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THE ANATOMY  
OF MOTIVATION

If most biographies of leaders offer more questions than answers about leadership, at least the questions may help pave the way toward a general theory of leadership. My own study of Franklin D. Roosevelt illustrated the possibilities and limitations of such investigations. FDR's presidency provided insights into the social and political forces both undergirding and thwarting leadership at the very highest level. His adventurous leadership raised questions that led me into unexpected paths—especially into the lives of the *people* of the 1930s, the poor and the jobless as well as the beneficiaries of the New Deal—yielding invaluable clues to the wants and needs, the motivations and aspirations of those who might become followers of responsive leaders.

Part of the poverty of the poor is the paucity of records of their lives. Impoverished people rarely send protests to the editor, have the opportunity to speak freely or candidly to candidates or pollsters, or give money to politicians. But one political act some do perform, aside from voting—they write letters to the president or first lady, as the only persons they “see” on the national stage. In recent years I have read hundreds of these letters at the Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York.

Many are heart-wrenching. I remember particularly a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from a woman whose husband was acutely ill and whose son was jobless. She asked the First Lady for a loan and enclosed her wedding and engagement rings as surety.

Such desperation I had expected, but what surprised me was the uniformity of these letters over time. I had assumed that the "Hoover Depression" letters of 1930–32 written to Governor Roosevelt would reflect the most dire wants, and that the letters of 1933–39 would mirror the economic improvement and hopefulness we associate with President Roosevelt's New Deal. But the correspondence files belied this assumption. The letters of the mid- and late-1930s cried out a desperation rivaling that of the earlier years, as though their authors felt their voices still were not being heard. They were sometimes more hopeful, to be sure, but the hope seemed only to deepen the later disenchantment welling out of the city streets and grass roots.

What I found in such letters was sheer want burdening people, going unmet, the kind FDR later responded to in his famous call for "freedom from want." The president had also called for "freedom from fear," and I found I was tapping a whole substratum of fear that seemed linked to want.

Roosevelt recognized that the New Deal had not realized its early promises with his January 1937 admission that one-third of the nation remained "ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished . . ." It was a frank confession of failure on the part of a president who had been in office for four years. A little later, he warned his fellow Democrats:

"If we do not have the courage to lead the American people where they want to go, someone else will."

## SHEER WANT

Where does leadership begin? Where change begins. Where does change begin? In my view, with the burgeoning in humans of powerful physical and psychological wants. Leadership is so intertwined with fundamental change, and change with the dynamics of wants and needs, as to make rather arbitrary any locating of origins in what is really a seamless web. I begin with the power of wants because I know of no global change more massive and persistent than the birth every day of tens of thousands of babies starting off on their own lives with imperious demands and immediately transforming the family environments around them.

Raising four children forced me to think about managing, or at least redirecting, their surging wants. At first we parents were subject to their unrelenting demands for food and warmth. Then, as they grew, we sought

to regulate their diet, sleep, speech, clothes—they preferred to go barefoot. And to regulate their social life. “But we *want* to stay out late,” they would cry. “But you don’t *need* to,” we would reply. “But it’s not *fair*,” they’d say.

I was a bit slow in recognizing the implications for leadership of what we were doing. We were legitimizing some of their wants as genuine needs and vetoing others. In defining their needs we were assuming a leadership role in the hope that they would follow us, which of course they often didn’t. Wants and needs were inseparable—needs grew out of wants—but the two were different. The distinction became crucial to my own thinking about leadership. In puzzling out that difference I turned, like a typical academic, to received wisdom on the subject.

Liberal thinkers of the Enlightenment viewed the proliferation of wants with approval, or at least complacency. David Hume, distinguishing humans from animals because of the former’s insatiable wants, saw man as endowed with abilities proportionate to those wants. Jeremy Bentham held that every person sought to maximize his pleasure and each fulfilled want created fresh ones, which became new pivots of action. John Stuart Mill, distinguishing between crude wants and more elevated ones, held that the satisfaction of material wants should lead to the cultivation of intellectual and moral wants.

