

# SCARF Model

As we know the brain is wired to maximise reward and minimise threat. We are 5 times more likely to see the threat in any situation than the reward. This is due to the reptilian and mammalian part of the brain that is wired to keep us safe from danger – remember the amygdala scanning for and triggering a greater number of threat emotions Fear Anger Disgust Shame and Sadness.

Now we are unlikely to have to deal with that kind of physical ‘threat’ in terms of death. However, our brain is always scanning the environment for ‘threats’ in order to keep us safe – these show up as psychosocial threats.

E.g. ‘If you get your report finished by 4 pm, you can go home an hour early (reward)’.  
‘If you don’t get your report finished by 4 pm today, you will have to work a longer day (threat)’.

*Are you more motivated by ‘threat’ or ‘reward’? What is the impact of these preferences on their health and motivation (especially if you have a threat bias)?*

The way a message lands with yourself or those you manage will directly impact on the brain chemicals that get activated i.e. dopamine or cortisol. The importance of ‘Threat vs Reward’ also links to ‘Carol Dweck’s theory of ‘Growth and Fixed mindset’. She says, when we reward effort, it creates a learning culture where employees are encouraged to learn and make mistakes.

A fixed mindset assumes that effort is a bad thing. People with this mindset have a view that ‘you must be clever at this’. As a result, individuals will have a difficult time being resilient to setbacks and their attitude may be ‘I can’t do this’. The Growth mindset is ‘I can’t do this YET, but with effort I will get there.



## SCARF

A useful model that helps us understand what the brain requires to be in harmony. It was devised by 'David Rock' to help people understand the elements required for the brain to be able to cope with changes. It describes what drives social behaviour.

We have 5 key Social Domains that are either rewarding or threatening for us:

# The SCARF Model



Status - sense of personal worth



Certainty – sense of what the future holds



Autonomy – sense of control over life



Relatedness – sense of safety with others



Fairness – sense of a fair exchange

## SCARF elements:

Status	Sense of personal worth - the relative importance to others - where we feel we are in the pecking order
Certainty	Sense of what the future holds - perception of our ability to predict future
Autonomy	Sense of control over life events / having + making choices
Relatedness	Sense of safety with others - do we trust them?
Fairness	Sense of fair exchange and perception of fair connections and exchanges with others

These elements subconsciously drive our behaviour.

Essentially, this model is useful to leaders to help them identify their personal motivators and that of those they manage. In a lot of cases, 'the lack of certainty' can cause stress in an individual and in a period of change in a business without effective communication this is where 'uncertainty' is heightened. We move away from things / situations that make us look bad, we avoid uncertainty or where there are no or few choices, and where we don't trust each other. Behaviourally we move toward situations where we look good in the eyes of others, where there is increased certainty and choice.

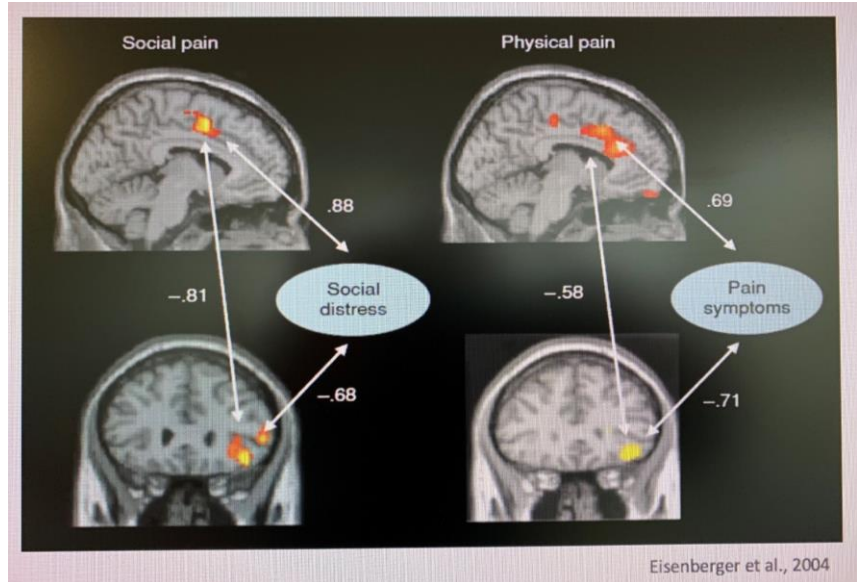
However, the relative importance of these elements varies in people and some people are highly motivated by some and are more sensitive to others. For example, certainty may be a strong motivator/driver for some and less so for others (eg P's and J's in MBTI) or relatedness might be an important driver in some and less so in others (eg E's and I's in lockdown!)

