

In today's interconnected world the ability to collaborate with other people is an increasingly important part of workplace communication. In order to understand how to better manage bigger groups and improve co-operation, it's important to comprehend what drives social behavior.



In this guide, we'll examine one model explaining this behavior, called the SCARF model. Will explain the **basics behind the theory**, the **way it explains the approach and avoid responses**, and **how you can use it to decrease the threats and increase the sense of reward when collaborating with others**.

WHAT IS THE SCARF MODEL?

Before we start looking deeper into how the SCARF model can be used for collaborating and influencing people, it's a helpful to look at some of the basics of the theory.

The SCARF model of behavior is a relatively new theory, having first been published in 2008 by [David Rock](#). The word SCARF is an acronym, which stands for:

- **Status** – the relative importance to others.
- **Certainty** – the ability to predict future.
- **Autonomy** – the sense of control over events.

- **Relatedness** – the sense of safety with others.
- **Fairness** – the perception of fair exchanges.

The basic premise of the SCARF model is the assumption the brain makes us behave in certain ways, which are to minimize threats and maximize rewards. While the brain takes a threat and reward approach to primary needs, such as food and water, the theory argues this same also happens with social needs.

In essence, a positive emotion or reward creates a stimulus making people act, whereas a negative emotion or punishment causes a threat stimulus, which leads to avoidance.

The aim of the SCARF model is therefore interaction with people in a way that minimizes the threats and maximizes the rewards in relation to the five key areas mentioned above. Understanding of the approach-avoid response can help improve collaborations and help influence the way people behave.

THE APPROACH-AVOID RESPONSE

The theory doesn't simply base its findings on assumptions on human behavior, but it uses brain imaging to highlight its conclusions. Several studies on the brain have shown how the human brain is focused on minimizing danger and maximizing reward. This refers to the approach-avoid response.

The approach-avoid response developed as an evolutionary response and has largely helped humans to stay alive. The most commonly used example is how the memory of foraging disgusting tasting food (poisonous) resulted in humans avoiding it. On the other hand, tastier berries, which left humans feeling good, were eaten regularly.

But it isn't only the primary needs of food and water, which are impacted by this approach. Brain scanning has shown the human brain is socially tuned and social threats and rewards drive our behavior. In fact, a study by the University of Michigan Medical School highlighted how social pain, such as rejection from a group, causes the same regions of the brain to light up as would in the event of physical pain.

Matthew Lieberman, from UCLA, stated in [a Strategy+Business interview](#), *"Most processes operating in the background when your brain is at rest are involved in thinking about other people and yourself."*

It is the limbic system, which plays an important role in the approach-avoid response. All the stimulus to the brain goes through the different parts of the brain. It first goes to the primary part of the brain before travelling to the more advanced areas (neo-cortex). The primary part or the so-called reptilian brain is more tuned to dealing with threats, as these can't involve much analysis. When a lion was hunting you down in the savannah, you didn't have time to start analyzing the best route; you simply ran.

This means a number of stimuli to the brain don't get far enough the limbic system for the person to generate an analytical response. In fact, the part of the limbic system, which is tuned into threats, the amygdala, creates the first emotional reaction. This often results in highly emotional response to situations the person perceives as a threat.

Studies have highlighted that the limbic system processes stimuli before conscious awareness. This means the reactions are automatic and quick; in essence, reflexes.

All of the above means the approach a person unconsciously goes for can have a big impact on performance and behavior. The approach-avoid response has implications across social life, since we only need to unconsciously perceive a threat to respond with a negative emotion.

Furthermore, this impacts the work situation as well, which is why the SCARF model can help managers achieve the best results.

The SCARF model can help **control the approach-avoid response** and **improve collaboration** by reducing the threat and increasing the reward reaction.

HOW TO MANAGE THREATS AND REWARDS WITH SCARF

Let's now look at the five different SCARF domains: *status*, *certainty*, *autonomy*, *relatedness*, and *fairness*.

Each of these domains can be used to enhance collaboration and to influence people's behavior. The five domains are the crucial parts behind the approach-avoid response in the brain when it comes to social situations.

We'll look at each domain separately and identify the ways it is possible to reduce the threat reaction and create a reward response instead. This can be applied to a management situation at work or in other professional circumstance.

