

WHY DID YOU DO THAT? STOP PREVARICATING ! I PAY YOU TO BE ACCOUNTABLE FOR COMMERCIAL RISK TAKING. GET IT FIXED, DO YOU HEAR ME ?

WHAT ?!..TAKE RISKS... DON'T TAKE RISKS..? OH..I..DIDN'T FOLLOW ANY OF THAT...WHAT SHALL I DO ?

OF COURSE. I'LL SORT IT.



CHAPTER FIVE

SCARF

How you could be dramatically reducing the performance of your people ... without realising it

THE BIG IDEA

One of the most useful half-hours I ever had was spent listening to a neuroscientist talk about a brilliant model called SCARF and why coaching worked from a scientific perspective. All very interesting as a coach, but it also added huge value to me as an HR leader. Why? Because it made me think entirely differently about the potential reasons for underperformance at work and gave me an entirely different lens to look through to find solutions.

When we try to get under the skin of underperformance we tend to look primarily at the person who is underperforming.

What are *they* doing or not doing? Is it *their* 'skill' or 'will' that is the issue? It becomes all too easily about *them*.

Whilst there is no doubt that it can be really worthwhile to explore the skill or will gaps of someone who works with you, getting 'under their skin' can be exceptionally time consuming. There is sometimes a faster way to get their performance to improve.

The science that I learnt about in that half-hour helped me to realise that looking not just at the skill or will of the person who is underperforming, but the skill or will of the person who is *judging* them to be an underperformer, can be game changing.

And, yes, that does mean 'It could be you ...'

This doesn't sound very appealing, I accept. When someone is really irritating you, or your reputation is on the line because of their results, the last thing you want to do is gaze at your own belly button. But this analysis can take minutes. It can actually save you loads of time to ask yourself what part you may have played. After all, YOU are in charge of you, and if you are contributing something to the problem, it can be much faster to change one of your own actions, to see if it makes a difference. Influencing someone else to change what they are doing can and does take much longer – if it works at all.

In the case of underperformance, it is worth doing a quick check to make sure that you are not doing something inadvertently that is restricting someone's performance by up to 80 per cent. That's right, they may only be working with



20 per cent of their thinking capacity switched on and fully operational as a result of your actions.

This is where SCARF comes in. The theory was proposed by David Rock, who has written some of my favourite books around how understanding our brain wiring can help us to be more effective at work. Look him up on YouTube. He coined the acronym SCARF to summarise the five main triggers (buttons) that when activated (pressed) by someone or something can set off our ‘fight-or-flight’ reaction.

I expect you’re familiar with the idea: put simply, we have some ancient Palaeolithic wiring in our brains that has been passed down from our ancestors that makes us want to safeguard ourselves when we are threatened either by fighting back or running away. We can easily understand why our ancestors needed this to survive – when you live in a cave, you either fight the bear or run away, otherwise you become bear food. And if you are bear food you don’t get the chance to pass on your genes to the next generation.

This fight-or-flight thought path has become very well protected in the brain over centuries, so even though bears no longer chase us back to our caves we still have the same wiring – it’s just set off by slightly different stimuli, now that our environment has evolved. The SCARF model uses a simple mnemonic to describe the five threats that make our Palaeolithic fight-or-flight response kick in. These are threats to our:

Status (our role or place in the pecking order),

Certainty (our sense of who we are and what we know),

Autonomy (our ability to control our lives),

Relatedness (our relationships or how we connect with others), or

Fairness (our sense of what is right or wrong).

So, back to underperformance. You might be able to think of a time recently when you purposely or inadvertently pressed someone's 'fairness' button. You know they didn't agree with you about something and that they thought that what you were asking them to do was unreasonable. You knew the business required it anyway, so you gave them the hard stare and just told them to get on with it and stop whinging, right?

Well, SCARF helps us to understand that you probably have only a one-in-five chance of that working. At best. Because pressing someone's 'fairness' button also switches on that inbuilt fight-or-flight response. And by attaching sensors to our heads and watching what happens, neuroscientists have discovered that when that fight-or-flight response is switched on, the part of our brain that deals with rational thinking and problem solving is powered down. I really zoned in when I heard the neuroscientist make that link and I asked a question to make sure that the penny I thought had dropped for



me was a real penny. It felt like it might be worth its weight in gold.

‘Yes,’ she said in response to my question to check. ‘There is a direct correlation between putting someone under the sort of pressure that makes them feel threatened and their ability to think and reason. As neuroscientists we are confident that the brain’s capacity to problem solve and think rationally is reduced by up to 80 per cent when a person feels under threat.’

What this recent science bombshell tells us is that, when you ask that colleague to do something that they think is not fair, not only do they instinctively not want to do it, but also they probably can’t even process your request properly. Pressing their ‘fairness’ button diminishes by about 80 per cent their capacity to see your request in a rational way and to come up with solutions.

This helps to explain why that person who is usually so competent/helpful/creative won’t be able to process and understand what you are asking. They certainly won’t be able to come up with any solutions as to how they can get you what you want right now. They won’t relate to why it is important to you and be able to rationalise it. They might not even remember the details of what you asked.

Going right back to the beginning of the chapter. When you encounter underperformance in someone it might not be *their* skill or *their* will that is the problem. It might be how *you* are asking for things to be done. It might be the fact that you have inadvertently reduced their capacity to think by about 80 per cent that is the problem. If you can adapt the manner in which you are asking for things to be done and

change how your presence makes them feel, you might find their competence and enthusiasm return. Or even find they are not, in fact, someone you need to manage out of the business, but a potential star performer.

