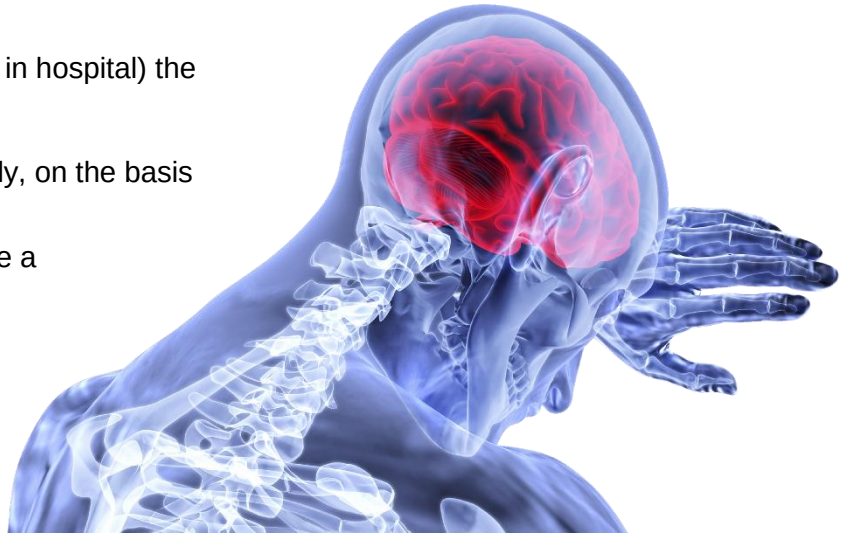
SCARF: an introduction to a management solution for ‘people problems’ in change

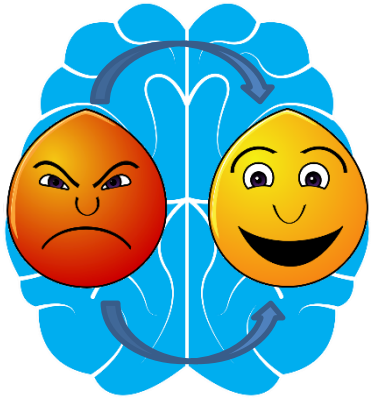
The essentials of the Neuroscience bit:

From studies of people using MRI scanners (brain scanners, like you see in hospital) the following has been proven:

- Our brains make decisions about 5 times a second, subconsciously, on the basis of a threat or reward.
- In any decision process there will be an emotional response before a rational one, because of this decision process.
- The brain treats many social threats and rewards with the same intensity as physical threats and rewards.
- The threat response is more intense and more common and can reduce higher brain functions - by ‘Amygdala Highjack’ - you don’t need to be clever to run away.



So, the brain seeks pleasure and avoids pain:



- When threat or fear is perceived, we ‘move away’ from its source:
  - consequently, our ability to use our intellect is disrupted or reduced
  - because the brain subconsciously restricts the prefrontal cortex
- Conversely, when reward is perceived, we ‘more toward’:
  - now our high-level intellect remains operational
- Thus, our ability to make decisions, solve problems and collaborate is:
  - generally, reduced by a threat response
  - generally, increased under a reward response

The SCARF model

The SCARF model, as developed by David Rock, directly engages with the core issues that drive engagement at work, based on the recent neuroscientific research above:

- ***Reduce the social threats: so the capacity to engage and be more productive at work increases.***

The model has five domains that the brain requires satisfying in social settings for optimal performance and engagement.
Which is the most important and their relative importance to each person depends on the individual.

