

“I Am Because We Are: Extending Maslow’s Hierarchy through Ubuntu and Peace Linguistics in the Workplace”

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Abstract

Conventional interpretations of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, rooted in Western individualist thought, emphasise personal attainment and self-actualisation while often overlooking relational and communal dimensions of human well-being. This paper reimagines Maslow’s model through an Afrocentric lens, integrating Ubuntu philosophy and peace linguistics, which define the self as constituted through ethical and reciprocal relationships. Anchored in the Ubuntu axiom *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (“a person is a person through other persons”), the study argues that human needs—particularly in workplace contexts—are most fully realised through dignified, empathetic, and restorative communication that affirms social and moral standing rather than hierarchical authority. Using the dual framework of peace linguistics (analytical and ethical), the research investigates the mechanisms by which linguistic practices serve to either sustain or erode collective dignity, social belonging, and psychological safety. The study extends Maslow’s hierarchy by proposing a sixth tier: Relational Dignity, the human need to be acknowledged, socially affirmed, and ethically respected through communication. Findings demonstrate that reclaiming Ubuntu through peace linguistics transforms workplace communication into a restorative process, where motivation and human flourishing emerge from individual achievement and from mutual recognition, linguistic harmony, and collective well-being. This Afrocentric-communicative reinterpretation offers a globally

relevant framework for human-centered organisational design, challenging individualistic motivational models and advancing an ethic of relational humanity.

Keywords: *Afrocentric motivation, Collective well-being, Linguistic harmony, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Peace linguistics, Relational dignity, Ubuntu philosophy, Workplace communication*

1. Introduction and Background

Human motivation has long been a central concern in organisational behaviour, psychology, and management studies. Among the most influential frameworks is Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943/1954), which posits that human beings are driven by a series of layered needs, progressing from physiological necessities to safety, social belonging, esteem, and ultimately self-actualisation. Maslow's model has been widely applied in workplace contexts, suggesting that the fulfillment of these needs enhances job satisfaction, engagement, and productivity (Vo, 2022; Saleem, 2022). Despite the acknowledged importance of Maslow's framework, a critical gap persists. The hierarchy does not explicitly recognise communication as a mechanism or potential human need, nor does it account for culturally informed, ethically guided communication practices that foster relational dignity. While the hierarchy provides a useful structure for understanding motivation, empirical studies indicate that higher-order needs; belongingness, esteem, and self-actualisation are frequently realised through interpersonal and organisational communication (Men, 2014; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Ruck et al., 2012). In organisational practice, employees often report that how they are communicated with, the respect and recognition they receive, and the inclusivity of interactions significantly affect their sense of belonging, esteem, and ability to self-actualise (Jacobson, 2022; Vendeirinho, 2021). This gap highlights the need to extend Maslow's hierarchy to incorporate communication as a core element for fulfilling higher-order needs.

To address this gap, this study draws on Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasises interdependence, mutual respect, and the collective well-being of individuals ("I am because we are"), and peace linguistics, which focuses on ethical, nonviolent, and dignity-affirming communication. Ubuntu informs workplace communication by promoting principles such as respectful address terms, recognition of age and experience,

inclusivity, attentive listening, and avoidance of speech that harms others, reflecting the social and moral value of each individual beyond formal hierarchy. Peace linguistics complements this by encouraging harm-free discourse, empathetic phrasing, active affirmation, and restorative dialogue, ensuring that communication nurtures rather than diminishes relational dignity. Together, these frameworks offer a lens for exploring how communication can operationalise the fulfillment of human needs, sustain relational dignity, and enhance workplace performance through ethically grounded, culturally informed, and mutually reinforcing interactions.

The study therefore aims to:

- To interpret the role of communication in fulfilling higher-order human needs: belongingness, esteem, and self-actualisation within the workplace context.
- To explore how Ubuntu-inspired and peace-linguistic communicative practices can foster relational dignity and enhance employee engagement.
- To develop a conceptual extension of Maslow's hierarchy of needs that integrates communication as both a mechanism and a human need in organisational life.