## Rewards and Threats

The perceived threats and rewards can influence our behaviour in different ways. Since we are social animals, it's essential to understand how to manage these threats and rewards when we interact with other people.

SCARF domains are motivators and create a 'reward' (dopamine hit) in the brain which creates a stimulus making people act. When any of the SCARF motivators are **absent or under threat**, this will cause a 'threat' response (cortisol hit) therefore, causing demotivation and lack of action and avoidance. In order to balance threat / reward you can use SCARF to decrease the threats and increase the sense of reward when managing yourself and others through change.

Brain scanning has shown the human brain is socially tuned and social threats and rewards drive our behaviour. A study by the University of Michigan Medical School highlighted how social pain, such as rejection from a group, causes the same regions of the brain to light up as would in the event of physical pain.



	THREAT
<b>Status</b>	Perceived loss of 'power' or 'identity' especially around job eg, restructuring or redundancy. Also status can impact in personal life eg, Empty nester, therefore loss of identity as a parent or splitting up in a relationship. Performance reviews and offering feedback can be viewed as a 'status' threat because the recipient receives the feedback as a 'personal attack'
<b>Certainty</b>	Not knowing your bosses expectations or being unclear of whether you will have a job in a new reorganisation. Outside of work, lack of certainty impacts individuals when they don't know what they are doing at the weekend or haven't planned for holidays etc. For self employed workers, the 'not' knowing when the next work assignment will come in, can create a threat response linked to 'lack of certainty'
<b>Autonomy</b>	Being micromanaged. Not being clear about own level of responsibility and having to defer to the boss. In personal relationships, lack of autonomy can be an issue for some if their partner chooses to make all the decisions in their relationship
<b>Relatedness</b>	Meeting someone unknown, working with different cultures. Not having a connection with co-workers. People who connect via social media have a feeling of relatedness, however, when someone doesn't answer a text or post, it can cause a stress response
<b>Fairness</b>	Lack of ground rules, expectations and objectives. Treating people differently can cause a threat response around 'lack of Fairness'. Children coming home from school saying 'it's not fair, I have two pieces of homework tonight, I was only supposed to get one!'

The approach-avoid response has implications across work and social life, since we only need to unconsciously perceive a threat to respond with a negative emotion. This is why the SCARF model can help managers achieve their best performance results by:

- Understanding the emotional response that they and those they manage might be having to a change situation.
- Which of the 5 SCARF elements is absent or under threat.
- Which are they particularly sensitive to?
- It helps you to think about how you manage individuals in ways that reduce threat and increase reward focusing on the particular element that is most effected for that individual.

## MANAGING THE 5 DOMAINS

### STATUS

#### Reducing Threat

Since a threat to a person's status causes such a strong negative reaction, the threat can be felt even when no real danger to the status is present. Everyday conversations can be turned into a measurement of status, as people try to ensure they are not perceived as being any less valued than others. This means things such as performance feedback can cause an avoid-response. Talking about feedback (not even the act of giving it, but talking about it) can create a feeling that perceived social status is at risk, which can cause a negative behavioural response.

Therefore, reducing the sense of loss of status is essential. For example, instead of providing feedback, allow the person to give feedback on themselves or the project.

#### Increasing Reward

On the other hand, using status and gains in it as a reward, you can receive a positive approach-response. In organizations, this kind of rewarding approach often comes in the form of promotions. It's unrealistic to use promotions as a reward when managing at a time of change as it will only affect a few. Most will find themselves in different roles due to the change so you need to consider broader measures such as looking at the specific skills that can be developed within the new role and how they might use those to further their career. The aim is to promote learning opportunities, as well as improvement and rewarding this behaviour within a team with public acknowledgment. A positive feedback, such as that, would increase the feeling of status, but wouldn't end up removing status from other people in the group.

