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David Rock's SCARF Model

Using Neuroscience to Work Effectively With Others

Jan is managing a new team, and she notices that one of her team members, Carl, is using a new piece of software incorrectly. She offers him some advice and returns to her work. But later, she notices that he's still misusing it. So, she decides to sit with him until he gets it right.

Over the next few days, Jan notices that Carl has become standoffish with her. He's defensive when she offers him feedback, and he avoids talking to her. Jan is bewildered – all she wants to do is to help Carl, and she can't figure out why he's reacting so badly to her support.

If she'd used the SCARF Model, Jan would have realized that Carl wasn't being difficult – he just felt threatened. The way she handled the situation made Carl feel silly and stupid, instead of empowered.

In this article, we explore the SCARF Model further, and explain how you can use it to work with people more effectively.

What Is the SCARF Model?

The SCARF Model was developed in 2008 by David Rock, in his paper "**SCARF: A Brain-Based Model for Collaborating With and Influencing Others**." SCARF stands for the five key "domains" that influence our behavior in social situations. These are:

1. **Status** – our relative importance to others.
2. **Certainty** – our ability to predict the future.
3. **Autonomy** – our sense of control over events.
4. **Relatedness** – how safe we feel with others.
5. **Fairness** – how fair we perceive the exchanges between people to be.

The model is based on neuroscience research that implies that these five social domains activate the same **threat** and **reward** responses in our brain that we rely on for physical survival.

This "primitive" reaction helps to explain the sometimes strong emotional reactions that we can have to social situations – and why it's often hard to control them. It's instinct, and

unfortunately we can't just "turn it off."

For example, when we are left out of an activity, we might perceive it as a threat to our status and relatedness. Research has shown that this response can stimulate the same region of the brain as physical pain. In other words, our brain is sending out the signal that we're in danger.

Furthermore, when we feel threatened – either physically or socially – the release of cortisol (the "stress hormone") affects our creativity and productivity. We literally can't think straight, and this increases the feeling of being threatened.

On the flip side, when we feel rewarded (for instance, when we receive praise for our work) our brains release dopamine – the "happy hormone." And, of course, we want more! So we seek out ways to be rewarded again.

Note:

This concept is closely related to Barbara Frederickson's **Broaden and Build Theory** , which states that, generally, the safer and happier we feel, the better we perform.

How Does the SCARF Model Apply in the Workplace?

Feeling threatened blocks our creativity, reduces our ability to solve problems, and makes it harder for us to communicate and collaborate with others. But, when we feel rewarded, our self-confidence soars, we feel empowered, and we want to do a good job.

The SCARF Model can help you to minimize perceived threats, and to maximize the positive feelings generated through reward when working alongside others. Doing this can help us to collaborate better, to coach people, and to provide more effective training and feedback.

How to Use the SCARF Model

Use the following practical tips to maximize your colleagues' sense of reward and to eliminate perceived threats, for each domain of the SCARF Model:

Status

Eliminate Threats: mishandling **feedback** can threaten someone's sense of status, and may even cause him or her to become angry and defensive. A gentler approach could help here. For instance, you could offer the person the chance to evaluate his own performance first, or try to reframe your feedback in a more positive way.

Or, perhaps you feel that your status as a manager is threatened by people on your own team, particularly if they are highly skilled. This may cause you to "lash out." For instance, you might try to downplay their ideas or focus on their mistakes, even minor ones.

You can avoid this kind of **self-sabotaging behavior** by facing your fears and challenging them. Learn to appreciate the positive aspects of your talented team – this will help you to get the best from them, and you'll earn a reputation as a great manager.

Maximize Reward: give your team members **regular praise** when they perform well, and provide them with opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge. For example, you could give them more responsibility, or involve them in new projects. However, avoid **over-promoting them** , particularly if they aren't quite ready, or you may set them up for a fall.

Certainty

Minimize Threats: when we're uncertain of something, the orbital frontal cortex of our brains starts to work overtime as it attempts to make sense of the unknown. This can cause us to feel threatened and to lose focus.

Reduce the likelihood of this happening by breaking down complex processes into smaller, more understandable chunks. And, to help people to cope better with **uncertainty** , encourage them to develop their **flexibility** and **resilience** .

Maximize Reward: the human brain prefers predictability. When we know what to expect, we feel safe. This safety is a reward in itself, and you can maximize it by being clear on what you expect from your team member. This will give her direction, and she'll feel safe in the knowledge that she's on the right track, no matter how uncertain the wider environment is.

Autonomy

Minimize Threats: **micromanagement** is the biggest threat to autonomy. Try to avoid getting too involved with people's day-to-day work. Instead, show that you trust their judgment by including them in decision-making processes, and be sure to **delegate tasks** instead of holding onto them.

Maximize Reward: encourage your people to become **more autonomous** by allowing them to take on more responsibility, and to use their initiative. Give them the freedom to try out new ideas.

Relatedness

Minimize Threats: a lack of relatedness can leave us feeling isolated and **lonely** . This can reduce creativity, commitment and collaboration. Combat this by introducing buddy

systems or mentoring arrangements. And take particular care to check in regularly with vulnerable team members, such as **virtual workers** .

Maximize Reward: when we connect with others, our brains release the hormone oxytocin (also known as the "love hormone"). The more oxytocin that's released, the more connected we feel. So, work to build up strong team bonds by scheduling in regular **one-on-ones** , or by organizing a team lunch or team-building event.

Fairness

Minimize Threats: if someone believes something to be unfair, it will activate her insular cortex – the region of the brain that is linked to disgust. This results in a powerful threat response. Minimize the impact of this by being open and honest with the person about what's going on, and why (insofar as it is appropriate or ethical to do so).

Most importantly, make sure that you treat everyone fairly. Encourage **mutual acceptance** , and never show favor or exclude people on purpose.

Maximize Rewards: unfairness will more likely occur where there is a lack of rules, expectations or objectives. Setting up a **Team Charter** , which clarifies individual goals and roles, team hierarchy, and day-to-day operations, can remedy this. But remember to get your people's input and approval before you introduce it!

Note:

These tips are generalizations only. Remember, not everyone on your team is the same, and each person can react differently to a particular situation. For example, an introvert will likely shy away from public praise, while an extrovert may feel energized by it.

To use the SCARF Model most effectively, you need to **understand the people around you** . Before you act, consider the individual needs of the other person. Put yourself in his position: what would he see as a threat? What reward would he most desire?

If someone reacts strongly to something that you view as minor, don't ignore it. Find out what she is feeling threatened by, or fearful of, and why. And ask her how she would like you to approach similar situations in the future.

Mind Tools Club and Corporate users can hear our 30-minute Expert Interview with David Rock from 2010, **here** .

Key Points

The SCARF Model was first developed by David Rock in 2008. It suggests that there are five social domains that activate the same threat and reward responses in our brain that we

rely on for physical survival. These are:

1. Status.
2. Certainty.
3. Autonomy.
4. Relatedness.
5. Fairness.

You can use the model to work more effectively alongside others by minimizing perceived threats and maximizing the positive feelings generated by reward. It's particularly useful if you need to collaborate with or coach others, or when you need to provide training and feedback.

REFERENCES

Rock, D. (2008). 'SCARF: A Brain-Based Model for Collaborating With and Influencing Others,' *Neuroleadership Journal*, 1, 1-9. Available [here](#).



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