Small Business Post–COVID-19: Motivational Needs through Uncertain Times

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Abstract
Small businesses have been significantly impacted by the effects of COVID-19. Not only have many needed to close their physical doors, but now there are extra health standards and social distancing requirements. Research from other studies, a one-question survey, and research from readily available resources have all been taken into account in the following research to focus on the motivating needs of businesses post–COVID-19. It is important for the small business owner to be aware of the effects this will have on the physical environment and also on the needs of their employees and customers. It is important to remember that various level needs can be worked on at the same time. Most importantly, it is critical to remember that one’s business is not just about numbers and to-do lists, but rather the relationships, the people that make up one’s business, and the impact on others and the community.

Keywords
small business, motivational needs, needs, COVID-19, empowerment

Everyday life has significantly shifted from the effects of COVID-19. One could argue the best approach or the ideal next steps to set in place for the future thriving economy of the United States, but one cannot argue the impact this has had on small businesses across the nation and the world. According to Main Street America, of those employed at small business, 35.7 million Americans are at risk of unemployment.1 This has not only impacted every individual; this has greatly impacted the American culture and the future of businesses across the nation.

The following will discuss some of the impact COVID-19 has and will continue to have on small businesses. Some research is readily available for collection since many small businesses are voicing their action steps with their customers on their social media platforms, and additionally, nine one-question surveys were collected from small business owners on the topic of what changes need to be implemented, both short term and long term. The small business owner in the pre–COVID-19 environment had many difficulties to overcome to create, build, and grow a business, and now there are additional obstacles to overcome both real and perceived.

One-Question Survey
In addition to research from outside sources such as the study from Main Street America

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and personal research from social media outlets, nine one-question surveys were collected on the topic of changes needed for these small businesses post–COVID-19. The question was, “What changes (short term and long term) will be made to your business in response to COVID-19 once all businesses are able to fully open their doors again?” Three main themes emerged: cleanliness/social distancing, funds/staffing, and online resources. Excerpts of the quotes from the surveys are listed below with the coordinating themes. While these themes are assumed during this time, more details concerning how this will be implemented in certain small businesses is presented below. Additionally, these themes will be viewed while integrating a motivational theory.

| Respondent | Themes present | Quote excerpt |
|------------|----------------|---------------|
| #1         | Cleanliness/social distancing | “…wiped down and deep cleaned more diligently to ensure a healthier environment for our students and staff” |
| #2         | Funds/staffing | "We will rehire employees that we laid off" |
| #3         | Online resources — funds/staffing | “…more tech and online resources even for site classes….group projects that will be more tech driven…We will put more focus on raising funds for emergency situations like this one…We will increase training for faculty and staff in using online resources and we will look for new online resources as well. We will find new ways to have real interaction in a virtual setting…we are looking for more improvements that we have not decided upon at this point including issues of finance, the business model, and staffing” |
| #4         | Cleanliness/social distancing — Online resources | “Short term, I plan to limit one client at a time for a service. I will ask each client to wash their hands... now disinfect my area before and after each client. Long term, I plan to develop a relationship online with my clients. I plan to implement more communication through an online calendar…” |
| #5         | Cleanliness/social distancing | “Enforcing Sanitation protocols…” |
| #6         | Funds/staffing | “Short-term focusing energy on shifting time and energy to new opportunities because of COVID-19, while also reducing expenses in areas of my business that will take a long time to [be] viable again. Long term, looking to expand during changing opportunities, regulations, and market conditions. Looking to expand with more reserves, increase credit, and reduce the amount of debt” |
| #7         | Online resources | “We will better utilize video instruction and video meetings for/with our customers” |
| #8         | Online resources | “…shift focus from brick and mortar to a more online inventory. A point is being made to understand how to better serve both customers and corporate relationships from a virtual platform. Thankfully, my business is small enough that we were only impacted by a decrease in workflow. Had the business been much larger, I’m not sure how things would have gone. I would also like to point out that even before this issue, my business was primarily phone contact and product delivery with some in-person contact (product delivery) being made. However, since this, it has shifted to a focus on virtual meetings and over the phone conversations” |

(continued)
Motivating Needs

“Probably the most famous needs-based theory is the one developed by Abraham Maslow. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory proposes that humans are motivated by multiple needs and those needs exist in a hierarchical order... wherein the higher needs cannot be satisfied until the lower needs are met. Maslow identified five general levels of motivating needs.”

This theory has been criticized for being overly simplistic; yet, this theory is easily communicated and practical when looking at human motivation.

