

The SCARF Model

SCARF centres around three core themes or ideas that unconsciously determine people's interactions with others. These three themes are very relevant in understanding how to effectively lead others.

1. The brain perceives "social threats" with the same intensity as actual physical threats.
2. When people feel under threat, their ability to solve problems, make decisions, or interact with others is diminished. When they are in a "reward environment," their abilities are enhanced.
3. The threat response, or the desire to avoid pain, is more common and always outweighs the desire to seek pleasure. Thus, the more pain people can avoid in social situations, the more effective they will be.

Leaders like you are inherently ahead in the domain of status, and as such, you are more likely to be perceived as a threat by others. However, as a socially adept and "SCARF-aware" leader, you can use your status to put others at ease and help them feel motivated rather than threatened by your presence.

Once you understand SCARF, you can recognise how it works within your own team. SCARF helps explain why some team members decide to approach others or avoid them, and why they adopt a defensive stance or a more aggressive mode. Once you understand the unconscious thinking behind their actions, you can more mindfully and effectively work with others—and teach other leaders how to do the same.

The five domains of human social experience in the SCARF model:

As well as the three central themes, the SCARF model also encompasses five domains or dimensions of human social experience. These are:

- Status
- Certainty
- Autonomy
- Relatedness
- Fairness

Once you become familiar with the model, you'll see that it's very easy to apply to your work (and life) pretty much straight away.

Status

In a nutshell, the status domain means that we are constantly evaluating our own importance relative to others.

As mentioned earlier, this puts leaders and managers at both an advantage and a disadvantage. While your own status might make you feel safe, it may make others whom you depend on daily feel unsafe.

Keep in mind, though, that it isn't just position or hierarchy that may give someone status; it can also be information or knowledge. Someone who is "in the know" may be perceived as having more status than someone who is not.

The delicate balancing act for a leader is to always be on the lookout for opportunities to elevate the status, either real or perceived, of team members, without making other team members feel like they are left behind.

One key tip is to make use of inclusive language where possible. When referring to your team, refer to them as "our team" rather than "my team." Use terms like "we" and "us" rather than "they." While these may seem like minor semantics, they do have a huge impact on how people perceive themselves relative to you.

Be mindful also of opportunities to be more open with information about what's going on within the business. The old saying, "What they don't know won't hurt them," isn't actually true. From a status point of view, the pain of being left out can be real, just as the pleasure of being included is real.

You'll know situations yourself where you felt some relief when you became more informed about something at work. As a leader, you have the opportunity to provide some of that relief to your team members.

Certainty

As you'd expect, the social dimension of certainty is about being able to predict the future, or at least to have a sense of assurance about what the future holds. More often than not, it's a lack of certainty that brings us pain.

This is why change can cause so much angst, especially in a work environment. While many of us like the idea of change, fundamentally it carries with it some risk, some lack of certainty.

When we talked about status, we mentioned the value of being open. In the domain of certainty, openness is even more critical. You can't over-communicate in the workplace, especially when it comes to change. When people say "We're getting too much communication," then you're probably hitting the mark and delivering the right amount.

Keep in mind it's as much the style as the frequency of communication that matters. Circulating emails is certainly one way to keep the flow of communication open, but wherever possible, try to find more personal avenues.

Face-to-face interactions, texting, brown-paper-bag lunches, walk-and-talk videos ... these are all creative avenues you can use that stand out from the usual emails or memos. They also show that you are serious about the communication and willing to put some effort into it. This in turn elevates the status of the recipient, which we already know is a good thing.

Of course there may be times when you don't have anything concrete to communicate that would add certainty to a situation. Even then, you can still provide some certainty by letting your team know that you'll let them know when there's more to share. For example, "I don't have anything at the moment but as soon as I do, I will let you know."

Autonomy

While the domain of certainty was about predicting the future, autonomy is about having a sense of control. It could be control over events, over the work environment, or even over the choices we have.

In simple terms, the more choices you can give people, the higher their feeling of autonomy is likely to be. More autonomy is pleasurable; less autonomy is painful.

Performance reviews are a typical workplace example where a worker might feel a lack of autonomy. Believe it or not, feedback can be perceived as a threat, and it triggers pain centres in the brain.

A way of increasing autonomy in this situation would be to let the person give you feedback on his or her own performance. For example, you could say, "If I were to give you feedback, what do you think that would be in relation to this particular area?"

Keep in mind that it takes trust to pull this off correctly. You don't want your team member to feel like it's a trap or a test. Present it as a genuine opportunity for the team member to make a valuable contribution to the process.

You can also give autonomy by empowering team members to solve their own problems. Often, team members might come to you with a question that has a hidden agenda. They may want you to make a decision about something because it takes them off the hook if it turns out to be wrong.

You can offer empowerment by acting as a sounding board while they explore the options, then inviting them to make the decision themselves based on their reflection. This strategy has the added advantage of liberating you for more high-value tasks, and it contributes greatly to the development of a high-performing team.

Relatedness

Relatedness essentially equates to a sense of belonging and safety. Are you friend or foe? Do I feel a part of this group or not? Ultimately, do I feel safe or do I feel threatened?

The critical function of the leader is to create a culture of trust, friendliness, and confidence.

Do the people on your team feel safe to share their thoughts, feelings, expectations, and views about what's working and what isn't? Do you encourage them to do so without fear of retribution or backlash?

Do you cultivate friendliness as you move about the office? Do you engage with team members and enquire about their well-being and life outside the office? Does your body language reflect that they can feel safe and open with you? Do you keep your eyes and ears open for signs of unfriendly conduct in the office and nip it in the bud?

Do you inspire confidence in your team members? Do you acknowledge them publicly for work well done? Do you encourage people to speak up when you can see they may be reluctant to do so?

People inherently mirror others, especially those with leadership status, so if you want to cultivate a culture of belonging and relatedness, let it start with you.

Be on the lookout also for signs of the "silo effect" in your organisation. Teams often develop a sense of competition with other teams in the business, even though they are working towards the same goals. Foster a culture where your team strives to contribute to the success of other teams.

Fairness

While it might well be true that "Life isn't fair," that doesn't mean that fairness isn't a value worth pursuing. In the workplace, this boils down to the concept of having a fair exchange between people, having the same set of rules and expectations for everyone.

Having an agreed set of standards among the team is a great place to start. If you don't have one already, make that an agenda item for your next team meeting.

Of course, you may also need to apply a bit of flexibility to the rules and standards from

time to time. For example, you may need to cut someone some slack due to a unique personal or professional context. Where appropriate, explain this difference in expectations to other team members, but don't let it become normal conduct.

Fairness also applies to rewards and recognition. Do team members get acknowledgement commensurate with their actions, or do you favour some team members over others? Make sure to practice fairness in this area as well.