### CERTAINTY

Certainty is another important domain, as it provides security to people. Operating in familiar and certain circumstances frees more resources in the brain for the work. If the surroundings are changing and uncertain, then the person's brain activity increases and creates a stress response. This can, in essence, hinder the ability to make effective and balanced decisions. If there is a lack of transparency or a sense of dishonesty this can lead to a threat response. In a work environment managing the perception of certainty is critical in change situations.

#### Reducing Threat

Significant and sudden changes lead to an immediate threat reaction and they should be avoided as much as possible. In a work environment, the focus should be on planning and strategizing in order to reduce uncertainty.

This is where creating a cohesive leadership team is vital and the need to communicate what you can as the change strategy is developing. Managing people's expectations of when they will hear and then a united delivery to communicate the change with clarity. Then overcommunicate and reinforce the clarity. Discussing and agreeing on objectives and goals generates certainty and can reduce the stress levels within the group. Furthermore, utilizing similar project management structures each time can be helpful in reducing the avoid-response.

### **Increasing Reward**

As mentioned above, clarity of role, setting clear objectives for projects can increase the sense of reward. Things such as outlining the meeting's agenda beforehand can create certainty and increase the sense of reward. Furthermore, timetables and reassurances are important part of management during uncertain times. It's important to establish structures, which remain constant to guarantee people feel a sense of clarity and certainty.

## **AUTONOMY**

Autonomy is the domain which creates a sense of control for the person. The less autonomy the person experiences, the more the situation is treated as a threat. On the other hand, the sense of autonomy activates the reward structures of the brain, creating a more stress-free experience. The control of the autonomy domain is important in corporate life, where authoritative leadership or micromanagement can often be the norm. Therefore, reducing the threat to autonomy is an important aspect of management. Merely by giving people a small amount of choice can make a substantial difference to their behaviour and commitment.

### **Reducing Threat**

Group collaboration often creates challenges to autonomy, as hierarchical structures are rather inevitable. Management of groups is needed to ensure objectives are met and some level of micromanagement can guarantee the collaboration is properly organized. But in order to reduce threats, people in collaboration should be **provided as much autonomy as possible**. This could be achieved through the option of making choices. For example, a person has a bigger sense of autonomy if he or she is presented with a choice to either do option A or B, rather than told to do option C.

Furthermore, you can reduce the threat from the loss of autonomy by increasing the reward of status, certainty and relatedness. So, even when autonomy is reduced, reward the person with:

- Increase perception of status, such as **positive feedback** and specific skill development toward future career
- Enhanced levels of certainty by **creating rules and objectives** that are the same for everyone.
- Improved relatedness through **improved communication and coaching**.

### **Increasing reward**

The sense of autonomy is important, even if the actual level of autonomy remains low. **The ability to make small decisions**, even when they aren't that significant, can help the person feel a sense of reward and therefore, apply the approach-response.

In a work environment, this can mean the ability for the person to decide things like the timing of a lunch hour, the way they organize their work areas, and the ability to occasionally work from home, for instance. Overall, the easiest way to increase reward is to provide the person with boundaries in which they can

operate in, instead of creating a strict set of rules. Delegation can also help here. For example, instead of telling the person they have a lunch hour from 1pm to 2pm and they must not leave the premises, you can allow them to choose their own lunch hour between 11am and 3pm.

It is key however that with autonomy comes a self - RESPONSIBILITY to ensure your role is carried out to the best of your ability and so builds empowerment.

## **RELATEDNESS**

Since the human brain is a social machine, the relatedness we feel to other people influences our decision making to a great extent. We are designed to build groups that rely on mutual trust and work together against uncertainty. Group activity and a higher sense of relatedness influences the production of oxytocin in our brain. This chemical is behind positive emotions and the feeling of trust, and therefore essential for group collaboration. In order to improve collaboration, it is crucial to focus on rewarding relatedness and creating trustworthy relationships within the group.