Physiological

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory states that there are five levels of needs that build upon another. These needs motivate individuals. The foundational need or the first needs are the physiological needs. These needs would include the need for food, water, and shelter. Some of these basic needs that have not been difficult for individuals previously may now be a struggle. Where people are not able to depend on stores to have toilet paper, people’s basic needs have been shaken. If one’s basic needs (through consistent pay) are not being

| Hierarchy of needs | Basic | Post–COVID-19 |
|--------------------|-------|---------------|
| Physiological      | Food, water, and shelter | Food, toilet paper, payment delays, or forgiveness |
| Safety             | Personal security, employment, and health | Employment (can I do this from home), health and appearance of health, and safe environment no matter one’s ethnicity |
| Love and belonging | Friendship and sense of connection | Connection near or far, physical or virtual, and acceptance |
| Esteem             | Respect, status, and freedom | Enough status that will not waver with shifting environment and freedom for yourself and those who work for you |
| Self-actualization | Desire to become the most that one can be and being creative, empowered, and/or challenged | Self-development no matter the location or environment with pure intentions from the leader |
met by their employer, then there is no buy-in for a company; there is little loyalty to stay at a particular place of business if these needs are unstable. It becomes a need for survival, and unless a business can guarantee these basic needs, the business must not assume that their employees will stay. Many businesses have had to lay off or significantly decrease hours for many, if not all, of their workers; but if a company is able to avoid this through creative means, they will be able to meet this basic need and provide for their employees and ultimately the longevity of their company.

Safety

The next level of needs, according to Maslow, is safety needs; safety of employment but also health. Businesses who have opened or who are planning their opening cannot move forward without health safety. Another factor to consider is not only health safety, but the appearance of it as well, for both the employees and the customers. A company could be significantly impacted by only an appearance of lack of safety within health standards. A small business owner, no matter their opinion of this pandemic, needs to keep this in mind in order to avoid even more decrease in sales and employees due to an appeared lack of standards to regulate people and germs.

Another aspect of safety that has had significant impact recently is safety due to race. People want to know they are welcome no matter their skin color. This is another area that perception is imperative. One business owner may choose a different avenue of communicating this safety compared to others, and therefore, it will look different from one business to another, but it is imperative that acceptance for all is present. In Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech Strength to Love in 2016, he said, “Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.” No matter the chosen course, it is important that business owners are not purposefully ignorant. Moving forward in the United States, this will only hinder small businesses.

Love and Belongingness

After safety is the need for love and belongingness. Some small businesses have been able to keep up a sense of connection with their regular customers; many have used their social media outlets to aid in this particular area. Among many small businesses, even a sense of pride has developed through supporting small business and through supporting one’s local community during a time that many are struggling. Whether a business was active on social media or not previously, those who will continue to grow are those who will use platforms such as social media to keep connected to their employees and customers. This is also an avenue where business owners are able to communicate their plans for the previous need (safety) on how they will be keeping their environment clean and safe for all. Employees must feel a part of the group, a part of the family, loved and accepted among their peers and supervisors in order for love and belongingness to be evident.

Esteem

“The need for esteem relates to the desires for a positive self-image and for attention, recognition, and appreciation from others. Within organizations, esteem needs reflect a motivation for recognition, an increase in responsibility, high status, and credit for contribution to the organization.” These needs build off each other. First, are people’s basic needs being met (are they getting paid)? If not, then the foundation of the employee/employer relationship is broken and will not last. Next, are they safe and do they belong; these areas may or may not be hurdles. However, if they are problems among employees, trust will not develop among one’s staff. “Trust has been identified as a critical ingredient to enhance organizational effectiveness and competitive advantage in the competition of human talents, job satisfaction, and the long-term stability and well-being of organizational members.” Most will agree that trust is a critical component of any business; but the question is, are most businesses reaching this level of need for their employees?
Self-Actualization

Even though these five needs build off each other and most assume it must always come one need and then the next, we live in a time that is complex. In the beginning of COVID-19, food was difficult to be found, but some businesses were still reaching out with love to their employees. The times have passed of simple. Some of our needs may be simple on the surface—pay, safety, or belonging. However, this may mean we are working on several needs simultaneously. “As the consultant Susan Fowler notes, ‘People are ‘self-actualizing’ all over the place.’ Addressing real structural inequalities around the world is absolutely essential to giving everyone opportunities to self-actualize and transcend, but this does not mean that people must wait to work toward a deeper sense of fulfillment until more security-related needs are met. We can work on multiple needs simultaneously.”  

A meta-analysis was conducted in 2018, where data were collected from 105 studies from more than 30,000 employees across the globe, focusing on empowering leaders and their subordinates. In their research, they highlighted when one should empower their employees and when they should not. They did identify that “Empowered employees are more likely to be powerful, confident individuals, who are committed to meaningful goals and demonstrate initiative and creativity to achieve them. They typically have the freedom to generate novel ideas and the confidence that these ideas will be valued”.

There are many benefits in empowering one’s employees; however, there are some factors a superior ought to take into consideration before assuming all employees are desiring self-actualization in their current workplace. Concerning this analysis on empowering employees, it says, “There was also a great deal of variation; sometimes leaders who tried to empower their employees ended up doing more harm than good. For instance, one study in our analysis found that by trying to provide employees with additional responsibility and challenges at work, empowering leaders burdened their employees and increased their level of job stress. The empowering leaders who did see better performance on routine tasks were the ones who developed good relationship with their employees and were more trusted”.

