

SCARF



A simple but powerful framework that helps us understand what drives human behaviour. Especially in moments of stress, change, or challenge. When these needs are met, people feel safe, connected, and motivated. When they're threatened, even unintentionally, it can trigger defensive or disengaged behaviour.

WHAT IS THE SCARF MODEL

Developed by David Rock in 2008, it draws on neuroscience research into how social threats and rewards influence our brains, much like physical pain or pleasure.

SCARF stands for five domains that shape our reactions:

- **Status** – our relative importance to others
- **Certainty** – our ability to predict the future
- **Autonomy** – our sense of control over events
- **Relatedness** – how safe we feel with others, connection and belonging
- **Fairness** – how fair we perceive the exchanges and processes around us to be

HOW CAN LEADERS USE IT?

Use the SCARF model to:

- Navigate difficult conversations with greater empathy
- Design change communication that reduces threat responses
- Check in with your team and respond to what's underneath the surface
- Reflect on your own triggers and how you show up in leadership

Even small changes in language or behaviour can reduce threat and increase engagement.

QUICK DIAGNOSTIC PROMPTS TO CONSIDER

Help spot which SCARF domain might be triggered:

- **Status:** Is this person feeling valued, overlooked, or devalued?
- **Certainty:** Do they know what to expect next, or are they lost in ambiguity?
- **Autonomy:** Do they feel like they have choice or voice in what's happening?
- **Relatedness:** Are they feeling left out or disconnected from the group?
- **Fairness:** Might this feel like one rule for some and another for others?

CRAFTING YOUR MESSAGE BASED ON WHAT'S BEEN TRIGGERED

Understanding which SCARF domain is activated allows **you** to tailor your message to reduce threat and build connection. The same message can land very differently depending on how it's phrased and how well it meets the other person's needs in that moment. We can alter our communications to fit with the needs of the person we are speaking too.

Let's take a simple example: You want to ask your neighbour to turn their music down.

➤ If Status is triggered (they feel criticised or looked down on):

✗ "You're always inconsiderate."

✓ "You probably didn't realise how clearly we can hear the music. We'd really appreciate a bit of quiet tonight."

➤ If Certainty is triggered (they're not sure when they can play music):

✗ "Just keep it down, okay?"

✓ "Would you be open to turning the volume down after 9pm most nights? That would really help."

➤ If Autonomy is triggered (they feel controlled):

✗ "You have to stop playing music at night."

✓ "I'd love to work something out together. What might work for you that also helps us get some sleep?"

➤ If Relatedness is triggered (they feel attacked or like the relationship is cold):

✗ No greeting, abrupt demand.

✓ "Hey, I know you probably didn't mean to disturb anyone. We're neighbours and I'd love us to stay on good terms. Could we find a way to keep the noise down a bit?"

➤ If Fairness is triggered (they think they're being singled out):

✗ "Why can't you just stop being noisy?"

✓ "We've asked a few neighbours when it gets loud. We're just hoping everyone can keep things a bit quieter late at night."

FRAMING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Just like with the neighbour and the loud music, the way we frame our message can either defuse tension or make things worse.

In moments of stress, frustration or uncertainty, people aren't just reacting to what we say, they're reacting to how it makes them feel. Is their voice being heard? Do they still have influence? Are they being treated fairly?

The SCARF model helps us tune into those underlying needs and adjust our approach. Below are some common phrases you might hear in difficult workplace conversations, alongside ways we can respond that reduce threat and create safety, rather than trigger defensiveness.

Use this as a guide when preparing for tricky conversations, or when you find yourself in the heat of one.

SCARF FACTOR	YOU MIGHT HEAR	DON'T SAY	DO SAY
Status	"I feel like my role isn't as important anymore."	"Just focus on what needs to be done."	"Your experience is valuable. How can we use it to navigate this change?"
Certainty	"I don't understand what's happening or where I fit."	"I don't have all the answers either."	"Here's what we know so far, and I'll keep updating you as we learn more."
Autonomy	"I feel like decisions are being made for me without my input."	"This is what's happening, and we need to get on with it."	"I know this change is big. What ideas do you have on how we can make it work?"
Relatedness	"I feel disconnected from my team or leadership."	"Everyone's feeling the pressure right now right now."	"Let's check in more often. I want to make sure we stay connected through this."
Fairness	"This doesn't feel fair. Why is this happening to us?"	"That's just the way it is."	"I understand this feels unfair. Let's talk about what we can do to support each other."

Use these prompts to explore what's going on beneath the surface, whether you're preparing for a tough conversation, leading through change, or trying to understand your own reactions.

SELF AWARENESS PROMPTS

Use these on your own or with a coach.

- Which SCARF domain is most easily triggered in me under pressure?
- How does that show up in my behaviour—especially in conflict, change, or feedback moments?
- What helps me feel safe and grounded again when I feel that threat response?
- What's one SCARF domain I might underplay in how I lead or communicate?
- Who on my team might have different SCARF needs to me—and how might that be showing up?

PREPARING FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Use these to plan and shape your message with care.

- What might be going on for the other person beneath the surface?
- Which SCARF factor(s) could be activated for them?
- How can I frame my message in a way that reduces threat and increases connection?
- Where could I create a moment of choice, clarity, fairness, or acknowledgment?
- What tone will help this land well?

TEAM CONVERSATION STARTERS

Use these in a team meeting or offsite to deepen group awareness.

- What helps you feel safe and respected in this team?
- When have you felt uncertain, left out, or powerless at work—and what helped?
- What's your "non-negotiable" SCARF need—the one that hits hardest when it's not met?
- How can we spot signs of a SCARF trigger early in each other?
- What would it look like to lead with SCARF-awareness in our culture?

AFTER A TOUGH INTERACTION

Use these to plan and shape your message with care.

- What might be going on for the other person beneath the surface?
- Which SCARF factor(s) could be activated for them?
- How can I frame my message in a way that reduces threat and increases connection?
- Where could I create a moment of choice, clarity, fairness, or acknowledgment?
- What tone will help this land well?