### **Reducing Threat**

As we seek social groups, which generate the feeling of trust and mutual understanding, co-operating with people outside of this usual peer group can create a threat reaction. Therefore, the introduction of new members to a team shouldn't be taken lightly. It's important to properly introduce new members and spend enough time creating the connection through group activities.

In addition, if collaboration happens through long-distance project, the focus on relatedness should be at the core of group operations. This is down to the lack of social time and cohesion in long-distance collaboration, since interaction is much rarer and focused on the work-related objectives. Threat in these situations can be reduced by enhancing the social interaction. Video conferences instead of non-video calls will help establish a closer connection, as it creates the visual impact between team members. We need to be able to see friendly facial expressions and gestures.

There should also be emphasis on sharing personal stories through networking on social media and outside of the work environment. The so-called "water cooler" conversations are an important part of reducing threat and enhancing a sense of relatedness.

### **Increasing Reward**

A great way to increase the sense of reward is through the creation of closer social interaction and connections. Mentoring and coaching programs are perfect for ensuring new members of the team are welcome, as well as establishing a sense of trust within a collaborative team.

Furthermore, small groups tend to be better for generating approach-responses than larger groups. Therefore, it might be beneficial to divide larger teams into smaller groups. Nonetheless, in these situations it is essential to avoid creating the "them vs. us" narrative. Social events outside of work are necessary for improved relatedness across the organization.

## **FAIRNESS**

Finally, the last domain in the SCARF model deals with fairness. When a person thinks something is unfair, the brain automatically reacts with the avoid-response and goes into a defensive stance. People don't relate to or empathize with people who they think are acting unfairly, even if the person is in pain. Add to this rules and guidelines are unclear and poor communication – a threat response can occur. On the other hand, when someone either removes unfairness or sees another person act in order to prevent unfairness, the reward structures of the brain are turned on.

## Reducing Threat

Unfairness can be created rather easily in the work environment, and its removal can be difficult. Operational structures can be perceived unfair and changing them is often a slow process. For example, financial rewards might differ across the organization (consider gender wage gap as an example) or the operational rules between departments might differ. The threat response can be switched on when a person feels not everyone in the team or the organization is putting in the same kind of effort as they are.

One of the easiest ways to reduce threat response is by introducing greater transparency about decisions. People are less likely to experience unfairness, if they understand the processes. This means teams must have rules and guidelines, which are clearly outlined for everyone. Communication must be open and candid. Furthermore, in organizations it is important to not only talk about corporate values, but also showcase them in action. This includes doing voluntary work, highlighting transparency in financial rewards such as bonuses and having a procedure for unacceptable behaviour.

## Increasing Reward

It's also possible to increase the reward response by improving the sense of fairness. Fairness and autonomy can often go hand in hand. Therefore, self-management is a good way of enhancing fairness, as the rules come from within and not from the outside.

In a collaborative situation, it can be beneficial for the team to establish the rules together. This removes the feeling of having been told what to do and feeling of other people benefitting more from the rules, for example. If you want to improve fairness, you should consider small adjustments to the systems, which are deemed unfair. For instance, slight salary adjustments can help instil a sense of fairness within a group. The key is to ensure there's a perception of fairness, even if the situation isn't 100% fair.

## In summary you can:

Use the SCARF model to help in understanding human behaviour better - it's a good tool for influencing other people. By understanding how we can reduce the perceived threats and instead focus on rewards, it's possible to manage change and improve collaboration in the workplace.

- Increase the perception of status with positive feedback and specific skill development and learning in the new role building toward their future career.
- Enhance levels of certainty by having a clarity of role's and expectations and boundaries as well as a clear understanding of where responsibility lies.
- Enhance autonomy by rewarding effort enabling decision making and encouraging people you manage to take reasonable risks. Anything that develops the other SCARF elements will also enhance autonomy leading to greater self – management.
- Improved relatedness through regular, clear communication and bringing a coaching approach to managing teams.
- Fairness is boosted by articulating the transparency of the business case for change so there is an understanding of the need for it and the team's role in it. This is enhanced by showcasing your values in action and overtly focusing on what that means in practice.