By bridging Maslow's motivational theory with relational, ethical, and culturally grounded communication practices, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of human motivation in modern workplaces, highlighting communication as a key driver of employee well-being, performance, and relational dignity.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews literature on Maslow's hierarchy and organizational communication highlighting theoretical gaps. Section 3 details the qualitative exploratory methodology, while Section 4 presents findings on dignity-eroding linguistic violations in the workplace. Section 5 discusses these patterns and maps them theoretically, and Section 6 introduces the Extended Maslow model with the sixth tier—Relational Dignity. Section 7 concludes with the study's implications for leadership, organizational communication, and human-centered workplace practices globally.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Appreciating Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Identifying the Communication Gap

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs has profoundly shaped our understanding of human motivation, particularly in organisational contexts. Maslow (1943) proposed that individuals are driven by a hierarchical of needs, beginning with physiological necessities and culminating in self-actualisation. This framework has informed management practices aimed at enhancing employee motivation and performance. Empirical studies have, however, provided mixed support for Maslow's model. For example, Wahba and Bridwell (1976) critically examined its empirical validity, while Alderfer's ERG theory (1969) condenses Maslow's five levels into three: Existence, Relatedness, and Growth, suggesting that needs may not be strictly hierarchical and can be pursued simultaneously. Despite these critiques, the notion that fulfilling human needs promotes performance remains influential.

In workplace contexts, addressing employees' needs has been linked to enhanced job satisfaction and productivity. Vo (2022), analysing data from over 32,000 individuals across 25 countries, found that autonomy and social relatedness positively impacted work motivation, aligning with Maslow's higher-order needs. In alignment with this perspective, Saleem (2022) found that workplace incivility compromises employee performance through the erosion of their fundamental needs for social belonging and self-esteem. These findings confirm that attending to employees' needs is crucial for optimal organisational outcomes.

All the same, Maslow's model overlooks a critical element; communication. Vendeirinho (2021) argues that internal communications aligned with hierarchical needs significantly influence morale and productivity, while Jacobson (2022) highlights that effective communication fosters a sense of belonging and recognition essential for esteem needs. These observations suggest that communication is not merely a tool for transmitting information but is integral to fulfilling human needs. The absence of communication as a central mechanism or potential need represents a gap in Maslow's hierarchy, which this study addresses by introducing the concept of Relational Dignity.

2.2. The Value of Communication in the Workplace

Organizational communication is widely recognised as a determinant of employee engagement, motivation, and performance. Men (2014) reports that strategic internal communication is positively associated with satisfaction and organisational commitment, while Welch and Jackson (2007) emphasise that communication should be stakeholder-centered, where dialogue, feedback, and recognition satisfy belonging and esteem needs. Similarly, Ruck et al. (2012) demonstrate that employees' perceptions of communication quality specifically clarity, openness, and responsiveness directly influence inclusion and self-efficacy, crucial for motivation and productivity.

Empirical evidence further reinforces this link. Verčič, Grunig, and Grunig (2020) found that organisations employing two-way symmetrical communication channels reported higher engagement and innovation, aligning with Maslow's higher-order needs. Romero-Rodríguez et al. (2024) highlighted that communication practices fostering psychological safety, individual recognition, and participatory dialogue significantly enhance both employee well-being and organisational performance. Professional guidelines echo these insights; CIPD (2024) underscores that effective communication creates safe and inclusive environments, while ILO (2020) identifies it as central to workplace health, safety, and ethical practice.

Collectively, these studies indicate that communication is both a mechanism and a relational need for realising Maslow's higher-order needs. It is essential for translating potential need satisfaction into actualised engagement, performance, and self-realisation.

3. Methodological Orientation

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design within an interpretivist paradigm to examine how Ubuntu philosophy and workplace communication inform the addition of a Relational Dignity tier to Maslow's hierarchy. To achieve this, a hybrid conceptual-illustrative approach was adopted, combining literature review with qualitative data to bridge theory and practice. In this regard, foundational and contemporary literature on Maslow, Ubuntu, peace linguistics, and workplace communication was reviewed to identify conceptual gaps and develop the Extended Maslow Communication Hierarchy, positioning communication as a mediating force across all tiers.

