HARVARD BUSINESS PUBLISHING

Harvard Business Review

The late David C. McClelland was a professor of psychology at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1976 when this article first appeared. David H. Burnham was at that time the president and chief executive officer of McBer & Company, a behavioral science consulting firm. He is currently a principal of the Burnham Rosen Group, a strategic consulting and leadership-training firm in Boston.

BEST OF HBR

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Power Is the Great Motivator

Contrary to popular opinion, the best managers are the ones who like power—and use it.

by David C. McClelland and David H. Burnham

Most HBR articles on motivation speak to managers about the people whose work they oversee. Curiously, the writers assume that the motivation of managers themselves—that is to say, of our readers—is so well aligned with organizational goals that it needs no examination. David McClelland and his colleague David Burnham knew better.

They found that managers fall into three motivational groups. Those in the first, affiliative managers, need to be liked more than they need to get things done. Their decisions are aimed at increasing their own popularity rather than promoting the goals of the organization. Managers motivated by the need to achieve—the second group—aren't worried about what people think of them. They focus on setting goals and reaching them, but they put their own achievement and recognition first. Those in the third group—institutional managers—are interested above all in power. Recognizing that you get things done inside organizations only if you can influence the people around you, they focus on building power through influence rather than through their own individual achievement. People in this third group are the most effective, and their direct reports have a greater sense of responsibility, see organizational goals more clearly, and exhibit more team spirit.

What makes or motivates a good manager? The question is enormous in scope. Some people might say that a good manager is one who is successful—and by now most business researchers and businesspeople know what motivates people who successfully run their own small businesses. The key to their success has turned out to be what psychologists call the need for achievement, the desire to do something better or more efficiently than it has been done before. Any number of books and articles summarize research studies explaining how the achievement motive is necessary for a person to attain success.

But what has achievement motivation got to do with good management? There is no reason on theoretical grounds why a person who has a strong need to be more efficient should make a good manager. While it sounds as if everyone ought to have the need to achieve, in fact, as psychologists define and measure achievement motivation, the need to achieve leads people to behave in ways that do not necessarily engender good management.

For one thing, because they focus on personal improvement, achievement-motivated people want to do things themselves. For another, they want concrete short-term feedback on their performance so that they can tell how well they are doing. Yet managers, particularly in large, complex organizations, cannot perform by themselves all the tasks necessary for success. They must manage others to perform for the organization. And they must be willing to do without immediate and personal feedback since tasks are spread among many people.

The manager's job seems to call more for someone who can influence people than for someone who does things better alone. In motivational terms, then, we might expect the successful manager to have a greater need for power than a need to achieve. But there must be other qualities besides the need for power that go into the makeup of a good manager. We will discuss here just what these qualities are and how they interrelate.

To measure the motivations of managers, we studied a number of individuals in different large U.S. corporations who were participating in management workshops designed to improve their managerial effectiveness. (See the sidebar "Workshop Techniques.") We concluded that the top manager of a company must possess a high need for power—that is, a concern for influencing people. However, this need must be disciplined and controlled so that it is directed toward the benefit of the institution as a whole and not toward the manager's personal aggrandizement. Moreover, the top manager's need for power ought to be greater than his or her need to be liked.

Workshop Techniques

Measuring Managerial Effectiveness

What does it mean when we say that a good manager has a greater need for power than for achievement? Consider the case of Ken Briggs, a sales manager in a large U.S. corporation who joined one of our managerial workshops. (The names and details of all the cases that follow have been disguised.) About six years ago, Ken Briggs was promoted to a managerial position at headquarters, where he was responsible for sales-people who serviced his company's largest accounts.

In filling out his questionnaire at the workshop, Ken showed that he correctly perceived what his job required of him—namely, that he should influence others' success more than achieve new goals himself or socialize with his subordinates. However, when asked, with other members of the workshop, to write a story depicting a managerial situation, Ken unwittingly revealed through his fiction that he did not share those concerns. Indeed, he discovered that his need for achievement was very high—in fact, higher than the 90th percentile—and his need for power was very low, in about the 15th percentile. Ken's high need to achieve was no surprise—after all, he had been a very successful salesman—but obviously his desire to influence others was much less than his job required. Ken was a little disturbed but thought that perhaps the measuring instruments were not accurate and that the gap between the ideal and his score was not as great as it seemed.

Then came the real shocker. Ken's subordinates confirmed what his stories revealed: He *was* a poor manager, having little positive impact on those who worked for him. They felt that little responsibility had been delegated to them. He never rewarded them but only criticized them. And the office was poorly organized, confused, and chaotic. On all those scales, his office rated in the tenth to 15th percentile relative to national norms.