

Taking the resistance out of change: SCARF

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A neuroscience model to help us manage human behaviour, SCARF is increasingly being utilised in change management to better manage the underlying thoughts, mental mechanisms and subsequent behaviours of employees. Of particular note, is the effectiveness of this model in reducing threat – a major driver of change resistance.

So what is SCARF, and how do we use it to reduce or eliminate change resistance?

While there are a number of elements that perpetuate resistance to change, from an individual or personal level the SCARF model highlights five universal principals of human social experience that when effectively addressed can minimise threats and increase rewards to drive desired behaviours.

These domains of human experience are: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness.

Status

Status is one of the most significant determinants of human longevity and health. Research on primate communities has shown that status equals survival: higher status monkeys have lower baseline cortisol levels, live longer and are healthier. David Rock in a journal of Neuroleadership article points out that status is about relative importance, 'pecking order' and seniority. Humans hold a representation of status in relation to others when in conversations, and this affects mental processes in many ways. The perception of a potential or real reduction in status can generate a strong threat response – a reduction in status can even activate the same regions of the brain as physical pain. For example, being left out of an activity (where one feels they are invested) may threaten status. When threatened in this way, people may become belligerent or defend a position that doesn't make sense, simply to avoid the perceived pain of a drop in status.

Reducing the threat to status

To change others' behaviour, more attention must be paid to reducing status threats when communicating, particularly when giving feedback. This is one reason why its best-practice to allow employees to evaluate their own performance. Another best-practice working model in this sense, is a culture of collaboration and inclusion when managing projects – for example effective stakeholder engagement. Status is about one's relative position in a community of importance such as a professional group or social club based on what is valued – therefore a culture of inclusion is central.

Certainty

The brain is a pattern-recognition machine that is constantly trying to predict the near future. Basically, rather than starting from scratch to recognise what behaviour or movement is necessary (for example, picking up your coffee cup) your brain draws on memory and on expectations drawn from previous experiences. If something is different (for example your coffee cup is leaking) you pay extra attention. In short, our brains crave certainty, so that prediction is possible. A coffee cup shouldn't leak, so when it does, we know something is wrong. This equates to 'certainty' – there is nothing ambiguous about a cup that leaks – it just shouldn't.

Without prediction, the brain has to use dramatically more resources to process information, draining its energy. Even a small amount of uncertainty can force attention away from the task at hand. An example of debilitating uncertainty could be not knowing your boss' expectations, or whether or not your job may be secure. In contrast, the act of creating a sense of certainty is rewarding - meeting expectations generates an increase in dopamine levels in the brain, resulting in a reward response.

Reducing the threat from uncertainty

Any kind of significant change generates uncertainty. A few simple steps can reduce uncertainty:

Breaking a complex project down into small steps

Establishing clear expectations of what might happen in any given situation

setting and communicating expectations of desirable outcomes

making implicit concepts more explicit, such as stating clear objectives at the start of any project or discussion.

Putting to use the well-known learning adage, 'tell people what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them' is a sure-fire way to help reduce uncertainty.

The art of change management is creating certainty where little may exist. Even creating a perception of certainty can reduce the threat or fear of change, for example when going through an organisational restructure, providing a specific date when people will receive more information can help minimise uncertainty.

Autonomy

Autonomy is a feeling or perception of having control over – and choices within – your environment. An increase in the perception of autonomy feels rewarding, for example starting your own business to feel a greater sense of control. A reduction in autonomy, for example when being micro managed, can generate a strong threat response. Humans have an innate desire to have a sense of control and ability to influence outcomes. If a person senses a lack of control, they may experience a feeling of threat.

Increasing autonomy

The key to autonomy is sound organisational policies that establish the boundaries within which individuals can exercise their creativity and autonomy. This ultimately allows for individual and team decision making without consultation with, or intervention by, leaders. In this regard, sound policy hardwires autonomy into the processes of an organisation. Self-directed processes including learning portals, human resources systems and information, communication hubs, flexible working hours and work spaces are great ways to enable autonomy. During times of change, autonomy may be harder to implement – therefore further emphasis may need to be placed on the other elements of the SCARF model such as relatedness and certainty.

Relatedness

Relatedness is a sense of belonging – whether you're 'in' or 'out' of a social group. People naturally like to form 'tribes' where they experience a sense of belonging. In the absence of safe social interactions the body generates a threat response. The experience of connecting with another person increases a hormone called Oxytocin. Oxytocin has been shown to increase collaborative behaviour - a handshake, swapping names and discussing something in common, may increase feeling of closeness by causing the release of oxytocin. The concept of relatedness is closely linked to trust. The greater that people trust one another, the stronger the collaboration and the more information that is shared.

Increasing relatedness

The key to relatedness, particularly during times of change is to find ways to increase safe connections between people. Some examples include efficient communication and small groups for briefing or learning, mentoring or coaching programs. Face-to-face channels can have a great effect on relatedness – even if via video conferencing.

Fairness

Fair exchanges are intrinsically rewarding in contrast to those perceived as unfair, which generate a strong threat response. People who perceive others as unfair generally don't feel empathy for their pain, and in some instances, will feel rewarded when unfair others are punished.

Reducing unfairness

The threat from perceived unfairness can be decreased by increasing transparency and the level of communication and involvement about business issues.

Increasing approach states using SCARF

These five SCARF domains reflect core brain networks that activate when collaborating with and influencing others. Understanding these drivers can help individuals and organisations to function more effectively, reducing conflicts and increasing the amount of time people spend in the very important approach state (versus an avoidance state) - which is associated with better performance. Approach states are important for reducing change resistance, making SCARF an interesting and valuable consideration in designing change management and communication programs.

Reference:

Rock, D. (2008). SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. *NeuroLeadership Journal*. Retrieved from: <http://www.scarf360.com/files/SCARF-NeuroleadershipArticle.pdf>

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