The SCARF Model

How it may help us understand how we (and our teams) feel and behave, and offer insight into how we can attain and retain a positive frame of mind

Introduction

When putting two organisational development bods together to talk about behaviour models and to try to understand people's experience, there is every risk a short brief will turn into a book - we're going to try to keep this concise! Some colleagues across Public Health Wales may be familiar with this model already so please, dig out your notes and add to the conversation.

An important note to make up front is that we are all leaders – we all have responsibilities to ourselves and each other, the environment around us and as such we all have a role in helping us all be our best.

The Model (and a bit of neuroscience)

Diane Lowther, at Brilliant Minds, wrote, "The major organising principle of the brain is to minimise threat and maximise reward. This means the brain is constantly (five times per second) scanning the environment for stimuli that may lead to either threat or reward. Stimuli associated with positive emotions and reward will trigger a reward and thus approach response; stimuli associated with negative emotions and experiences will be seen as a threat and trigger an avoid response."

Let's pause and think a moment: what happens if we perceive a physical threat? Sweating palms? Increased heart rate? Anxiety? Cannot focus? David Rock[1]'s research identified that there are number of 'social dimensions' that trigger the same part of the brain that responds to perceived threats and rewards; in other words, a perceived act of unfairness will trigger the same neuro-activity as a threat to our health – or life.

Similarly, a perceived uptick in 'status' will trigger the same positive brain activity as a bumping into a friend. We tend to move (physically and emotionally) towards perceived rewards and away from perceived threats.
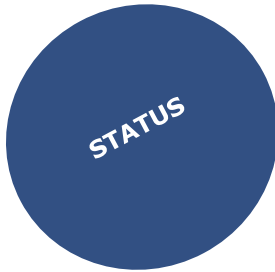

---

[1] *SCARF: A Brain-Based Model for Collaborating With and Influencing Others (2008)*

This model focuses on five key social domains/dimensions and we aim to use these, and the context that we're living and working in; to explore how our colleagues and we may feel and to help accept that these feelings are valid.

STATUS

In short, status is how important we feel in comparison to others, where we are in the 'pecking order' so-to-speak. Think of the perceived gain in status that can come with having 'manager' in a job title, or the loss of perceived status experienced, for example, if a company car was taken away. Whilst logic may tell us that these, in the grander scheme of things, are unimportant, the feeling of a threat to social status – for some – is completely valid.

During our response to COVID-19, many of us have taken on new responsibilities, perhaps having more responsibility and leading a critical piece of work; being leader, being responsible, could trigger a reward response – 'this is great, finally I get to showcase my skills or develop new ones!' Others may have been asked to 'hold the fort' or pick up essential tasks that don't usually sit with them which, conversely, could trigger a 'threat' response of feeling unimportant. Colleagues who are shielding or needing to isolate might not feel like they're contributing as much and as such, feel a threat response to their status. As the organisation recovers, temporary 'gains' in status may be reversed.

What we can do:

- Emphasise we are all playing vital roles in delivering this response – and that absolutely includes keeping ourselves well by following advice and shielding.
- Consider what can be done at home – a few months in, we hope this may be easier as we have been working differently for some time.
- Talk to the mobilisation team – there could be other parts of the service and/or NHS in Wales that could really benefit from skills/knowledge.
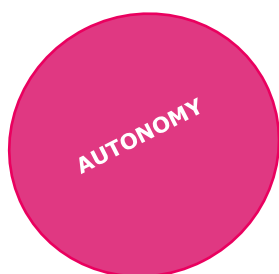
CERTAINTY

We've all heard the phrase '*creatures of habit*' – our brain conserves energy by checking for patterns and operating on autopilot per-se; over time, we may, for example, stop using the sat nav for frequent trips. We check the signage in supermarkets less when we're used to the route (*LW: it definitely makes my brain hurt when the supermarket changes what is in which aisle!*). The greater the need to actively think, the more capacity and energy we're using.

In times of uncertainty and with less scope to predict what's coming next, we get closer to operating at full capacity. Some uncertainty won't trigger a huge 'threat' response, in fact, sometimes it's what we need to generate creative

problem-solving, but too much of it too often can lead to panic, upset and poor decisions.

What we can do:

- Give as much certainty as you can for as long as you can; even knowing how long we'll be in a different role, or working in a different place, conserves that much needed energy.
- Be clear on priorities: we know that responding to the outbreak is our top priority – remember that when allocating work/agreeing objectives
- Agree objectives! My Contribution helps us all see how what we're doing (even if different) links into the organisation's goals – talk about how what they're specifically doing and how it contributes – try and keep away from 'everyone is playing a part' generalisms, we know it's true, but it may not help the one person who needs it.

