

SCARF

The SCARF model is the work of David Rock, an Australian neuropsychologist who did extensive work measuring the brain's response to perceived threatening stimuli. SCARF stands for Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness, the key elements impacting perceived threats. His work identified signals from the environment that the brain regards and threats (that we move to **avoid**) and those that are seen as reward responses (which we move towards, or **approach**).

The approach-avoid response is a survival mechanism designed to help people stay alive by quickly and easily remembering what is good and bad in the environment. The amygdala, a small almond-shaped object that is part of the limbic system of the brain, plays a central role in remembering whether something should be approached or avoided. The amygdala (and its associated networks) is believed to activate proportionally to the strength of an emotional response.

The limbic system can process stimuli before they reach conscious awareness. The approach-avoid response drives attention at a fundamental level – non-consciously, automatically and quickly. It is a reflexive activity. Due to the overly vigilant amygdala, which is more tuned to threats than rewards, the threat response is often just below the surface and easily triggered. This discovery that our brain is inherently attuned to threatening stimuli helps explain many disquieting parts of life, from why the media focuses on bad news to why people are self-critical.

On the other hand, an approach response is synonymous with the idea of engagement. Engagement is a state of being willing to do difficult things, to take risks, to think deeply about issues and develop new solutions. An approach state is also closely linked to positive emotions; interest, happiness, joy and desire are approach emotions. This state is one of increased dopamine levels, important for interest and learning.

The most important factors to be aware of, as identified in the research, form the acronym SCARF:

- Status
- Certainty
- Autonomy
- Relatedness
- Fairness

An explanation of each is provided below, although this full detail will not be shared with participants initially (see exercise below).

1.1.1.1 Status

What it means	Status = relative importance, 'pecking order' & seniority / one's sense of status goes up when one feels 'better than' another person; the perception of reduction of status can generate a strong
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	threat response.
Threats & our responses	It is surprisingly easy to accidentally threaten someone's sense of status (e.g. by giving instructions or advice, by suggesting someone is slightly ineffective at a task).
Typical triggers	The question 'can I offer you some feedback' generates a similar response to hearing fast footsteps behind you at night. Performance reviews often generate status threats, explaining why they are often ineffective at stimulating behavioural change.
How to reduce threat /avoid	Allowing people to give themselves feedback on their own performance. A social rejection is drop in status too, as it threatens one's status in a community of importance; alternatively one can play against oneself, change the community referred to, or change the criteria of reference
How to increase reward / approach	For example, people feel a status increase when they feel they are learning and improving and when attention is paid to this improvement (positive feedback, public acknowledgement)

1.1.1.2 Certainty

What it means	<u>Certainty</u> = the brain is a pattern-recognition machine that likes to know the pattern occurring moment to moment, it craves certainty, so that prediction is possible. Without prediction, the brain must use dramatically more resources, involving the more energy-intensive prefrontal cortex, to process moment-to-moment experience
Threats & our responses	Even a small amount of uncertainty generates an 'error' response in the orbital frontal cortex (OFC). This takes attention away from one's goals, forcing attention to the error. Any kind of significant change generates such uncertainty.
Typical triggers	If someone is perceived as not telling the whole truth, or acting incongruously, the resulting uncertainty can fire up errors in the OFC. Larger uncertainties, like not knowing your boss' expectations, or whether your job is secure, can be highly debilitating.
How to reduce threat /avoid	Uncertainty can be decreased in many simple ways. This is a big part of the job of managers, consultants and leaders. As people build business plans, strategies, or map out an organisation's structure, they feel increasing levels of clarity about how an organisation might better function in the future. Another key tool involves establishing clear expectations of what might happen in

	any situation, as well as expectations of desirable outcomes.
How to increase reward approach /	The act of creating a sense of certainty is rewarding. Going back to a well known place feels good because the mental maps of the environment can be easily recalled

1.1.1.3 Autonomy

What it means	<u>Autonomy</u> = the perception of exerting control over one's environment; a sensation of having choices. Sound policy or internal governance establishes the boundaries within which individuals can exercise their creativity and autonomy.
Threats & our responses	When one senses a lack of control, the experience is of a lack of agency, or an inability to influence outcomes. Outsiders perceive respective behaviour as passiveness or lack of taking responsibility. The degree of control that organisms can exert over a stress factor determines whether or not the stressor alters the organism's functioning.
Typical triggers	A reduction in autonomy, for example when being micromanaged, can generate a strong threat response.
How to reduce threat /avoid	Working in a team necessitates a reduction in autonomy. In healthy cultures, this potential threat tends to be counteracted with an increase in status, certainty and relatedness. With an autonomy threat just below the surface, it can be helpful to pay attention to this driver. The statement 'Here's two options that could work, which would you prefer?' will tend to elicit a better response than 'Here's what you have to do now'.
How to increase reward approach /	Even a subtle perception of autonomy can help, for example by having self-directed learning portals, where employees get to design their learning curriculum, and self-driven human resource systems. Sound policy should enable individual point-of-need decision-making without consultation with, or intervention by, leaders. In this regard, sound policy hard-wires autonomy into the processes of an organisation.