Fifteen employees from three corporate organisations in Harare, Zimbabwe, were purposively sampled to ensure diverse perspectives on relational dynamics, recognition, and workplace communication. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes) conducted between January and March 2025, focusing on experiences of recognition, respect, interpersonal harmony, and Ubuntu-inspired values. In addition, twenty vignettes and scenarios were developed, either drawn directly from participant narratives or synthesised from recurring patterns, to illustrate authentic workplace experiences.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying patterns in relational dignity, recognition, and affirming communication. This process informed the conceptualisation of a Relational Dignity tier as an addition to Maslow's hierarchy.

4. Findings

4.1. Dignity-Eroding Linguistic Realisations: Violations of Ubuntu and Peace Linguistics Principles

Workplace communication functions as the medium through which dignity is either sustained or eroded. Within the Ubuntu–Peace Linguistics framework, language is not merely transactional but relational. It affirms or denies one's humanity. Ubuntu upholds values of respect, empathy, inclusivity, and mutual recognition, while Peace Linguistics (López, 2021; Gomes de Matos, 2002) promotes non-harmful, restorative, and affirming communication. Violations of these principles result in communicative harm that undermines employees' sense of belonging, competence, and psychological safety.

Analyses of Zimbabwean workplace interactions reveal a recurring set of dignity-eroding linguistic and paralinguistic behaviours, many of which reinforce hierarchical distance and communicative exclusion. These behaviours diminish self-esteem, silence participation, and disrupt relational equilibrium, all of which underscore the need for an additional motivational tier that centres human dignity in communication.

4.1.1. Interruptions and Silencing

Repeated interruptions and neglect of ideas communicate disregard and exclusion. Employees reported feeling invisible when their speech was cut short or ignored:

Whenever I tried to speak, I was cut off. It made me feel like my opinions didn't matter.

Such behaviour violates Ubuntu's ethic of listening with humanity and Peace Linguistics' principle of communicative non-violence. Silencing destabilises relational balance, erodes confidence, and impairs collective problem-solving.

4.1.2. Negative Address Terms and Demeaning Labels

Address terms such as “*child*,” “*girl*,” or “*useless*” reproduce hierarchies of age and status that contradict Ubuntu's equality of personhood.

Being called with demeaning labels by my supervisor, despite being an adult professional, made me feel excluded and diminished.

The selection of this lexicon diminishes the interlocutor's status by challenging their adult identity and professional credibility. Peace Linguistics classifies such expressions as linguistic aggression, language that humiliates rather than uplifts.

4.1.3. Exclusive Pronouns and Command Forms

The frequent use of isolating pronouns (*you must, you alone*) and abrupt imperatives (“*Do this now!*”) was reported as linguistic triggers of anxiety:

Being told, 'You must do this now!' without explanation made me even scared to ask questions.

These commands reduce communication to domination, violating Ubuntu's collaborative ethic and Peace Linguistics' principle of invitational dialogue.

4.1.4. Paralinguistic Aggression

Non-verbal cues such as raised tone, abrupt gestures, and avoidance of eye contact communicated threat or disdain:

Even if my work was acceptable, the way my manager raised their voice made me feel demeaned and unsafe.

The paralinguistic environment of fear undermines relational safety, a foundational element of both Ubuntu's mutual care and Maslow's safety needs.

4.1.5. Dismissive and Sarcastic Speech

Sarcasm and mockery trivialise employees' contributions, eroding both esteem and belonging:

When my manager said, 'Oh, that's not a brilliant idea...NO!' I felt humiliated and worthless.

Such utterances exemplify peace-violating discourse acts, where humour or scorn disempowers rather than nurtures.

4.1.6. Age and Hierarchy Imbalances

Cultural respect for elders and authority can unintentionally morph into communicative inequality. Younger employees frequently reported marginalisation of their ideas, while older supervisors admitted to unexamined patterns of harshness inherited from previous generations:

When I contribute ideas, they're dismissed until a senior repeats them. I sometimes speak harshly to interns. It's how I was trained.