AUTONOMY

We tend to feel less stress (threat) when we have control over events around us and, right now, we are all feeling the impact of being told to stay home, stay apart and to only go out for certain reasons and under certain conditions. We will emphasise in no small part that this is tough on its own, but when added to with new or evolved responsibilities (whether they present a threat or reward response), we will feel like we have less and less control over our lives. For others, working more flexibly around responsibilities at home and being able to have more of a say in what they're doing and when, has given a new sense of control.   Have some of us found in that we have been empowered to make quicker decisions and 'just got on with it'? How has that felt?

What we can do:

- Focus on the need to control the one thing we all can and should: doing what we can to stay well and control the spread of the virus.
- Understand that the things we currently don't have control over are temporary – it won't be like this all the time.
- Where there are positives and we've had more control, how can we try and retain it when the situation evolves or is resolved?

RELATED-NESS
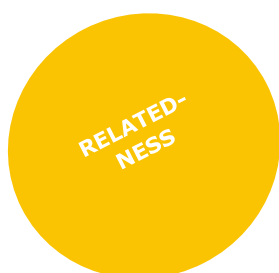
We are social creatures and relationships are important to us, we all have a need to feel 'safe' with and be amongst friend rather than foe. Right now, we may not be working with our usual teams, or may need to start working with new teams, which can trigger that sense of feeling detached, discomfort or difference.

If working within a new group, it usually doesn't take us long to establish connections and find our similarities, which gets the brain releasing more feel-good oxytocin, helping us trust and become familiar.

What we can do:

- Keep in touch with your team (or 'home team') as well as, even if on more of, a social basis than work
- Arrange a meeting time that suits, get a cup of tea or coffee and catch up; if you live relatively close and it's safe to do so, meet up for an appropriately distanced walking meeting or just to see each other
- Have some fun with it – we have already seen teams having fancy-dressed themed meetings!
- Managers: If you are aware of colleagues, who are living alone or work in relative isolation, please check in more frequently or consider what work could be done in partnership with others.

FAIRNESS This is how we perceive exchanges between or treatment of people. Acts that we deem fair and equitable promote trust between ourselves and others and a feeling of security, whereas events that feel unfair to us trigger that threat response and the associated feelings of distrust and hostility. We have noted the different situations many of us are in which can, occasionally, feel unfair. Some may need to attend a workplace whereas others may not, some may be able to work flexibly to manage caring responsibilities whereas others may need to work certain shifts.

When we scratch beneath the surface, these are not like-for-like situations or circumstances, but when feeling a 'threat', thoughts may not always include rationale.

What we can do:

- Without sharing anyone's personal circumstances with others as a way of rectifying this feeling, offer assurance that the right decisions are being made with the right intentions.
- As this can link to autonomy, find out what colleagues want to happen/do and see what compromise may be reached. Even where individuals are doing something different to others who they see as being 'in the same boat', understanding there is a reason for it will help minimise the threat response if not push toward reward.
- Have open dialogue with staff and trust them. Not all of us can work our usual hours because of competing priorities and responsibilities at home, perhaps different hours would work, different days, or focus more on output rather than hours put in.

In summary

These are strange times and we have lost count of how many of our exchanges have started with 'who would have imagined...' and the like. However, we are here and we are managing what we can as best we can; we need to be kind to each other and ourselves. In its most fundamental form, kindness can be identifying and acknowledging how we feel and accepting this is valid – however different it may seem from others' experiences.

We know the brain responds to these social threats/rewards in the same way as it does when we experience a physical threat or reward; please be assured that you're not alone or isolated in your experience, these feelings are normal responses to what is happening and many others will be feeling the same.

For our managers and leaders, create a reward frame of mind by:

- Giving positive feedback to all the team

- Keeping everyone involved and consulting them often

- Setting out plans and keeping your team informed and encouraging questions – colleagues, don't be reticent to ask!

- Explaining reasons for decisions, talking through issues and thought processes

- Giving individuals discretion for decision making – trust and judgement

- Creating rapport

- Coaching, mentoring and having team events, even if virtual

Listen to your thoughts, acknowledge how you feel and connect with your manager/teams regularly to *be* part of the group and be kept up to date with what is going on.

If you have any questions or feedback, please contact us via ODLearning@wales.nhs.uk – remember to use the resources available via the Staff Information Pages

Lisa Whiteman, Interim Assistant Director of OD & Learning

Barbara Busby, OD Consultant

Cydweithio, gydag ymddiriedaeth a pharch, i wneud gwahaniaeth

Working together, with trust and respect, to make a difference