1.1.1.4 Relatedness

What it means	<u>Relatedness</u> = involves deciding whether others are 'in' or 'out' of a social group, whether someone is friend, or foe. People naturally like to form 'tribes' where they experience a sense of belonging. The concept of being inside or outside the group is probably a
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	<p>by-product of living in small communities for millions of years, where strangers were likely to be trouble and should be avoided.</p> <p>Positive social connections are a primary need.</p> <p>The automatic response to new social connections involves a threat.</p>
Threats & our responses	<p>The need for safe human contact is a primary driver, like the need for food. In the absence of safe social interactions the body generates a threat response, also known as feeling lonely.</p> <p>The decision that someone is friend or foe happens very quickly and impacts brain functioning. Information from people perceived as 'like us' is processed using similar circuits for thinking one's own thoughts. When someone is perceived as a foe, different circuits are used.</p> <p>When treating someone as alien or threatening, the capacity to empathise drops significantly.</p>
Typical triggers	<p>The concept of relatedness is closely linked to trust. One trusts those who appear to be in your group, who one has connected with, generating approach emotions. The greater that people trust one another, the stronger the collaboration and the more information that is shared.</p> <p>If there is mistrust or trauma among different groups, a conscious healing process is required to start building trust.</p>
How to reduce threat /avoid	<p>Collaboration between people from different cultures, who are unlikely to meet in person, can be especially hard work. The automatic foe response does not get diminished by social time together. This response can be mitigated by dedicating social time in other forms. For example, using video to have an informal meeting, or ensuring that people forming teams share personal aspects of themselves via stories, photos or even social-networking sites. In any workplace it appears to pay off well to encourage social connections.</p>
How to increase reward approach /	<p>To increase the reward response from relatedness, the key is to find ways to increase safe connections between people. Some examples include setting up clearly defined buddy systems, mentoring or coaching programs, or small action learning groups. Small groups appear to be safer than large groups. Perhaps even having one trusting relationship can have a significant impact on relatedness.</p> <p>Getting from foe to friend can be helped by a handshake, swapping names and discussing something in common, be it just the weather, may increase feeling of closeness.</p>

1.1.1.5 Fairness

What it means	<u>Fairness</u> = Unfair exchanges generate a strong threat response. A sense of unfairness can result from a lack of clear ground rules, expectations or objectives
Threats & our responses	A threat response from a sense of unfairness can be triggered easily. This sometimes includes activation of the insular, a part of the brain involved in intense emotions such as disgust. People who perceive others as unfair don't feel empathy for their pain, and in some instances, will feel rewarded when unfair others are punished.
Typical triggers	Unfair situations may drive people to die in order to right perceived injustices, such as in political struggles.
How to reduce threat /avoid	The threat from perceived unfairness can be decreased by increasing transparency, and increasing the level of communication and involvement about business issues. In an educational context, a classroom that creates the rules of what is accepted behaviour is likely to experience less conflict.
How to increase reward / approach	Establishing clear expectations in all situations – from a one hour meeting to a five-year contract – can also help ensure fair exchanges to occur.. Allowing teams to identify their own rules can also help. Examples of the success of self-directed teams in manufacturing abound. Much of what these self-driven teams do is ensure fairness in grass-roots decisions, such as how workloads are shared and who can do which tasks.

1.1.2 Summary of pointers from the SCARF-model

<p>Acknowledge the other person's STATUS and activate the reward (approach) circuitry by encouraging them into a learning and improvement space:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acknowledge and positively mention things that work well = positive feedback ● Wherever possible publicly acknowledge efforts and good functioning ● Offer your support in service of their efforts
<p>Provide CERTAINTY so there is less anxiety / energy expended in trying to predict outcomes, i.e. make the implicit explicit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide a flow chart of organisational or project systems with different stakeholders' responsibilities and actions marked ● State your objectives in tasks to be carried out and link them to mutually accepted organisational / institutional / strategic objectives ● Provide clarity wherever possible

- Outline steps
- Identify what is expected by whom at each stage
- Give dates and timelines

Explicitly increase **AUTONOMY** / control over own areas of responsibility of others

- Build in choice wherever possible, e.g in discussing the tasks/responsibilities flow chart
- Provide clear guidelines as to the power of each person over decision-making in designated areas
- Encourage self-direction and self-reflection / own learning, and adjustments
- Make sure the guiding principles / policy behind decision-making powers is understood

Offer a sense of **RELATEDNESS** / belonging

- Locate your discussion in terms of a wider shared / organisational vision and mission
- Make a personal connection by sharing something of yourself (e.g. own challenges, passion) in working on functional topics
- Create safety in your conversation, so explicitly state your intention is not to criticise / cause problems but to discuss, connect, listen, and sort out things together (say this slowly and convincingly, it may need time to sink in). Talk about creating peer collegiality and support with them, going forward.
- Where emotional rifts abound / old wounds and scars are hurting, offer healing support.

Explicitly advocate **FAIRNESS**:

- Offer transparency in communication and discussion and sorting things out; express your intentions transparently and authentically
- Say you want to be fair on all and avoid blame settling on others
- Refer to clear, transparent financial / administrative / supervision systems as a way to avoid corruption, which is ultimately unfair and takes advantage over others

AVOID the following, by taking care of verbal messages (words) and non-verbal messages (body language, voice, tone):

- Talking down
- Criticising
- Judgement
- Unclear messages (check you have been understood and check back that you have heard them too)
- Talking too much, listening too little

- Ignoring / glossing over real problems (name them, be empathetic, you don't need to try to solve them all yourself)