Ubuntu's ideal of intergenerational respect mandates reciprocity: Elders provide guidance, but they must simultaneously maintain receptiveness and listen to the younger generation. Elders guide, but must also listen. Peace Linguistics adds the communicative discipline of mutuality, ensuring that power does not silence dignity.

4.1.7. The Psychosomatic Cost of Linguistic Harm

Language that humiliates or excludes often manifests in embodied stress, racing heartbeat, tension, and loss of focus, showing that linguistic violence produces physiological effects:

When my supervisor called me 'useless,' my heart raced and I couldn't concentrate.

This intersection of communicative and physiological harm underscores that language plays a vital role in sustaining human motivation and well-being. When speech undermines dignity, it disrupts not only relational harmony but also employees' overall sense of safety, belonging, and esteem. Such findings reveal a motivational dimension that Maslow's existing tiers do not fully capture: the need for relational dignity. This tier recognises that individuals thrive in environments where communication affirms their humanity, respect, and mutual worth.

5. Discussion

5.1. Reorienting Maslow's Hierarchy through Ubuntu and Peace Linguistics: The Case for a Sixth Tier

While Maslow's hierarchy of needs remains one of the most enduring frameworks for understanding human motivation, its psychological foundation is largely individualistic. Maslow (1943) envisioned self-actualisation as the pinnacle of human fulfillment, achieved once physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem needs were satisfied. This structure, though powerful, assumes that motivation is primarily an internal and personal pursuit of growth rather than a relational process of co-becoming. The African philosophical thought of Ubuntu and communicative ethics drawn from Peace Linguistics challenge this assumption by locating motivation, dignity, and well-being within the matrix of interpersonal connectedness and ethical communication.

5.1.1. *Ubuntu as Relational Reorientation*

Ubuntu, a cornerstone of African ethical thought, emphasises relationality, mutual respect, and communal humaneness. Within an Ubuntu worldview, there is a strong commitment to respect for all, the dignity of humanity, caring, inclusivity, transparency, harmony, solidarity, kinship, consensus creation, and compassion. Ubuntu offers a moral and philosophical re-centering of human motivation. Its dictum *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* ("a person is a person through other persons") situates humanity in relationships rather than in individual attainment (Ramosé, 2002; Metz, 2019; Gade, 2012). The philosophy provides the ethical foundation for Relational Dignity, emphasising relational personhood, mutual respect, and communal harmony. Recognition of others' dignity is thus central to one's own flourishing. In organisational contexts, Ubuntu-informed practices like active listening, empathy, inclusive language, and respect for communal contributions enhance interpersonal harmony and motivation (Mukuni, 2023; Chetty & Price, 2024). Dignity, in this sense, is not an individual possession but a relational accomplishment co-constructed through mutual recognition and ethical interaction. Beyond serving merely as a neutral instrument, communication must be considered a moral act. Titles, greetings, tone, and pronouns become vehicles for affirming or eroding personhood. When communication privileges hierarchy, age, or qualification at the

expense of mutual respect, relational bonds are severed, and motivation deteriorates. Therefore, Ubuntu provides the ethical foundation for a communicative order in which every individual, regardless of rank, deserves respectful address, attentive listening, and empathetic engagement. It insists that collective well-being and productivity are attainable only when relational dignity is upheld as a shared moral obligation.

5.1.2. Peace Linguistics as a Communicative Regulation

Whereas Ubuntu defines the ethical why of human relationality, Peace Linguistics articulates the communicative how. Founded on principles of non-maleficence, inclusivity, empathic listening, and restorative dialogue (Gomes de Matos, 2002; López, 2021), Peace Linguistics extends ethical responsibility into the micro-practices of speech. It proposes that language can either perpetuate harm or serve as an instrument of harmony and healing. Within workplace communication, this framework demands conscious linguistic choices that prevent humiliation, exclusion, and symbolic violence.

Peace Linguistics operationalises these principles, offering a systematic framework to assess language use and prevent communicative harm (Innocentia, 2020; Uwatt, 2022). Its key principles—non-maleficence, empathy, inclusivity, restorative dialogue, and affirmation of dignity—guide communicators to uphold the relational and moral worth of colleagues. Together, Ubuntu and Peace Linguistics underscore that effective workplace communication is not merely functional but a vehicle for sustaining ethical relationships and collective well-being.

