them with a means of assessing their progress and comparing their achievements with those of other people.

They normally do not seek money for status or economic security.

Feedback

A desire by people with a high need for achievement to seek situations in which they get concrete feedback on how well they are doing is closely related to this concern for personal accomplishment. Consequently, achievement-motivated people are often found in sales jobs or as owners and managers of their own businesses.

In addition to concrete feedback, the nature of the feedback is important to achievement-motivated people. They respond favorably to information about their work.

They are not interested in comments about their personal characteristics, such as how cooperative or helpful they are.

- Affiliation-motivated people might want social or attitudinal feedback.
- Achievement-motivated people might want job-relevant feedback. They want to know the score.

Why do achievement-motivated people behave as they do?

McClelland claims it is because they habitually spend time thinking about doing things better.

In fact, he has found that wherever people start to think in achievement terms, things start to happen.

Examples

College students with a high need for achievement will generally get better grades than equally bright students with weaker achievement needs.

- Achievement-motivated people tend to get more raises and are promoted faster because they are constantly trying to think of better ways of doing things.
- Companies with many such people grow faster and are more profitable.

McClelland has even extended his analysis to countries where he related the presence of a large percentage of achievement-motivated individuals to the national economic growth.

A taught skill?

Can this motive, the need for achievement, be taught to people?

McClelland was convinced that this can be done. In fact, he also developed training programs for business people that were designed to increase their achievement motivation.

He also developed similar programs for other segments of the population.

Achievement-motivated people

Achievement-motivated people can be the backbone of most organizations, but what can be said about their potential as managers? As we know, people with a high need for achievement get ahead because as individuals they are producers they get things done.

However, when they are promoted, when their success depends not only on their own work but on the activities of others, they may be less effective. Since they are highly job-oriented and work to their capacity, they tend to expect others to do the same. As a result, they sometimes lack the human skills and patience necessary for being effective managers of people who are competent but have a higher need for affiliation than they do. In this situation, their overemphasis on producing frustrates these people and prevents them from maximizing their own potential.

Thus, while achievement-motivated people are needed in organizations, they do not always make the best managers unless they develop their human skills. Being a good producer is not sufficient to make an effective manager.

McClelland has found that achievement-motivated people are more likely to be developed in families in which parents hold different expectations for their children than do other parents.

More importantly, these parents expect their children to start showing some independence between the ages of six and eight, making choices and doing things without help, such as knowing the way around the neighborhood and taking care of themselves around the house. Other parents tend either to expect this too early, before children are ready, or to smother the development of the personality of these children.

One extreme seems to foster passive, defeated attitudes as children feel unwanted at home and incompetent away from home. They are just not ready for that kind of independence so early. The other extreme yields either overprotected or over-disciplined children. These children become very dependent on their parents and find it difficult to break away and make their own decisions.

The Herzberg link?

McClelland's concept of achievement motivation is also related to Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory. People with high achievement motivation tend to be interested in the motivators (the job itself).

Achievement-motivated people want feedback. They want to know how well they are doing on their job.

On the other hand, people with low achievement motivation are more concerned about the environment. They want to know how people feel about them rather than how well they are doing.

Summary

According to David C. McClelland's research, achievement-motivated people have certain characteristics in common, including;

- the capacity to set high ('stretching') personal but obtainable goals,
- the concern for personal achievement rather than the rewards of success, and
- the desire for job-relevant feedback (how well am I doing?) rather than for attitudinal feedback (how well do you like me?).

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