All saw limits, perceiving that the pursuit of wants without restraint might threaten the social order, and found moral danger in undisciplined acquisitiveness that would cripple the development of higher human qualities. Still, these and other philosophers hailed the expansion of wants as the social and economic horizons broadened in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

It was this explosion of wants that, a century later, alarmed Mohandas Gandhi in India. He saw rampant wants as the force driving industrialization in the West, as well as the resulting concentrations of power and wealth amid pervasive exploitation and inequality. The “unrestricted individualism” of the West, he wrote, was the “law of the beast of the jungle.” The only remedy lay in people transforming themselves. The satisfaction of wants “must meet at a certain point a dead stop,” and each must do his share of “bread labour” rather than exploit others. Few in the West were tempted—intellectually, or in practice—by the asceticism of the East.

How then to comprehend the “jungle” of wants of nearly six billion people? Abraham Maslow saw the possibility of order where others saw only disorder. A psychologist at Brooklyn College, Maslow in the early

1940s shaped a theory of the rank-ordering of wants and needs into a kind of hierarchy. Most analysts of wants had written of their denial and the resulting social violence. Maslow was more interested in the *satisfaction* of wants and the resulting changes in people's motivations and behavior as they move higher in his hierarchy. (Maslow usually used the term *needs* rather than *wants*.)

At the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy lie the inborn physical and biological wants for subsistence noted above. Once these begin to be met, a new urgent want—for security—becomes the dominant motive. Then humans develop wants for affection and belongingness, realized in home and neighborhood, in local associations, in workplaces. These activities in turn lead to the emergence of self-esteem as primary motive, and beyond that, the pursuit of self-development, with the need for self-actualization at the pinnacle of Maslow's hierarchy.

Maslow did not have the impact on political and social studies that some felt he deserved. An early exception was the work of political scientist James C. Davies, who emphasized the political implications of the hierarchy. Davies began with physiological wants, as Maslow did, suggesting that anyone who doubted their most basic quality should simply stop breathing for a minute or go without food for a few days. Davies also agreed with Maslow on the higher stages in the hierarchy—wants for the “social-affectionate,” or just plain love, and for self-esteem and self-actualization. Davies, though, saw the want for security—for “order, predictability, dependability of the environment”—as not just another stage in the hierarchy but at the core of the process, as the crucial means of making attainment of all other wants possible.

I was struck by this emphasis on security because I wanted to build a leadership hierarchy out of these priority lists. I had found in historical studies an overwhelming want for political and social security. Millions of people—in Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America—felt such a desperate imperative for sheer survival that they were led to embrace dictatorships that promised to deal with marauding bands of killers and other anarchic behavior. So my own hierarchy began with *order*, which supplied the foundation for wants and needs, hopes and expectations, that political leaders must satisfy.

What appealed to me most, though, was the potential link between Maslow's drive for self-actualization and the motivation for leadership. The qualities that motivate and characterize self-actualization—creativity, the

capacity for growth and learning, flexibility, openness, and what psychologist Robert White called “effectance,” skills in dealing with others or with the environment—are near to those of leadership. A crucial distinction is that while Maslow describes self-actualizing persons as self-contained, autonomous, dependent on “their own potentialities and latent resources,” leadership self-actualization is pursued through a process of *mutual* actualization with others, motivated, in the words of political theorists Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, by commitment “to a value or a purpose that stands higher than the person.”