Part of being a leader who can use self-actualization effectively is knowing your employees. The goal is not to get the most out of them you can for the leadership and the company, the point of self-actualization deals first with the individual and then the company. When this gets reversed is often when more harm comes from the challenge. It is about the individual rising to the challenge compared to the challenge forcing either the individual to succeed or fail. It is about the individual, not the challenge.

Today’s Environment

Pre– or post–COVID-19 people are going to know if you are challenging them for selfish
or altruistic reasons. Now, the trust and relationship that often occur before self-actualization may be more difficult due to the uncertainty of other needs. Anyone can be a good and practical leader for a business, living day-to-day, challenging employees for the betterment of the company and that may be a successful organization. It is rarer to find a great and inspiring leader who puts the people before the company and in time becomes a thriving organization.

Many well-known successful businesses today continue to thrive because of not necessarily what they do, but why they do it. It is about connection; it is about people. “Starbucks set out to be a different kind of company. One that not only celebrated coffee but also connection.” Additionally, the first statement Starbucks makes on their website concerning their core values says, “Creating a culture of warmth and belonging, where everyone is welcome”. This is the type of atmosphere and culture business owners need to create and communicate post–COVID-19. Another example includes Chick-Fil-A, whose mission statement is “to be America’s best quick-service restaurant at winning and keeping customers”. Moreover, they set an example and implement it actively through the leadership model they have: “At Chick-Fil-A, leaders SERVE, which means they do five things: See and shape the future, Engage and develop others, Reinvent continuously, Value results and relationships, and Embody the company values.” This mission statement and leadership model do not outrightly talk about selling chicken, but rather focuses on people, connection, and empowerment.

Every year, a list is created for the best Fortune 100 companies to work for created by Great Place to Work®. What employees are saying for the top three organizations all include this concept of empowerment.

| Company/ranking | Hilton/#1 |
|----------------|----------|
| What employees are saying | Hilton truly has hospitality at its core, resulting in a unique team member and guest focus that is unlike any other company I have seen. The company invests in me and my team and encourages an entrepreneurial approach to our work. |

| Company/ranking | Salesforce/#2 |
|----------------|-------------|
| What employees are saying | They truly care about empowering employees and improving the entire community in which we are involved. Many places talk, but Salesforce backs up that talk with even more action. I am proud to tell people where I work and how much they give back. |

| Company/ranking | Wegmans Food Markets, Inc./#3 |
|----------------|--------------------------------|
| What employees are saying | I truly feel that Wegmans is a company where employees can follow the American Dream. We’re given endless opportunities to learn and grow. It’s a place where those who seek to build a career for themselves, while following their passions can do so. |

(Chart created from information collected from https://www.greatplacetowork.com/best-workplaces/100-best/2019).

These may be examples of large businesses, and there are many resources these businesses have that most small businesses do not. Empowering employees will not deplete one’s bank account though. Empowering employees will more likely create an environment (like these businesses have) of one where people want to work, where they want to be challenged and grow, and where they want to invest their time, resources, and lives.

Every individual has needs and varying levels of motivation in correlation with those
needs. Today’s environment does not make meeting those needs as straight forward as one may think. An effective leader is able to discern the needs of their employees and customers, while realizing the effects the environment has on these needs and people. Yes, employees ought to receive adequate pay for their work, but it is not only about pay, it is also about meeting other varying levels of needs. It has to begin there, but it must not stop there. People want to grow, learn, and become better people. With additional requirements and difficulties with the recent COVID pandemic and racial unrest, people are not as focused, and with due cause. People do not want to be just another person; they want to be heard. It is important to not only listen to employees and customers but hear them and empower them. Every individual has at least one area in life in common—relationships. We all need other people and our relationships. Creating an environment where people feel empowered no matter the task or challenge presented before them will create meaning in their work (or in your business). Every individual has needs, is motivated by needs, and wants to live a life with meaning. Small business is about connection; small business is about people and communities!

And Now, Make a Difference

Effective empowering leaders are needed today. These leaders can only empower if they address and meet their followers’ needs. This does not mean delving into every individual’s life and ensuring they are getting their needs met, but this involves awareness of people and their environment. This ought not merely be a checklist for the supervisor, this ought to be a heart issue. In Linda Belton’s reflections on Greenleaf’s The Servant as Leader, she writes, “As servant-leader, we must accept the awesome reality that our actions shape the world around us. If we understand that all thoughts create form on some level, we must think differently. If we recognize the repercussions of our words, we must speak more carefully. If we wish to create a unified environment, we must behave in ways that are unifying. If we comprehend that our decisions affect a myriad of others, we must lead in ways that uplift our workplace. We cannot profess a truth and fail to be changed by it” (as cited in Greenleaf).12

Leaders need to be aware of the truths of the environment and the repercussions of the recent instability of current systems. One must not be shaken and return to previous ways. Now, new truths are within the fabric of our current reality; it is time to rise up and be part of the change. Now is the time to stand for one’s business, community, and the current and future United States of America. It is time to think differently and lead in ways that uplift others and the workplace. “We cannot profess a truth and fail to be changed by it” (as cited by Greenleaf).12 Be that empowering leader who exemplifies and inspires change and unity and makes a difference!

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Notes

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