Self-Actualizing your Knowledge Management Program
By Jon Powell, CKO, Hewitt Associates
Jean Egmon, Director, Center for Learning and Organizational Change,
Northwestern University

When you were in school, you probably learned about a psychological model of human motivation called Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). The gist of it is that there are 5 levels of needs, going from "lower-order" needs like food and shelter, to "higher-order" needs like belonging, self-esteem and finally, self-actualization (See Figure 1)

Figure 1
Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
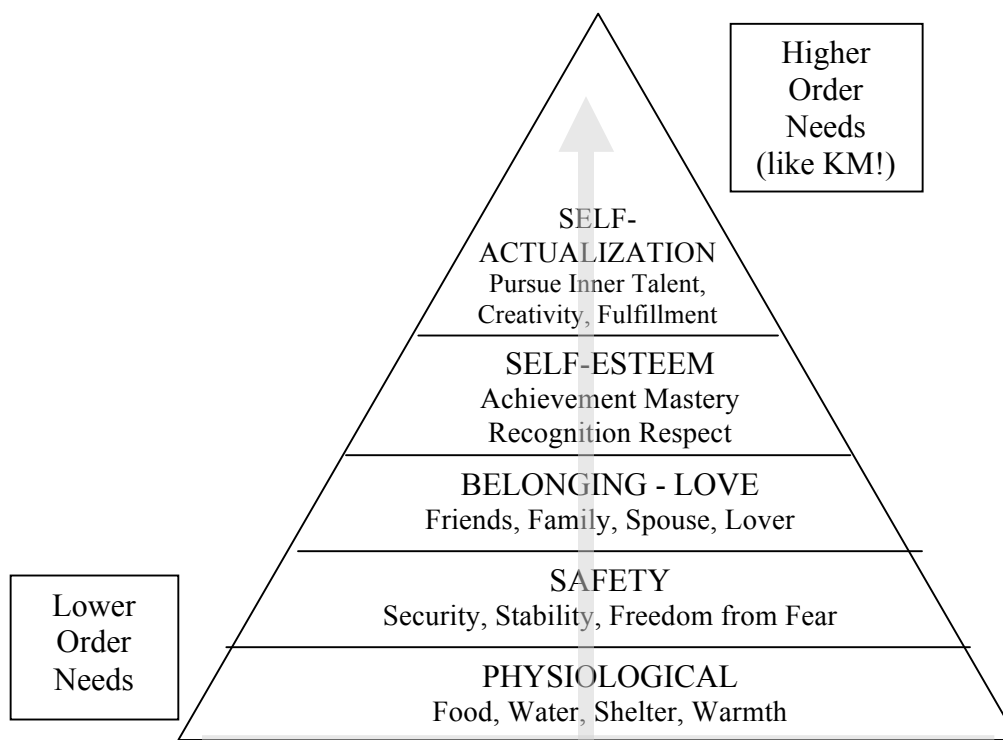
A key feature of Maslow's hierarchy is that until the lower order needs are satisfied, one cannot really focus on the higher order needs. So, here's our premise: Knowledge Management (KM) activities thrive only when lower-order needs have been satisfied; or to put it another way, where higher-order needs are being addressed. In fact, true KM is pretty far up on the hierarchy. Hence, until employees feel a certain level of safety and belonging, the chance of their engaging in knowledge sharing and creation is pretty low.

Most of what can be done at the lower levels is "brokering" information rather than the more risky work of knowledge creation and sharing.

There is nothing wrong with beginning with information – a necessary but insufficient part of knowledge. For information to rise to knowledge requires that the information be laced with the business and employee's context (including what they already think and believe), and with the organization's business goals and the people's work and personal goals. When you add all of that to the mix, it is clear why knowledge is "sticky" and messy in the making.

Turning information into knowledge requires time, energy and learning, and that is tough to do when people are low on Maslow's hierarchy, i.e., when they are scared, demotivated, have no sense of belonging, or see no reason to change the way they see things.

