

Achievement Motivation Training

This model primarily targets the achievement drive competency. Originally developed by Harvard psychologist David McClelland and his colleagues at Hay/McBer, it has been used in many different settings with many different types of individuals, including corporate executives, small business entrepreneurs, minority businessmen and women, business school students, police officers, and social workers. It also has been used in other countries. In fact, it was first used in 1963 with Indian businessmen.

Although the training has been offered in different ways, from week-long residential retreats to semester-long college courses, it typically involves 70 hours of work spread over 5 or more days. On the first day of the program, the participants are informed of the training objectives. They are told that the program is intended to increase the strength of their achievement motivation and that the faculty has confidence that the program will be effective. Next the faculty spend some time describing what achievement motivation is, the characteristics of people with strong achievement motivation, and the relation of achievement motivation to success in managerial work. These presentations include detailed discussion of research studies on achievement motivation. After listening to these presentations, the participants meet in small groups and try to identify incidents at work that demonstrate the effects of achievement motivation on business-related decision-making and performance. Each small group selects a case example to be presented to the whole group.

These initial activities are designed to accomplish several objectives. First, the faculty tries to create a belief in the participants that it is both possible and desirable to develop increased achievement motivation. Second, through presentation of research

findings, the faculty demonstrates that increased achievement motivation should lead to improved managerial performance and personal success. Third, the activities help participants conceptualize clearly what achievement motivation is and how it affects behavior. Finally, the small group activity is designed to help the participants see how achievement motivation is involved in everyday work experience.

In the next part of training, the faculty helps the participants conceptualize more clearly what achievement motivation is, particularly as reflected in imaginative thought. They begin by discussing the case examples that the small groups developed previously, with the faculty helping the participants to identify more clearly how achievement motivation plays a role in each example. Then the participants learn a method of scoring achievement motivation in stories, and use this method to score their own stories, which were written before the beginning of the program. Later the participants discuss their stories and scoring in an individual conference with a faculty member. During these activities, participants not only get a clearer idea of what achievement motivation is and how it manifests itself in work situations; they also are confronted with data about their own achievement motivation, which often helps generate a strong desire to change.

The next segment of training begins with practicing “achievement thinking.” The participants write a new set of stories, now trying to saturate them with achievement-related thinking. Then the participants do the same with a set of business situations. This work takes up half a day. The next part of training is devoted to the topic of personal goals and goal-setting. (Goal setting is an important aspect of achievement-oriented behavior.) The faculty help the participants to discuss their own personal goals and conflicts among goals, such as conflicts between family and work-related goals. The

participants conclude this part of the program by developing detailed personal goals for the next two years and the next five years.

Most of a day is devoted to the next activity: playing a business game. During the game, the participants are scored on several criteria, and at the conclusion of the game they receive feedback on their individual scores. Then they discuss how their scores relate to their level of achievement motivation and the demands of their jobs for achievement-oriented performance. At the end of this discussion, the participants decide whether they want to develop greater achievement motivation, and in what specific aspects of it they wish to improve. These activities help the participants to gain even more awareness and insight into their own achievement motivation and to commit themselves to a program of personal change.

The last part of the program is devoted to the development of a personal action plan. The participants discuss their individual goals for developing greater achievement motivation, and the faculty help them to identify techniques that can be used to increase achievement motivation. They spend considerable time discussing how to keep records of daily progress through a journal or diary, and the faculty helps the participants anticipate some of the obstacles they are likely to encounter as they attempt to apply what they have learned at work and in their personal lives. The concluding activity is an individual conference with a faculty member in which the participants discuss their own goals and action plans.

The program designers conceptualized the program as involving seven “training inputs.” The first is to learn achievement motivation thinking. The second is for the participants to understand their own characteristics and goals. The third is to help

participants practice achievement-related actions in cases, role plays, and real life. A fourth input is to practice achievement-related actions in business and other games. A fifth input is for the participants to relate the achievement behavior model to their own behavior, self-image, and goals. Sixth, the program helps participants develop a personal action plan. Finally, the program provides participants with feedback on progress toward achieving goals.

Considerable evaluation research has been conducted on achievement motivation training, and the results generally are positive. One study found that program participants evidenced a significantly higher rate of advancement within their company than did a control group (Aronoff, 1971). In another evaluation study, an achievement motivation training program that targeted small business owners was effective in influencing business performance as measured by increased monthly sales, monthly profits, monthly personal income, and number of employees. And results of a cost/benefit analysis of this government-sponsored program showed that the net increase in tax revenues due to the increased profitability of the targeted businesses more than paid for the program: after two years the cost/benefit ratio was over 5 to 1 (Miron, 1979).

For more information on this model, see:

Aronoff, J., & Litwin, G. H. (1971). Achievement motivation training and executive advancement. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 7(2), 215-229.

Miron, D., & McClelland, D. C. (1979). The impact of achievement motivation training on small businesses. California Management Review, 21(4), 13-28.