



ILLUSTRATION BY ROLAND DAHLQUIST

Who's Maslow anyway?

By Jane Durant, Vancouver, B.C., Canada

It's easy when you're a speaker who's been to college to believe that everyone else has too. Maybe you have been surprised to learn that many people in your audience are not "up-to-date" with the latest gurus, books, or buzz words, or even the old ones. In fact, people with post-secondary education are the minority in many of our audiences.

In my work with supervisors over the past eight years, the lesson about walking in the audiences' shoes has been one of the most important that I've learned.

Assumptions are often made that most members of the audience have heard of Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of needs. As Wayne and Garth would say, "Not." Nor have many of the folks that I work with ever been in anything like a school classroom since they were in the traditional school system. Yes, they are fully functioning supervisors. They have lots of common sense and traditional wisdom, but they haven't gotten it from sitting in seminars and

workshops or from reading books.

In fact, the word "workshop" itself has been questioned from time to time. It is so important to ask people whether they know what a workshop is and does. Some participants may tell you that it's where they fix things. Well, we can bridge that observation to our work and talk about how we will take things/ideas/concepts apart and put them back together again.

One of the paradoxes in our society, outlined in *Managing Workforce 2000* by David Jamieson and Julie O'Mara, is that while some of us may have received excellent education in its fullest sense, we have an epidemic of illiteracy and dropouts among people who have grown up right here in North America.

So back to Maslow. Good old Abraham talked about how people meet their needs in what tends to be a predictable hierarchy. When we offer training and professional development, we are working at level four of his hierarchy. As a professional trainer, human resource consultant, speaker, what have you, it is critically

important with whatever type of audience you have, that you pay attention to the hierarchy of needs.

So let's start at the beginning. When I was growing up and attending school in England, we were not allowed to leave the classroom once the session had begun, under any circumstances. Many of our audiences still remember that system and need to be given the OK for the creature comforts of life. Does this sound silly? Well, one of the things that seems to be more and more important with clients is not to assume anything.

If participants feel that this will be like school, which they did not particularly enjoy, then it is critical that we address their needs up front. More importantly, it is vital that we work with the client to make sure that the room, facilities, handout materials, video resources, etc., will be meaningful and comfortable to our audiences.

There is always a dilemma with audiences. For some folks, no handouts are required; they intuitively know what they need to learn. For

others, not giving handouts would label us as flakes. For these participants, the weight of materials on leaving the workshop is directly proportional to the value of the workshop. The point is, folks are different.

Other participants are workshop junkies. They have been to every workshop on every new topic, have read all the books and know all the buzzwords. They are sometimes so obsessed with attending workshops that they fail to "do" anything other than attend another presumably better workshop. These types have heard of Tom Peters; Stephen Covey; Ken Blanchard, CPAE; Maslow and others, and therefore may criticize your presentation as elementary, too simple, too easy. For others, to whom these names mean nothing, they need to feel that their not knowing does not

Just in case

Maslow's Theory of Personality

- The theory that two basic types of motivation are important: deficiency motivation as oxygen, food and water, and growth motivation, striving for knowledge and self-actualization. There is a postulated hierarchy of motivation according to which physiological needs must be satisfied first, followed by safety needs, love, esteem needs and finally the need for self-actualization.

Source: Dictionary of Behavioral Science, Benjamin Wolman, 1973

make them feel like idiots. These people want and expect common sense and practical ideas they can use.

How do we address all these varying needs? If the great majority of people do not have a post-secondary education, then I know where I would put my efforts in pitching my material. The know-it-alls can always learn something new if their attitude is right, and that's up to them after all.

Know your audience - and then do the best you can. You will never please everyone, but you need to please most people. Find out early on the level of "education" of the people,

their workshop "readiness," familiarity with group exercises, role plays, speaking in front of others, etc.

Being sensitive and aware of the varying needs of our audiences and showing respect for them only enhances our ability to be effective. In addition, know the group you prefer to work with. As a highly interactive, pragmatic, down-to-basics presenter, I know that an audience of real people to me is a group of the people that do the work and whose managers are in on it, too. I find great pleasure in participants coming to the conclusion that "school" is not so bad after all; they did know the way but did not know they did.

If you want to talk about Maslow, then ask who's heard of him. Someone may have, and they can tell the group what they know. Theory is great, but you can't do theory; people need the tools, not just the blueprints. Teach a little theory, but a lot of confidence, taking risk, trying things. For you as a presenter, learn from feedback and focus on your strengths. Be comfortable saying "I don't do _____, but I can find you someone who does."

Review your evaluations carefully, especially the ones that appear negative. You can learn from them. For example, some aspects of your appearance may irritate. One comment may not be significant, but two or three need your attention. Learn from the audience. Most people want you to do well; they don't want to waste their time, after all. Include those comments to enhance your competency with the next group. Growth and being the best you can be is the top of the hierarchy of needs. Maslow called it "self-actualization" and both you and your participants are looking for that. ■



Jane Durant
Vancouver, B.C.
Canada