When I wrote my book *Leadership* in 1978, I described this process as one of “leading by being led.” The leader’s self-actualizing qualities are turned outward. He empathetically comprehends the wants of followers and responds to them as legitimate needs, articulating them as values. He helps followers transform them into hopes and aspirations, and then into more purposeful expectations, and finally into demands. Leaders, I hypothesized, rise one step ahead of followers in this political hierarchy, but continued progress depends on their ability to stay closely attuned to the evolving wants, needs, and expectations of followers—in short, to learn from and be led by followers. And it requires a commitment to a process in which leaders and followers *together* pursue self-actualization. Their wants for belongingness, for esteem, are recognized and satisfied, efficacy is enhanced, and the potential for self-fulfillment—“to become everything that one is capable of becoming,” as Maslow put it—is activated. What leaders and followers become, above all, are active agents for change, capable of self-determination, of transforming their “contingency into destiny.”

Maslow’s concepts struck me as the most promising I had encountered in leadership studies, most of all because they offered an illuminating explanation of human change that could be linked closely to leadership. I had my own hopes and expectations—that psychologists and other scholars interested in leadership and impressed by Maslow would improve his ideas, and go further than I had in laying the basis for a full-blown explanation of the first and fundamental processes in the long chain of leadership. Aside from some modest testing and tinkering, however, this did not happen. Perhaps this was due to inadequacies in the concepts or to the challenges of verification, given the highly complex questions that would arise. More likely, I have concluded, follow-up failed because Maslow did not adequately recognize some fundamental assumptions that gravely influenced his ideas.

What assumptions? In political terms, that liberal democracy was the universal model of government, that protection of individual rights was the main, perhaps the only, test of that democracy, that most changes were brought about by individual ambition and striving, that the analytical spotlight should concentrate on the developing wants and needs of individuals.

Maslow's theory of actualization exemplified this ideology of individualism. It was *self*-actualization. Internal physical and psychological forces in persons propelled them to rise to the next higher stage in the hierarchy of needs. But what about the external, social forces—family, school, workplace—that also shaped the developing individual? And could the idea of *mutual* self-actualization—the transforming impact people have on one another—serve as the crucial dynamic in a leadership process that would advance great social, public values, above all the collective pursuit of happiness?

## REAL NEED

For a short time during our children's development we as parents played an almost exclusive role in satisfying some of their growing wants, recognizing some of them as needs, and denying others. Gradually we had to yield our privileged position as the children went to school, made friends, learned about the world beyond the neighborhood, as they chose their own movies or television programs, eventually demonstrated for political causes and candidates we deplored.

Wants develop as children grow. They become more diverse, more complex, though no less compelling. As children are exposed to broadening circles of influence, the legitimation of wants as needs falls increasingly to teachers, peers, clergy, media, employers, government, and ultimately to society. Needs are social, and the conflicts over their legitimacy, their meaning, their extent, their satisfaction, take political form. More than anything else, wants and needs motivate leaders and followers to struggle for social change. They are the powerhouses of leadership.

Typically the conversion of wants into needs is a lifetime experience, because humans are never free of emerging wants that seek sanction as needs, or of social forces that regulate the process. Nor, it seems, of philosophers ready to define the wants that society ought to acknowledge as needs. The liberal-individualist tradition set fewer roadblocks and signposts to the legitimation of wants as needs because its very credo validated

the right of humans to break through restrictions if necessary to realize their hopes and ambitions. But an alternative approach that cast a skeptical eye on the extent of human needs has an even older intellectual patrimony going back to the Stoics and Epicureans. Let us start with a more modern thinker, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

The Geneva philosopher boldly confronted the crucial question: what are the human wants that ought to be recognized and satisfied? In contrast to the liberal focus on individual autonomy, Rousseau emphasized the social or communal nature of needs. He saw humans developing from an early primitive state with few, largely physiological wants, to a civilized society characterized by a plenitude of new needs. But here was the rub. The crass materialism of the mercantile society Rousseau saw growing around him in the mid-eighteenth century convinced him that most of these needs were artificial, unconnected to true wants, the products of a society that had made the proliferation and possession of *objects* its highest value. It was, he wrote, "the fewness of his needs" that made "a man really good," while the "multiplicity of needs" bred the "hateful and angry passions" that "spring from selfishness" and made reasoned and moral choice among needs impossible.

