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WHAT DO WE NEED?

Grades: 9 and up

Time: 45-60 minutes

Materials: Fifteen sheets of 8 ½" x 11" paper, each with a word written on it (see below); a few chairs; a small, short sturdy box or crate that's safe for someone to stand on; a very large drawn pyramid with five levels, big enough for the 15 sheets of paper to fit within (see below); tape; art materials and paper

Relevant Subjects: Psychology, Social Studies, and Language Arts, and, with modifications, Consumer Science and Environmental Science

Preparation: Write the following words, each one on a sheet of 8 ½" x 11" paper, so that you have a total of 15 words/sheets of paper:

Self-Actualization (add the words "personal growth & fulfillment" or similar, if needed)
Achievement, Responsibility
Relationships, Affection, Intimacy
Protection, Security, Laws, Stability
Air, Food/Water, Shelter, Sex (or Reproduction, if you prefer), Sleep

Pertinent Information: The above words are from Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. You can add/subtract words (or create your own hierarchy of needs) as desired for your purposes. Be sure that the number of words for each "level" are such that a pyramid can be made (for the example above: 5 on bottom level, 4 on next, 3 on next, 2 on next, 1 at top). See below for details.

1. Pass out a sheet of paper with one of the words on it to each of 15 (or whatever number of words you're using) participants. Be sure to mix up the sheets and pass them out randomly.
2. Ask: "What do these all have in common? What one word describes them? (Needs)"

3. Ask those participants who think that they have a word that represents a basic survival need to sit together on the floor facing the observers (non-participants) and display their sheets with the words facing the observers.
4. Let participants know that, for this particular example, there are four more levels.
 - Ask those who think that they are part of the next level (the next most basic needs) to kneel behind the first group and face their words to the observers.
 - The next group should sit behind the kneeling group, on chairs. The next group should stand behind the “chair” group, and anyone at the top should stand on the box/crate.
 - Have the participants discuss amongst themselves who fits where, and let people move around until they’re fairly confident that their placement makes sense. (Having everyone placed properly is not the point of the exercise, as long as the most basic needs are at the bottom and self-actualization is at the top.) If you wish, you can ask the observers for their input.
5. Have each person in the top four rows put their hands on the shoulders of the person in front of them, so that they form a pyramid.
6. Say, “I want to show you what happens when something we need is missing.” Pull out two or three people from the bottom four rows of the pyramid, so that there is a gap, and some people cannot put their hands on the shoulders of another.
7. Thank the volunteers. Reveal the large drawn pyramid and ask students to place their need in the correct level on the pyramid, using the tape provided. Have everyone sit down when they’re finished.
8. Lead a brief discussion about the concept of “self-actualization.” Ask the class for definitions. Ask questions such as:
 - Why would we want to make it to that level?
 - What kind of world might we have if everyone were at this level?
 - If we remove self-actualization, what does that affect?
9. Have each student create a pyramid that reflects their own needs, from most basic to their highest level.

Alternative:

This activity could be adapted in a variety of ways. For example, you could mix other “needs,” such as products, in with Maslow’s needs. You could have participants

create a hierarchy of wants, in order to discuss the differences between a want and a need. You could compare what people in the United States consider a need with what people from other countries consider a need (books like *Material World* and *Hungry Planet* – both by Peter Menzel – might be useful for this exploration). You could adapt this activity to the interconnectedness of a variety of systems (such as biodiversity). You could compare the needs of humans and nonhumans. There are numerous possibilities.

Activity by Sherry Gilkin (M.Ed. Student)