Status

Status relates to the individual's sense of worth. We all have internal status structures created, which help us model the workplace in social and organizational context. In fact, status is among the key drivers when it comes to workplace behavior.

The perception of a threat or the actual reduction in status tends to generate a strong threat reaction. It's therefore an important domain to understand when it comes to influencing people's behavior.

REDUCING THREAT

Since threat to a person's status causes such as a strong negative reaction, the threat can be felt even when no real danger to the status is present. Everyday conversations can be turned into a measurement of status, as people try to ensure they are not perceived as any less valued than others.

This means things such as performance feedback can cause an avoid-response. Talking about feedback (not even the act of giving it, but talking about it) can create a feeling that perceived social status is at risk, which causes the negative behavior.

Therefore, reducing the sense of loss of status is essential. For example, instead of providing feedback, allow the person to give feedback on themselves or the project.

INCREASING REWARD

On the other hand, using status and gains in it as a reward, you can receive a positive approach-response. In organizations, this kind of rewarding approach often comes in the form of promotions.

But the focus of increasing reward in status shouldn't be on the artificial reward structures, such as promotions or increases in status. The aim is to promote learning, as well as improvement and rewarding this behavior within a team. A positive feedback, such as that, would increase the feeling of status, but wouldn't end up removing status from other people in the group.

Certainty

Certainty is another important domain, as it provides security to people. Operating in familiar and certain circumstances frees more resources in the brain for the work.

If the surroundings are uncertain, then the person's brain activity increases and creates a stress response. This can, in essence, hinder the ability to make effective and balanced decisions.

In a work environment, it is crucial to ensure clarity and certainty prevail. This yields better results and guarantees the approach-response takes over.

Managing the perception of certainty is critical in change management situations.

REDUCING THREAT

Significant and sudden changes lead to an immediate threat reaction and they should be avoided as much as possible. In a work environment, the focus should be on planning and strategizing in order to reduce uncertainty.

Collaboration can be improved by including expectations and desirable outcomes as part of the project management. Discussing and agreeing on objectives beforehand generates certainty and can reduce the stress levels within the group.

Furthermore, utilizing similar project management structures each time can be helpful in reducing the avoid-response.

INCREASING REWARD

As mentioned above, setting clear objectives for projects can increase the sense of reward. Things such as outlining the meeting's agenda beforehand can create certainty and increase the sense of reward.

Furthermore, timetables and reassurances are important part of management during uncertain times. If the organization is going through change, it's important to establish structures, which remain constant to guarantee people feel a sense of clarity and certainty.

Autonomy

Autonomy is the domain, which creates a sense of control for the person. The less autonomy the person experiences, the more the situation is treated as a threat. On the other hand, the sense of autonomy activates the reward structures of the brain, creating a more stress-free experience.

The control of the autonomy domain is especially crucial in corporate life, where micromanagement can often be the norm. Therefore, reducing the threat to autonomy is an important aspect of management.

REDUCING THREAT

Group collaboration often creates challenges to autonomy, as hierarchical structures are rather inevitable. Management of groups is needed to ensure objectives are met and some level of micromanagement can guarantee the collaboration is properly organized.

But in order to reduce threats, people in collaboration should be provided as much autonomy as possible. This could be achieved through the option of making choices. For example, a person has a bigger sense of autonomy if he or she is presented with a choice to either do option A or B, rather than told to do option C.

Furthermore, you can reduce the threat from the loss of autonomy by increasing the reward of status, certainty and relatedness.

So, even when autonomy is reduced, reward the person with:

- Increase perception of status, such as **positive feedback**.
- Enhanced levels of certainty by **creating rules and objectives** that are the same for everyone.
- Improved relatedness through **improved communication and coaching**.

INCREASING REWARD

The sense of autonomy is important, even if the actual level of autonomy remains low. The ability to make small decisions, even when they aren't that significant, can help the person feel a sense of reward and therefore, apply the approach-response.

In a work environment, this can mean the ability for the person to decide the timing of a lunch hour, the way they organize their work areas, and the ability to occasionally work from home, for instance.

Overall, the easiest way to increase reward is to provide the person with boundaries in which they can operate in, instead of creating a strict set of rules.