All this was intellectual fuel for a philosopher-activist of the next century, Karl Marx. In Marx's materialist theory of history, wants and needs powered the mechanisms of class struggle and social change. As primitive subsistence wants were satisfied, new needs emerged and in turn generated new forms of production and new class structures.

Yet Marx offered more than historical generalizations. He looked at nineteenth-century European life hard in the face and, like Rousseau, asked the fundamental question: what do human beings really need? As political scientist Patricia Springborg has noted, Marx distinguished "between 'fixed needs,' those found in all social formations whose form merely changes, and artificial needs, those which are entirely the product of a specific mode of production." Marx did not share Rousseau's disdain for materialism, but he saw capitalism as a machine for the production of distorted and debased needs, from the hypersophisticated needs of the rich to the "bestial barbarisation" of needs in the poor, an inequality of needs that reflected and reinforced the artificial inequalities in capitalist society and degraded all relationships among human beings.

Under capitalism, Marx wrote, every product was "a bait with which to seduce away the other's very being, his money; every real and possible

need is a weakness which will lead the fly to the glue-pot,” an “opportunity to approach one’s neighbour under the guise of the utmost amiability and to say to him: Dear friend, I give you what you need but you know the *conditio sine qua non*; you know the ink in which you have to sign yourself over to me; in providing for your pleasure, I fleece you.”

Still, Marx, unlike Rousseau, had a spacious view of *real* human wants. While his abiding concern was with industrial workers and their economic conditions, he saw them not as stick figures but as people with a wealth of real wants beyond the material—cultural, aesthetic, political, and even romantic. The satisfaction of material wants was the basic condition of human existence, but “the *rich* human being is simultaneously the human being *in need* of a totality of human manifestations of life—the man in whom his own realization exists as an inner necessity, as *need*.”

Both scholarship and political argument over true and false needs continued largely within the materialist parameters set by Marx for over half a century after the revolutionary philosopher’s death in 1883, with even liberals and conservatives accepting those terms. But some scholars were dubious about the whole enterprise of distinguishing false from true needs. Could anyone besides the person experiencing the want that was the need’s basis make such a judgment?—a question that brought the debate back a bit to the old liberal individualist position.

While the subjectivity of wants might make it difficult to distinguish conclusively between natural and artificial needs, the conflict over needs and the distribution of resources that satisfy them is fundamentally political. Rousseau and Marx, after all, were not only philosophers but advocates and activists whose analyses of needs were in the service of calls for transformational change, and the debate between individualist and social approaches to needs—and their implications for government—has a long history in Western politics. Increasingly, needs analysis is gaining force on a world scale, with the recognition that, as political scientists Roger A. Coate and Jerel A. Rosati concluded, the “deprivation of human needs has been a major source of social and political change around the globe.”

Nothing offers so clear—and urgent—a challenge to leadership, nothing tests it so decisively, as human wants and needs. Leadership has its origins in the responsiveness of leaders to followers’ wants, and in followers’ responsiveness to leaders’ articulation of needs, empowering both leaders and followers in the struggle for change.

Leaders express wants and needs most forcefully in the language of *values*. Wants-as-values both motivate and guide leaders and followers as they seek change and also serve as measures and authentications of outcomes. Though values embody wants, the two concepts are not interchangeable. While the satisfaction of many wants is to some extent at least quantifiable, how to judge the realization of such values as liberty? What if the pursuit of individual liberty threatens such real needs as the social stability that protects both individuals and the people as a whole? And what if the reigning values are framed and controlled by narrow elements in a society—say, an economic or military elite—reflecting their own interests rather than the real human wants of all the people?

Some of these questions assume an almost limitless potential for wants to be fulfilled. But in most societies wants are remorseless and resources are limited. Even recognized human needs, expressed in the loftiest values, wrote political scientist John W. Burton, “can be achieved or satisfied only to the extent that conditions allow: if not so satisfied they are required to be suppressed by self-control, by acceptance of law and custom and by moral obligation.”

