



The five social triggers that instantly change how people think, feel, and react.

Introduction

The SCARF model gives you a cheat-sheet for human behaviour, revealing the five triggers that instantly shape how people react, collaborate, and perform. By revealing the five social triggers that drive human behaviour, it helps you reduce friction, build trust, and create interactions where people feel safe, motivated, and ready to engage.

Created by Dr. David Rock in 2008, the SCARF model is a neuroscience-based framework that outlines five social domains driving human behaviour.

The 5 SCARF Domains

S - Status: Your relative importance, worth, and position compared to others.

C - Certainty: Your ability to predict the future and expect clear outcomes.

A - Autonomy: Your sense of control and choice over your own actions and environment.

R - Relatedness: Your sense of safety, trust, and connection with a group (friend versus foe).

F - Fairness: Your perception of just, honest, and equitable treatment between people.

In the workplace, this explains why things like ‘giving & receiving feedback’ and ‘managing change’ can sometimes generate strong adverse reactions. By keeping this model in mind, we can anticipate how our actions and communications might provoke emotional responses in others, and take steps to mitigate these.

Status



Everyone wants to feel recognised, competent, accepted – even admired!

Moments that make us feel embarrassed, sheepish or overlooked threaten our need for status, and that's why they sting so badly.

So we need to be thoughtful and deliberate when offering challenging feedback, for example. Protect the 'status-need' of your colleague by focusing on the work, not the person; engage with them to find shared solutions; and put extra effort into building a sense of respect and mutuality into the conversation.

Certainty



Predictability and confidence in the future are important in making us feel psychologically safe.

We tend to feel ill-at-ease when our former certainties are disrupted, trusted systems called into question or chaos reigns for too long.

If upcoming uncertainty is unavoidable, try and provide as much information as you can. Try and avoid creating additional ‘uncertainty about the uncertainty’ by bounding it with timelines – for instance, when to expect a decision – and emphasising the areas of continuity that won’t be changing.

Autonomy



Sinatra did it his way, and we want to do it in ours.

Feeling micromanaged, overruled, or controlled gets most people's backs up.

So if you need to take control or impose changes, try to leave some room to protect the autonomy of others. (This also crops up in [Daniel Pink's theory of motivation](#).)

Give people some freedom to choose how things will be implemented, ask for genuine feedback, and spend extra time explaining your rationale so that they're more likely to feel aligned with the decision.

Relatedness



We're social creatures, and a solid connection to others can soften any defeat and sweeten any victory.

Feeling alienated from others, or operating in an unfeeling environment without the 'human factor', is a strong de-motivator. We need more than metrics and dashboards to feel at our best.

This is why it's so important to nurture effective teams and build trust and rapport to create an inclusive work environment that meets our deep-seated need for relatedness.

Fairness



Difficult decisions can be accepted if we feel like they're 'fair play.'

But we bristle at injustice. Capricious judgements, arbitrary rewards, and broken agreements are quick ways to agitate even the meekest contributor.

Ideally, we should strive to avoid unfairness altogether. Where it's perceived in one dimension, look for ways to 'compensate' on another. Listen honestly to what would make people feel like justice had been done. And interrogate your own process to ask yourself if you've done enough to ensure a fair and consistent outcome.

The SCARF model

This memorable framework from Dr. David Rock helps communicators recall the five key domains of psychological safety. When these pillars may be threatened, we should anticipate an instinctively avoidant response – and look for ways to soften the impact.



BiteSize Learning

Status

Threatened by...

Embarrassment, feeling singled out, pointed or surprising feedback, competence being questioned

Replenished by...

Mutual respect, separating the work from the person, public acknowledgement, job security

Certainty

Constantly shifting plans, unseen forces at work, unclear goals, major 'known unknowns', fuzzy strategy

Clear strategies, timelines and deliverables, steady expectations, sense of the bigger picture

Autonomy

Micromanaging, process over outcome, 'only one right way to do it', questions & challenge unwelcome

Empowered teams, collaborative decision-making, flexibility in acceptable approaches, playing to unique strengths

Relatedness

Impersonal demands, faceless bureaucracy, 'computer says no', disconnected leadership

Genuine human connections, putting a face to the ask, doing things for and with others, team culture

Fairness

Arbitrary application of standards, capricious rule changes, reneging on agreement, unjust rewards

Rules that make sense, giving and taking, transparency, and consistent treatment for everyone