According to Gay (1998), linguistic violence occurs when language harms an individual's dignity psychologically or socially, while Gomes de Matos (2002) notes that Peace Linguistics aims to prevent communicative harm and promote peace. By applying the principle of non-maleficence, Peace Linguistics calls for communicative restraint; avoiding interruptive, sarcastic, or demeaning expressions that erode psychological safety. Its restorative dimension requires repair after verbal harm, re-humanising dialogue, and reintegrating those who feel excluded. The discipline thus operationalises Ubuntu's moral vision into concrete, actionable communicative ethics that can regulate speech behavior in power-laden professional environments. Together, these frameworks converge to support the conceptualisation of Relational Dignity. Ubuntu offers ethical grounding through relational dignity, respect, and

communal personhood; Peace Linguistics provides the analytical rigour by evaluating how language practices enact or negate dignity. Collectively, they justify the addition of Relational Dignity as a tier emphasising recognition, respect, and affirming interpersonal communication, forming the theoretical basis for the Extended Maslow Communication Hierarchy.

5.1.3. Interplay of Age, Qualification, and Position

The empirical data revealed that variables such as age, qualification, and occupational position often determine how individuals are spoken to and recognised in the workplace. Younger or less-qualified employees are frequently subjected to silencing, interruption, or infantilising address terms, while senior staff may unconsciously exercise linguistic dominance that undermines inclusivity. Such communicative asymmetries produce relational inequity, a subtle form of structural violence enacted through language.

Ubuntu and Peace Linguistics jointly provide the tools for regulating these asymmetries. Ubuntu demands that respect flow multidirectionally rather than being constrained by hierarchy, while Peace Linguistics prescribes the linguistic and paralinguistic mechanisms—such as a calm tone, inclusive pronouns, and respectful forms of address—necessary to re-balance power through speech. Together, these frameworks construct an ethical-communicative equilibrium where motivation emerges not from fear or control but from recognition and affirmation.

6. The Proposed Extended Model

The synthesis of the above insights establishes the conceptual necessity for extending Maslow's hierarchy with an additional motivational tier; Relational Dignity. For the purpose of this study relational dignity is defined as the human need to be ethically acknowledged, affirmed, and respected through language and interaction. It reflects the affective and relational dimension of motivation, encompassing recognition, respect, and dignity-affirming communication. It recognises that higher-order needs cannot be fully achieved without ethical, inclusive, and restorative interpersonal interactions.

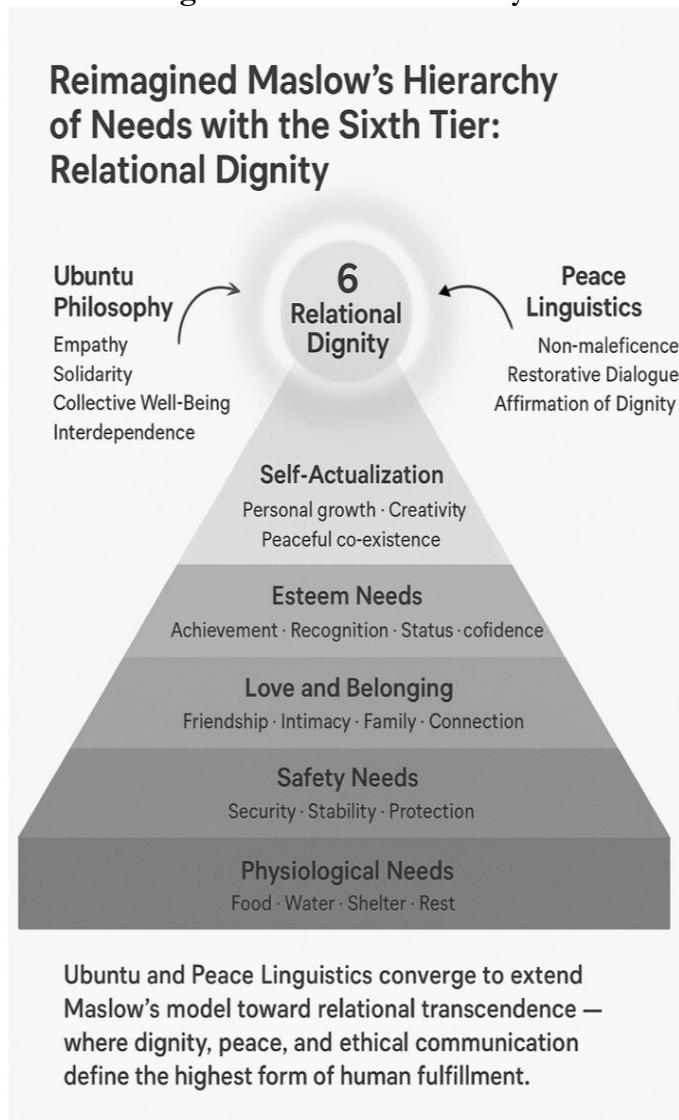
This sixth tier does not revise the earlier levels but transcends them, recognising that the fulfillment of all human needs depends on communicative and ethical interdependence. Relational Dignity