These conditional restraints reflect the larger struggle inherent in the competition of needs, described by Coate, Rosati, and David J. Carroll as the “conflicts between the institutional values and structures of society on the one hand, and human needs at the level of the individual on the other hand.” As the arguments of philosophers attest, such conflicts will never disappear. They reflect the duality and tension in human beings between their individual and social natures. Leadership stands at the crossroads, broadening individual aspirations to embrace social change and building a society that responds to human wants, needs, and values.

## EMPOWERING MOTIVES

Now we come to the intellectual dilemma that poses both crucial implications and complications for the analysis of change and leadership. The wants and needs of people—surging, soaring, tumultuous wants and needs—are the most powerful forces on earth. Humankind has to some degree learned to cope with hurricanes and floods, with wildly rampant wars and violence, with atomic and nuclear power. We humans have not learned

how to control our day-to-day behavior and misbehavior in the face of mounting wants, hopes, and demands, because we have not learned how to analyze the turbulent processes involved.

The mystery centers on the real nature of motivational forces, how they move people, how they expand and change, and how leaders might summon, direct, and shape them for the protection and even benefit of people. Under close scrutiny, motives can appear opaque, convoluted, even incomprehensible—the psyche’s equivalent to Tolstoy’s ungraspably infinitesimal causes in history—but hopes for understanding them ran high by the mid-twentieth century. Freud and his followers had elaborated a theory of three drives—sexuality, aggression, ego—that they claimed determined much of human behavior, with particular emphasis on the pathologies that rose from the conflict among drives, or between them and the demands of society. A behaviorist tradition, pioneered by psychologists Edward L. Thorndike and later Clark Hull, dismissed mental states as unknowable and found the motivational key in a mechanistic stimulus-response process that could be objectively observed and measured. Behaviorists began with survival wants such as hunger and pain avoidance and, experimenting with starved kittens, thirsting chickens, and rats in electrified mazes, they concluded that motivation was the drive to reduce tensions induced by the stimulation of wants. Higher wants, more complex behaviors, learned drives all proceeded from the primary survival wants.

Most motivational theories were hierarchical, often based in stages of development. In 1950, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson offered a model of motivation that was for a time enormously influential. He described a sequence of conflicts that defined the life cycle—from the balance of trust and mistrust in infancy, to issues of identity and role confusion in adolescence, to, in old age, the tension between ego integrity and despair. Development depended on the resolution of each conflict as it appeared, optimally with the positive qualities achieving a favorable ratio over the negative. But for all its novelistic richness, Erikson’s framework was too fixed in its stages and too intricately deterministic in its dynamics to account for human motivation across the broad range of experience, and particularly the complex processes of leadership. For that we turn again to the work of Abraham Maslow.

Few other motivational theories matched Maslow’s in boldness and intellectual creativity. His theory had the virtues of clarity, economy, and flexibility, without sacrifice of comprehensiveness. Like the behaviorists,

Maslow began with survival wants, yet he saw the higher wants as more than the mere compounding of these lower-order motivations. People were *qualitatively* transformed as they proceeded up the hierarchy of wants, and this motivation for continual betterment was at the heart of Maslow's idea of human nature. Unlike the Freudians, Maslow was above all an optimist. Not only did he describe ultimate human potential in the most generous terms of self-actualization, he held that people were powerfully motivated to achieve that potential. A theorist of leadership found in Maslow's ideas an account of progressive change grounded squarely in the motivations of leaders and followers alike.

Yet the question remained: how generalizable—how universal—was Maslow's theory, or any other comprehensive developmental theory of motivation? Maslow was taken to task for his bias toward individualism, and other motivational schools were similarly criticized for parochialism, notably psychoanalysis with its origins in fin de siècle Vienna. There was little dispute that motivational forces—especially the higher needs—would experience enormous variations in diverse cultures. Was there no way to bring them into a single framework that would overcome the apparent Western bias in motivational theory?

