

Use the SCARF Model to Understand Our Individual Triggers

Using SCARF to Collaborate with and Influence Others^[1]

We've known for a long time that our assumptions, emotions, world views, and paradigms influence our behavior. The latest research in neuroscience tells us that our neurobiology is what drives our behavior and defines how we, as leaders, make meaning, solve problems, and carry out tasks with others. Core neurobiological human processes play out every day in our actions, thoughts, feelings, and motivations.^[2] Understanding our own neurobiology—how we are wired and the deeply social nature of the brain—can help us own the dynamics within us and modernize how we respond to the contemporary complexities of our field.^[3]

Any of us who have had some success leading have had an analytic mindset about ourselves and situations. We have tried to understand what is going on inside of us—how we are changing over time and how we interact with others. To help leaders continue to gain clarity about themselves—Rock developed SCARF to illuminate two key biological foundations that underpin how humans relate to each other and themselves. In Rock's own words, these key foundations are as follows:

How these key foundations play out in our brain is in the approach-avoid response. A basic function of our brain is to distinguish when to approach or avoid something. This response has developed as an evolutionary response and has largely helped us—humans—stay alive. We are intrinsically motivated to move away from perceived threats and toward perceived rewards. Any positive emotion or reward generally creates action, whereas a negative emotion or punishment causes a threat stimulus—or activated networks—in our brain, which leads to avoidance.

The premise of the SCARF model is that the brain—as constructed over time—makes us behave in certain ways, which are to minimize threats and maximize rewards. Additionally, the drivers in the brain that take the threat and reward approach do so as if they were a primary need, such as food and water. Neuroscience research findings are helping us see in very tangible ways (for example, by using functional MRIs) that our social needs are on par with our need for food and water. This new science has big implications for the workplace—a highly social situation. In our interactions, our brain is busy classifying everything with a “reward” or “threat” feeling in our body, which then registers in our behavior. Our brains want to know, *is something good for us or bad for us?*

The SCARF model summarizes these two themes within a framework that captures the common factors that can activate a reward or threat response in social situations. You can apply and test this model in any situation in which

people collaborate as part of a group. The SCARF model involves five domains of human social experience: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness.

Table 1. Reward and Threat Responses in the SCARF Model

<p><u>Status</u>: sense of our personal worth—where we are in relation to other people</p>	<p>Positive feedback, public acknowledgement, allow staff to provide feedback to themselves in performance reviews</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More cognitive resources available to us • More insights • More ideas for action • Fewer perceptual errors 	<p>Critique, unsolicited advice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Released stressor hormones • Reduced resources for our brain—less oxygen and glucose available for brain function
<p><u>Certainty</u>: sense of what the future holds for us</p>	<p>Clear expectations, setting clear goals, realistic project schedules</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A wider field of view—more open 	<p>Lack of transparency, dishonesty, unpredictability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased cognition • Reduced working memory, which impacts linear, conscious processing
<p><u>Autonomy</u>: sense of control over our lives</p>	<p>Providing choices, delegation, self-responsibility, empowerment</p>		<p>Micromanagement, constant authoritative leadership</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inhibits the brain from perceiving the subtler signals required for solving nonlinear problems involved in the insight or “aha!” experience
<p><u>Relatedness</u>: sense of safety with others</p>	<p>Friendly gestures, foster socializing, mentoring programs</p>		<p>Fostering internal competition, prohibiting socializing in the workplace</p>	
<p><u>Fairness</u>: sense of what is impartial and just</p>	<p>Transparent decisions, open communication, candidness, clear rules</p>		<p>Unequal treatment, unclear rules and guidelines, lack of communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We generalize more easily, which increases the likelihood of erring on the safe side and shrinking from opportunities,

as we perceive them to be more dangerous

- Increased defensive reactions in interactions
- Small stressors are more likely to be perceived as large stressors
- Reduces our range and field of view
- Err on the side of pessimism

The idea is to use this model to design interactions to minimize threats and maximize rewards in each of these five domains. In a second step, the objective is to activate reward response to motivate people more effectively using internal rewards. When the brain and body register a social threat in these dimensions, they light up the networks of the brain that register the threat of physical pain, a finding that has substantial implications for leadership practices. The SCARF model improves people's capacity to understand and ultimately modify their own and other people's behavior in social situations like the workplace, allowing them to be more adaptive. This model is especially relevant for CCDF leaders and managers or anyone looking to influence others. The more we understand about the workings of our brain and body responses, the more we understand what is happening to us moment-to-moment, whether that is why we can't think straight after a long day or what's going on with a relationship in our life. We've got a new language for what's happening. This adds to feelings of certainty and control. Thus, we can make different choices that we might not otherwise explore. To better understand which of the five SCARF domains are key drivers for you, there is a free online self assessment that will give you insight into the importance each domain currently has in your life. Please see the Resources section of this guide for the self assessment.

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