represents the experiential state in which individuals achieve mutual recognition, communicative safety, and ethical affirmation. These conditions allow for the realisation of physiological, social, and esteem needs without psychological or physical harm

Whereas Maslow's self-actualisation emphasises individual potential, Relational Dignity emphasises co-actualisation; the shared flourishing that arises when human interaction itself becomes a source of respect and peace. Within Ubuntu, this state aligns with the ideal to live as people in harmony, and within Peace Linguistics, it manifests through language that restores, affirms, and dignifies.

In organisational life, Relational Dignity becomes visible when communicative practices transcend even hierarchical stratification. When age, qualification, and position no longer dictate respect, when dialogue replaces command, and when speech becomes a medium of moral reciprocity. Therefore, the tier integrates Ubuntu's communal ethics with Peace Linguistics' communicative praxis to form a holistic motivational ecology. It re-envisioned Maslow's pyramid not as a ladder of individual ascent but as an ecology of dignity, where motivation, performance, and well-being are co-sustained through ethical communication and shared humanity.

Figure 1: The reimagined Maslow's hierarchy of needs



Conclusion and Implications

This study advances the concept of a Relational Dignity tier within organisational and human needs frameworks, grounded in the African philosophical principle of Ubuntu and the communicative ethics of peace linguistics. By centering relational harmony, restorative communication, and the ethical treatment of individuals, the model offers a complementary and corrective perspective to traditional individualistic frameworks, such as Maslow's hierarchy. The findings demonstrate that human motivation and well-being are shaped not only by personal achievement but also by the quality of interpersonal relationships and the dignity afforded through communication.

Beyond its foundation in African philosophy, the model possesses universal relevance, serving as a practical blueprint for organisations aiming to cultivate humane, ethical, and productive workplaces. It equips leaders, HR practitioners, and teams with tools to improve communication, foster trust, and resolve conflict in ways that prioritise relational dignity. In doing so, the framework contributes to a global discourse on human-centered organisational design, challenging purely individualistic approaches and emphasising the interdependence of collective well-being, ethical communication, and relational care.

Theoretically, integrating Ubuntu and peace linguistics into Maslow's hierarchy reconceptualises human needs as inherently relational, highlighting that self-actualisation is inseparable from mutual recognition and respectful dialogue, and positioning language as a moral vehicle for human flourishing. Practically, the model offers actionable guidance for developing dialogic leadership, restorative workplace cultures, and linguistically ethical policies that foster inclusion, empathy, and trust. Globally, it provides a translatable critique of individualistic motivation models, demonstrating that organisational success, employee well-being, and human flourishing are profoundly relational phenomena.

Ultimately, this study underscores that language, culture, and relational ethics are central to sustainable human flourishing, not only in African contexts but wherever organisations, communities, and societies aim to create environments that respect dignity, nurture harmony, and cultivate holistic human potential.

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