1. **Status** — How do individuals perceive their relative importance in social interaction? To understand your relative position in relation to others. Where you stand socially? Are we equal?
   A threat response can come from simply having to deal with higher status individuals, while brain-based reward can be generated by simply acquiring a good reputation. All of which can happen subconsciously.
2. **Certainty** — Do individuals have the knowledge to reasonably predict their ongoing environment? Will you have a job / home tomorrow? Will the car start?
   Increased levels of certainty will promote reward circuitry, while the converse is true.
3. **Autonomy** — Do individuals feel suitably independent / able to make their own decisions? Is there anything I can do? Have I lost control? Greater job satisfaction and lessened anxiety are a result of greater autonomy.
   This can be; power or, choice based - with autonomy being processed as a reward by the brain.
4. **Relatedness** — Do individuals feel part of a greater whole? A sense of safety with others. Friend rather than a foe? Are we together?
   As per Autonomy this is also similarly processed in the reward centres.
5. **Fairness** — Do individuals feel fairly treated? A perception of fair exchanges between people. More responsibility = better paid? It's my round now!
   Both making and receiving fairness is rewarded by the brain, while unfairness is shown to be negatively received as a threat.

SCARF in use

These five domains activate either the 'primary reward' or 'primary threat' circuitry in the brain (and their associated networks). For example:

- A perceived threat to one's status activates similar brain networks to a threat to one's life.
- A perceived increase in fairness activates the same reward circuitry as receiving a monetary reward.

The model enables people to more easily remember, recognize, and potentially modify the core social domains that drive human behaviour, and can be applied before, during or after a relevant event.

It is arguable that these neuroscientific ideas, being directly based in biological functioning:

- Have a more fundamental role to play in the question of how to lead people through change.
- The functioning should underlay, or predicate, other models and approaches

Basically, you need to consider the people involved, who are all individuals and will have different responses to the 5 domains, then:

- Create a balance as a minimum in the 5 domains of SCARF as a result of the change process
- Ideally increase the positive SCARF factors, to create a toward motion to make change enticing and a positive prospect.

Bear in mind the following.

- Increasing one, or more, factors can potentially offset a decrease in another.
- Factors multiply, not add, to increase reward responses / engagement and conversely reduce disengaged states.
- SCARF is applicable: before, during and after an event - in a: predictory, regulatory and explanatory role.

In using SCARF:

- Consider those being changed / doing the change from the 5 aspects of SCARF before, during and after holding conversations
- Explore it as a tool for finding common ground in conversations between leaders / followers
- Consider ‘testing’ those being changed - through questionnaires, or online evaluations - to see how the ‘fit’ into the SCARF model

My SCARF findings

In my MSc I tested the ease of learning and adopting SCARF with 10 local companies undergoing change to BIM. The overwhelming majority found it:

- Recommendable as a tool for change management.
- Easy to understand and apply, notably within a short amount of time of first being introduced to it.
- Something they'd adopt for future change management engagement.

Also, it was found to be indicatively independent of the learners E.I (Emotional Intelligence) meaning you don't need to emotionally astute to be able to understand and apply it. This is good as it means it is likely to be widely applicable for use independent of peoples E.I.

Useful SCARF literature / web sites

- David Rock: SCARF, A brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. Neuroleadership Journal. 1, pp. 44-52 (2008)
- David Rock & Al Ringleb: Handbook of Neuroleadership. USA: Neuroleadership Institute.
- David Rock & Jeffrey Schwartz: The Neuroscience of Leadership: https://www.strategy-business.com/article/06207?gko=6da0a
- David Rock & Yiyuan Tang: Neuroscience of Engagement. Neuroleadership Journal. 2, pp. 1-8 (2009).
- David Rock's SCARF model. Using Neuroscience to work effectively with others: https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/SCARF.htm
- Ed Batista: David Rock on Neuroscience, Leadership and the SCARF model How to Collaborate with and Influence People Using the SCARF Model: https://www.cleverism.com/scarf-model-influence-people/
- Neuroleadership Journal: https://membership.neuroleadership.com/neuroleadership-journal/

To contact the presenter:

This has only been an introduction to SCARF and there are a lot more factors to it / associated theories and management models that it will sit alongside than there has been time to go into here. I'm more than happy to discuss this in more detail / depth if you are interested in it's use:

- Email: adam.carter@foundriesltd.com
- Web: Foundriesltd.com