The complexity of this task led scholars to put aside concepts of densely structured stages of motivation and development in favor of simpler levels of analysis involving loose clusters of inward-directed wants and motives centered on the "self," such as self-realization, self-determination, self-esteem.

This new approach demanded a more precise analysis of motives and their dynamics than had Maslow's broad and structured categories. In the analysis of change and leadership, motives of individuals are want-driven, situation-specific, goal-oriented. Innate wants encounter external forces that can promote or obstruct their satisfaction. The translation into *action* toward satisfying wants depends on the strength of motives, which in turn is influenced by the power of wants; on the expected probability of success in reaching intended goals; on the extent of resisting forces and the potential intensity of conflict. The desired end is a *change* by which wants are satisfied.

A vital element in this process is power—or perceived power—understood motivationally as the individual's control of both self and other. The effort to create change—the assertion of power—is directed both inward to the self, toward self-determination, self-esteem, and so on, and

outward to the environment, including power over “fate” or intransigent institutions or irreconcilable oppositions.

Here perhaps is a missing link between inward- and outward-directed motivations, between “self” and situation in individual and collective processes of change: the capacity to produce a final result or effect. In a word, it is *efficacy*. “People strive to exercise control over events that affect their lives,” psychologist Albert Bandura wrote in 1995. “By exerting influence in spheres over which they can command some control, they are better able to realize desired futures and to forestall undesired ones. . . . Inability to exert influence over things that adversely affect one’s life breeds apprehension, apathy, or despair. The capability to produce valued outcomes and to prevent undesired ones, therefore, provides powerful incentives for the development and exercise of personal control.”

Nothing strengthens the motivational power of efficacy like success. Persons with a high feeling of efficacy have great confidence in their ability to make changes, to remain committed to goals, to overcome difficulties and failures, to exercise control. Those with little conviction that they have the capacity to master their fate characteristically lack the motivation to try.

While psychologists of the self, especially Bandura, discussed the social or collective aspects of efficacy, the striking qualities of their analyses were *self-knowledge*, *self-regulation*, *self-development*, *self-directed change*. “An understanding of motivation and its connection to an individual’s specifications requires an investigation of the self-relevant cognitive instigators of goal-directed behavior,” according to researcher Nancy Cantor and her colleagues. Hence the primacy of the interest in individuals’ personally significant goals, motives, hopes, and fears.

By isolating a single crucial and “universal” factor—the workings of the self—the self-concept approach strengthens the generalizability of motivational analysis. But its explanation of the contents and goals of behaviors that enhance the self-concept tends to circularity: they are whatever enhances an individual’s self-concept.

To return again to the level of basic wants, the self-concept is at stake in their pursuit, but the self also is motivated by something *substantial*—the want of food, shelter, relief from pain—and any evaluation of outcomes must include not only the impact on the self-concept but also, and inseparably, the success or failure in achieving these wants, which means an actual change in the environment or situation. The “higher” wants, too—for

security, love, belongingness, even self-actualization—bring real, qualitative changes in the world when they are satisfied. And in leadership processes, the motivations of leaders and followers extend to both selves and purposes. Transforming change transforms people *and* their situations.

Yet leadership is a collective process, whose dynamic is more than the simple sum of individual motivations and efficacies. Writ large, motivation and efficacy are a function of political and social power, and hence have to be analyzed in collective terms. Writ larger, motivation and efficacy are the power of leadership that produces significant change.

The more we probe into the origins of leadership, the more we discover the complex matrix among expanding wants and needs and the two-sided dynamics of motivation. The process is “vertical” as individuals are motivated to higher and higher levels of want and hope and ambition and demand. There is an equally important “horizontal” dimension as these spiraling motives of individuals interact, creating integrated structures of collective motivation.

What sets this intricate mobile of empowered motives into motion is the spark of creativity.