

A Lesson in Neuroscience – The SCARF Model

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Neuroscience is confirming so much about human behavior and providing us with valuable insights we can apply to the real world. The beauty is that we do not have to be neuroscientists to understand or better still to apply the learnings.

One of the key models associated with change – personal as well as organisational is known as the SCARF model. The SCARF model (Rock, 2008) is a summary of important discoveries from neuroscience about the way people interact socially.

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. This can be measured by researchers with fMRI or EEG machines
2. The capacity to make decisions, solve problems and collaborate with others is generally reduced by a threat response and increased under a reward response
3. The threat response is more intense and more common and often needs to be carefully minimized in social interactions.

Research identified five key qualities which enables employees and executives to minimize the threat response, and activate the reward response. These are:

- **Status** - Our social status, if a change lowers social status it triggers a threat response. A perceived threat to one's status activates similar brain networks to a threat to one's life.
- **Certainty** – The human brain likes familiar situations, as they allow it to conserve energy (it takes lots of energy to fuse a new neural pathway). This allows the brain to run on autopilot, but when a situation changes it requires the brain to focus on the immediate task and change.
- **Autonomy** – The degree to which an individual can adapt or control either their environment, or their responses to the environment. When people can make their own choices, the feeling of certainty increases and reduces stress.
- **Relatedness** – Healthy relationships are caused by trust and empathy. The human brain groups others as friend or foe. When a person is considered different (foe) the brain generates feelings of being uncomfortable, which triggers a threat response and makes people unlikely to accept the change.
- **Fairness** – The perception of unfairness generates hostility, and undermines trust. The important key is that it is a perception of fairness. Unfairness in an environment prevents collaboration and trust, which

are integral to successful working environments and change management. A perceived increase in fairness activates the same reward circuitry as receiving a monetary reward.

Knowing about the elements of SCARF helps one understand issues such as why you can't think clearly when someone has attacked your status, instead of just trying to push the feeling aside. The emotional state will have a direct impact on your response.

The SCARF model can help you monitor your own behaviour at work, helping you to understand *why* you may sometimes feel under attack. It can also help improve your working relationship with others by understanding the optimal conditions under which people do their best work.

So let's put this into a real life example.

Many new leaders may negatively impact the domains of SCARF by accident. They may know how things should be done, and subsequently provide too much direction and not enough positive feedback, thereby affecting people's status.

They often don't provide clear expectations, impacting certainty.

They micro manage, impacting autonomy.

They want to maintain a professional distance, impacting relatedness.

And, they may impact fairness by not being transparent enough.

Now when the opposite happens and you meet someone who makes you feel better about yourself, provides clear expectations, lets you make decisions, trusts you and is fair, you will probably work harder for them as you feel intrinsically rewarded by the relationship itself. Spending time around a leader like this activates an approach response and opens up people's thinking, allowing others to see information they wouldn't see in a threat or avoid state.

SCARF has many implications for how organizations are structured, including reward systems, communications systems, decision processes, information flow and remuneration structures.

As a leader of a team, rewarding staff via money or promotion may be outside your boundaries of control. Knowledge of the SCARF model points to more creative ways of motivating that may not just be more cost effective, but also stronger and more sustainable.

References:

Rock, David: SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others (NeuroLeadership Journal, Issue 1, 2008)

<http://www.scarf360.com>

<http://changemanagement.posterous.com/>