However, if you start with where your people are at on Maslow's hierarchy, you can design a strategy for KM that helps people learn and move up the hierarchy, for their own benefit, and for the benefit of the organization. Getting straightforward information to people that does not impinge on an already uncertain workplace context can be useful first, second and third steps in bringing people up the hierarchy. In fact, the way you design and pace your KM initiatives can provide scaffolds on which employees construct new mental models for their work and roles (including knowledge sharing) in the organization.
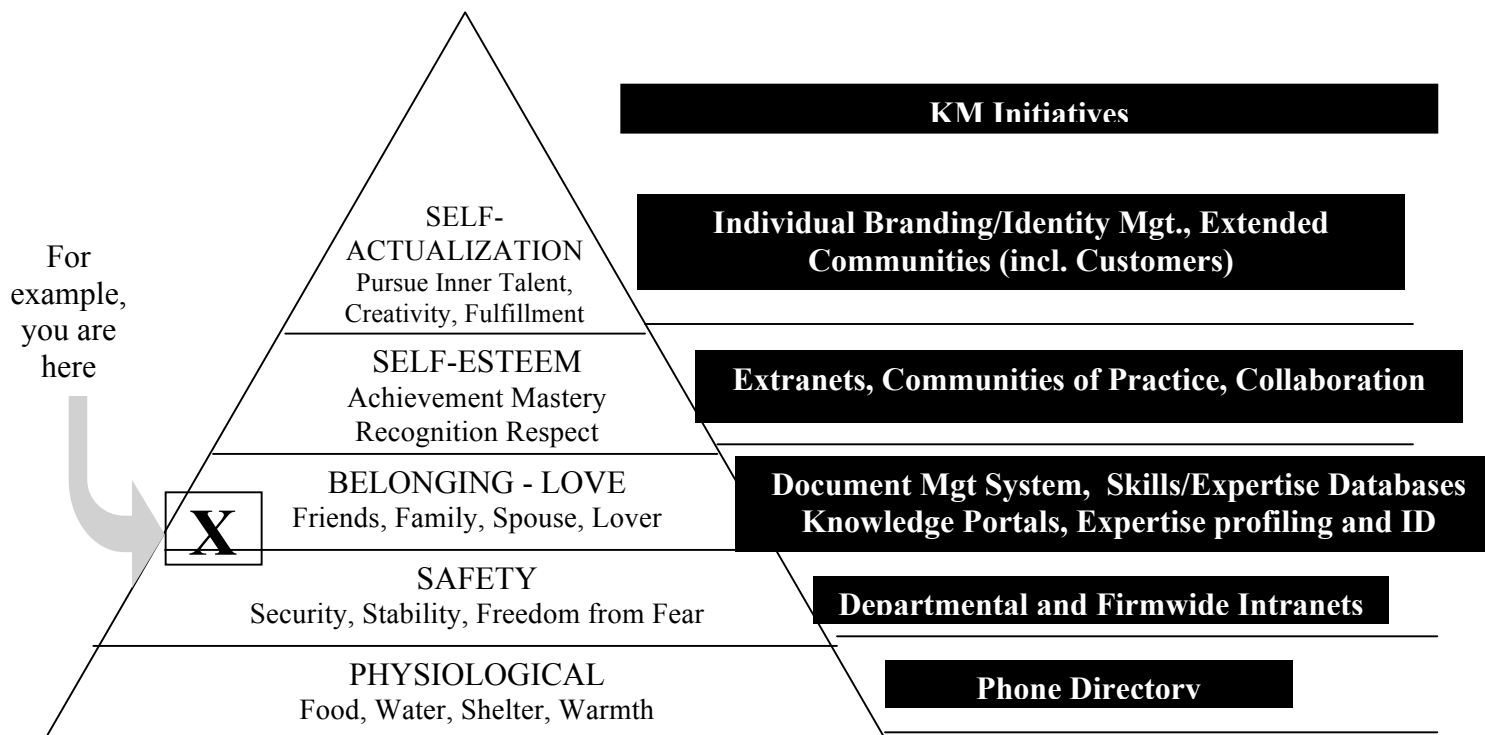
Scaffolding is an old term from the construction trade applied to learning (Elshout ,1987). Scaffolding takes the practical approach of giving people something secure to stand on as they work their way to higher heights when building (or repairing) a structure. KM can do the same thing for people in the process of building (or repairing) businesses, mindsets, and work practices.

In some cases, this scaffolding approach to KM will even be a more practical, cost-effective approach than orchestrating a full-blown cultural change initiative or other commonly referred to ways of getting people to change the ways they think and do things. Whether your goal is simply to choose the right level of KM that will work under the current organizational conditions, or to leverage KM to help the organization change, you will likely see more immediate and desirable resorts if you synchronize your KM initiatives with where your organization is on Maslow's hierarchy.