For example, instead of telling the person they have a lunch hour from 1pm to 2pm and they must not leave the premises, you can allow them to choose their own lunch hour between 11am and 3pm.

Relatedness

Since the human brain is a social machine, the relatedness we feel to other people influences our decision making to a greater extent. We are designed to build groups that rely on mutual trust and work together against uncertainty.

Group activity and a higher sense of relatedness influences the production of oxytocin in our brain. This chemical is behind positive emotions and the feeling of trust, and therefore essential for group collaboration.

Oxytocin helps in building relationships – that's why it's called the "Love Hormone." – produced as a result of touch.

In order to improve collaboration, it is crucial to focus on rewarding relatedness and creating trustworthy relationships within the group.

REDUCING THREAT

As we seek social groups, which generate the feeling of trust and mutual understanding, co-operating with people out of this usual peer group can create a threat reaction. Therefore, the introduction of new members to a team shouldn't be taken lightly. It's important to properly introduce new members and spend enough time creating the connection through group activities.

In addition, if collaboration happens through long-distance project, the focus on relatedness should be at the core of group operations. This is down to the lack of social time and cohesion in long-distance collaboration, since interaction is much rarer and focused on the work-related objectives.

Threat in these situations can be reduced by enhancing the social interaction. Video conferences instead of non-video calls will help establish a closer connection, as it creates the visual impact between team members. There should also be emphasis on sharing personal stories through networking on social media and outside of the work environment.

The so-called “water cooler” conversations are an important part of reducing threat and enhancing a sense of relatedness.

INCREASING REWARD

A great way to increase the sense of reward is through the creation of closer social connections. Mentoring and coaching programs are perfect for ensuring new members of the team are welcome, as well as establishing a sense of trust within a collaborative team.

Furthermore, small groups tend to be better for generating approach-responses than larger groups. Therefore, it might be beneficial to divide larger teams into smaller groups. Nonetheless, in these situations it is essential to avoid creating the “them vs. us” narrative. Social events outside of work are necessary for improved relatedness across the organization.

Fairness

Finally, the last domain in the SCARF model deals with fairness. When a person thinks something is unfair, the brain automatically reacts with the avoid-response and goes into a defensive stance. People don’t relate to or empathize with people who they think are acting unfairly, even if the person is in pain.

On the other hand, when someone either removes unfairness or sees another person act in order to prevent unfairness, the reward structures of the brain are turned on.

Unfairness can be created rather easily in the work environment, but its removal can be difficult. Operational structures can be perceived unfair and changing them is often a slow process.

For example, financial rewards might differ across the organization (consider gender wage gap as an example) or the operational rules between departments might differ. The threat response can be switched on when a person feels not everyone in the team or the organization is putting in the same kind of effort as they are.

One of the easiest ways to reduce threat response is by introducing greater transparency. People are less likely to experience unfairness, if they understand the processes. This means teams must have rules and guidelines, which are clearly outlined for everyone.

Furthermore, in organizations it is important to not only talk about corporate values, but also showcase them in action. This includes doing voluntary work, highlighting transparency in financial rewards such as bonuses and having a procedure for punishing un-accepted behavior.

INCREASING REWARD

It's also possible to increase the reward response by improving the sense of fairness. Fairness and autonomy can often go hand in hand. Therefore, self-management is a good way of enhancing fairness, as the rules come from within and not from the outside.

In a collaborative situation, it can be beneficial for the team to establish the rules together. This removes the feeling of having been told what to do and feeling of other people benefitting more from the rules, for example.

If you want to improve fairness, you should consider small adjustments to the systems, which are deemed unfair. For instance, slight salary adjustments can help instill a sense of fairness within a group. The key is to ensure there's a perception of fairness, even if the situation isn't 100% fair.

FINAL WORDS

The perceived threats and rewards can influence our behavior in different ways. Since we are social animals, it's essential to understand how to manage these threats and rewards when we interact with other people.

The SCARF model can help in understanding the human behavior better and it's a good tool influencing other people. By understanding how we can reduce the perceived threats and instead focus on rewards, it's possible to improve collaboration in the workplace.

The "radar" in the brain is always sensing....is it safe here?

