Maslow Was Wrong

Did your headline just say Maslow was wrong? Yep.

What the? I know. But there is something humans need more than food, water and shelter.

Humans want to belong. In fact, humans want to belong so strongly that they will do almost anything to ensure they do. Recent research by Professor Mathew Lieberman, who heads the Social Cognitive Neuroscience Lab at UCLA's Department of Psychology, Psychiatry and Biobehavioural Science, has shown that Maslow's celebrated hierarchy of needs is wrong. It turns out that belonging is actually more important to human beings than food, water or shelter.

How can this be true? Because in social animals, of which humans are the ultimate example, belonging to a group is a precondition that ensures we receive food, water and shelter. Without that belonging, we will die, particularly when young. So, whether we know it or not, our subconscious is constantly warning us that we'll die if we don't have belonging.

Why does this matter in the case of team or organisational culture? If humans will do almost anything to belong, that means each of us will closely watch what others do in the groups we join, figure out what earns them approval and belonging and start to adopt that behaviour as our own. Once we earn belonging for ourselves, we do whatever we can to ensure it is fiercely defended.

Any attempt to change the rules of approval or belonging - in other words, to change the culture - threatens our belonging. We find lots of conscious and unconscious ways to fight those changes.

It isn't as simple as 'people don't like change'. Resistance to a change in team or organisational culture is actually a perfectly rational response to a threat that feels very real. As far as our subconscious is concerned, it is literally a matter of life or death.

As leaders we need to be especially careful to give approval and belonging in response to the behaviours that are going to help our teams and organisations thrive.

Ask yourself: what behaviours earn belonging in my team?

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