(That's not to say that you should scrap your KM initiatives in favor of seeking radical culture change. Just recognize that you'll have better luck "synchronizing" your KM initiatives to where you are in the hierarchy of needs.)

 Here's some rules of thumb you can use to in figuring out where you are, as well as picking the right KM initiatives (See Figure 2):

Figure 2
Mapping KM Initiatives to Maslow's Hierarchy

```
                                         ┌────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
                                         │                KM Initiatives                  │
                                         └────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                    /\
                   /  \                   ┌────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
            SELF-                         │  Individual Branding/Identity Mgt., Extended   │
  For       ACTUALIZATION                 │         Communities (incl. Customers)          │
example,   Pursue Inner Talent,           └────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
you are    Creativity, Fulfillment
here       ─────────────────────          ┌────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
            SELF-ESTEEM                    │  Extranets, Communities of Practice, Collaboration │
           Achievement Mastery            └────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
           Recognition Respect
           ─────────────────────          ┌────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
     ┌─┐   BELONGING - LOVE               │  Document Mgt System,  Skills/Expertise Databases │
     │X│   Friends, Family, Spouse, Lover │  Knowledge Portals, Expertise profiling and ID │
     └─┘   ─────────────────────          └────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
            SAFETY                         ┌────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
           Security, Stability, Freedom from Fear │   Departmental and Firmwide Intranets   │
           ─────────────────────          └────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
            PHYSIOLOGICAL                  ┌────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
           Food, Water, Shelter, Warmth   │              Phone Directory                   │
                                          └────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

How do you know where you are? Ask people! They'll tell you exactly where they are, especially if it is a need for explicit knowledge or information, because they can <u>feel the frustration of not having it</u>. Take a second to check in with yourself – at what level have your needs been met in your job? Where would you place the "X" in the diagram?   Also, pay attention to what people are saying and doing in their everyday conversations. If people are asking for more explicit knowledge (i.e., information that can be codified, captured and shared directly like phone directories and references), they are likely operating within the lower two or three levels of the hierarchy. If, on the other hand, they are talking about more abstract felt realties like leadership, customer relationships, and the business environment, they are talking in terms of implicit and tacit knowledge (i.e., knowledge that is difficult to capture and articulate; often learned through social interaction, observation and practice). Things like communities of practice, branding and self-directed work teams are examples of KM initiatives that map to higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy and rely on implicit and tacit knowledge (Nickols, 2000).

What happens if your KM initiative gets ahead of the hierarchy? It's simple. There's no energy around it and you get passive resistance. And if you get too far ahead, you'll encounter active resistance. People will push back because you are asking them to give too much without the proper scaffolds on which to build. Ouch!

Don't give up. KM can actually help satisfy needs for belonging (Intranets and Communities of Practice), as well as higher order needs to learn, grow and contribute.

Different individuals and groups within your organization may be at different levels of the hierarchy. That is one more reason why KM is generally more successful if calibrated and tailored to local groups and letting it "catch on" rather than trying to push one best way of KM across the firm or company. Find the people who are empowered (victims make the <u>worst</u> KM participants), form communities to share expertise and own processes. Give them tools, fight for their right to congregate in person and on the Intranet, and help them convert others to the cause.

One aspect of firmwide KM that is advisable is to share success stories from various levels of KM across the organization. You can share formally through talks, newsletters, etc., but you can also share informally through conversations and by tapping into what Malcolm Gladwell in *The Tipping Point* (2000) calls the information mavens, social connectors and idea salesmen within your organization. These are people who are definitely thriving in the belonging and self-esteem rungs of Maslow's hierarchy, and who will love to spread the word and ideas for you, helping it catch on as a "social epidemic" within your company.

One more thing. If you can't find anyone like that, then implement the biggest, meanest document management system you can find because it'll look great on your resume.

Elshout, J.J., (1987). "Problem-solving and Education" in E.DeCorte, H. Ludewijks, R. Parmentien, & P. Span (Eds.), *Learning and Instruction – European Research in an International Context* (Vol. 1). Oxford: Leuven University Press and Pergamon Press.

Gladwell, Malcolm, (2000). *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference.* New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Maslow, Abraham, (1943). "A Theory of Human Motivation" in *Psychological Review*, July, 1943, pp. 370-96.

Nickols, Fred, (2000). "The Knowledge in Knowledge Management" in J.W. Cortada and J.A. Woods (Eds.), *The Knowledge Management Yearbook 2000-2001*. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann.