

THE IMPORTANCE OF FEELING SAFE



What is SCARF?

As a manager every action you take and every decision you make either supports or undermines an individual's perceived levels of threat or security. Every word or glance can carry social meaning. Sentences and gestures are noticed and interpreted, potentially magnified and combed for meaning you may never have intended. The SCARF model is a useful tool to help us understand how our choice of actions and words can influence reactions in other people

The model suggests there are five domains of human social experience:

Status is about relative importance to others.

Certainty concerns being able to predict the future

Autonomy provides a sense of control over events

Relatedness is a sense of safety with others - of friend rather than foe

Fairness is a perception of fair exchanges between people

The model is built on three central ideas:

1. The brain treats many social threats and rewards with the same intensity as physical threats and rewards
2. The capacity to make decisions, solve problems and collaborate with others is generally reduced by a threat response and increased by a reward response.
3. The threat response is more intense and more common and often needs to be carefully minimised in social interactions

How does this work?

These five domains have been shown to activate the same reward circuitry that physical rewards activate, like money, and the same threat circuitry that physical threats, like pain, activate. For example, a perceived threat to one's status activates similar brain networks to a threat to one's life. In the same way, a perceived increase in fairness activates the same reward circuitry as receiving a monetary reward.

During all interactions such as conversations or meetings, each SCARF domain is swayed towards threat or reward. Threat always trumps reward though, because threat responses are stronger, more immediate and hard to displace. Whilst we perceive a threat, we're generally not able to be creative, think clearly, be engaged or work well with other people.

	Away Threat <i>Try to Avoid</i>	Towards Reward <i>Try to Encourage</i>
S	Perception that an individual's competence is in question	Reassurance of value to the team
C	Perception that an individual's Job security is in question	A perception of continued investment in potential
A	Perception that an individual is being micromanaged	A perception the employee can create their own plan to improve
R	Perception that no help is available	A perception that the employee is not alone in effort
F	Perception that only faults are being addressed	A perception that all contributions are acknowledged.

How can this help during this period of uncertainty?

Now is a time for leaders to remind themselves of what their people need them to do, and to pause and think about what type of leader they need to 'be' for others. The Covid 19 pandemic is unprecedented and affecting people in their personal, and professional lives. Although we're unlikely to be able to remove all perceived threats, just being aware of this model can mean an alternative choice of behaviour.

Start by exercising self-awareness to notice your own threat responses and triggers in order to manage them. Everyone has individual foibles, motivations and levels of stress and an effective manager will take these things into consideration when communicating with others or making decisions, tailoring it to the person's state of mind. This will help team members are more likely to be engaged, think rationally, be creative, and generally work to their best.