Remember, it doesn't matter if your request is actually fair or rational. Or whether you think you are being threatening or intimidating. You can't expect to change someone's innate response by logical argument when it has been hardwired for millennia. Telling yourself that you are being assertive and not aggressive won't work either. It's a bit like beauty. Threat is in the eye of the beholder. Arguing with them about why your request makes sense won't help. It will simply keep them in that place of fight-or-flight for longer. Pushing any of their five SCARF buttons, be it on purpose or accidentally, will simply keep their thinking capacity at about 20 per cent for as long as you continue to do it.

You might think it's an appalling bit of faulty wiring for modern life – and you might be right. But like it or not, when we are dealing with problems in our air-conditioned, high-tech offices, we still bring along a response in our brains that is literally millions of years old. No amount of clever business process or whizzy gadgets will make up for the fact that, when we feel threatened, our old 'reptilian' brain kicks in and makes us want to run, hide, fight or freeze. Remember from Chapter 2 that the brain's newer part (the prefrontal cortex) doesn't work very well at all. Given that this frontal cortex deals with thinking, evaluation and reflection, the SCARF reaction impairs our ability both to solve problems and to be aware of our own and others' feelings.



This science, then, might save you spending hours going backwards and forwards – asking people to do things, them not getting it done, going back and checking, even doing it yourself in the end. It might only take a few minutes of reflection for you to work out how to short circuit their wiring and get the response you need.

Given that threat is in the eye of the beholder, seeking feedback from someone who will be honest with you could be the key to making the people who work with you almost instantly more effective. Don't ask the colleague who is most like you, ask someone who is different from you – ideally someone who reports to you and for whom you can create a safe environment for them to tell you honestly how you make people feel. Understanding the biology/physiology can help both you and the person providing feedback to identify how your behaviour might be triggering the SCARF reaction.

Think about yourself. When you are not performing at your best and you start to feel worried about it, what happens? How do you feel? What do you notice about how your body reacts to a 'threat'? Think about a situation that made you feel you might fail and/or lose status in the team? Or when you last got some feedback and feared you were about to be 'found out' as an imposter (see Chapter 4).

When something like this happens, do you feel and look like you want to fight? (Perhaps you get tingling or sweaty palms, grit your teeth or go red in the face?) Or does your body go into 'flight' mode and find an excuse to get away from the situation as quickly as possible? (Perhaps your stomach churns so that you want to excuse yourself, you get a

flush creeping up your neck that you want to hide, or your feet start twitching and you want to run away?)

These are all entirely normal reactions, which at a very simple physiological level all require blood and oxygen to persist. Oxygen is carried around our bodies by our red blood cells, so the two things are closely linked. Let's consider a flush or blush that may be triggered by feeling anxious or angry. In simple physical terms it is just 'evidence' that there has been increased blood flow to an area of your skin. If your heart is beating faster it means that more oxygen-rich blood is diverted to that area of your body.

The problem with our bodies is that we can't produce new blood and oxygen quickly enough to make those reactions happen without a knock-on effect elsewhere. If blood and oxygen have to be diverted to the place in your body that is hosting your reaction – e.g. if there is extra blood and oxygen at the site of your flushed skin or it is directed to your fast-pumping heart – it stands to reason it has to come from somewhere else.

Put simplistically, part of your body is starved of blood and oxygen temporarily in order to give you that flush, that

tingle or that pumped-up feeling. And guess which area of the body is starved, and so switches to sleep mode and stops working properly? Yes, we have come full circle: it's your prefrontal cortex – the thinking part of your brain.



So, just when you have been asked that really difficult question that has made your mouth go dry and a flush creep up to your cheeks, you know now that the rational part of your brain is about to let you down. Until your fight-or-flight response passes, you are unlikely to be able to think about the question rationally, or to judge how your blurted-out answer made someone else feel. Just when you need your clear-sighted thinking the most, you are probably at your most stupid because the part of your brain from which the blood and oxygen facilitating your threat response has been borrowed, is the very part that deals with logic, problem solving and an awareness of the feelings of others.

Equally, when someone is underperforming and you call them in to talk about it, how likely is it that you elevate their performance by pushing home your arguments when they go quiet and red in the face?

Put simply, it is not very likely that when you or any of your team feel threatened you will come up with your best answers, or indeed even be able to make sense of the question. You are not capable of being receptive to what is being said by someone else. Your thinking brain is just not working. You have effectively had a partial lobotomy.

The chances of a total human brain rewiring project being delivered in our lifetime are zero. It's probably a waste of time pretending you have 'grown out' of this reaction and telling yourself that you are 'too old', 'too senior' or 'too experienced' to behave like this.

I help my clients to let themselves off the hook by asking

what makes them think they can conquer, over twenty-five years in commercial life, a behaviour that has been alive and well in every human being for over a million?

People tell me that hearing this has changed their lives. They accept it is normal that they can't think at their best when they feel threatened – however irrational that threat might be. The flight/fight reaction is inevitable. The skill lies not in stopping the reaction – that is beyond us – but in retaining just enough objective thought to know the reaction for what it is.

I have helped people to train themselves with a concept called 'anchoring' so that when they feel their cheeks redden they can recall the SCARF acronym. Some of them imagine a pashmina or a Tom Baker as *Dr Who*-style stripy scarf at this point to kick in the memory. They remind themselves with the 20 per cent of their working brain that it is simply blood and oxygen rushing to that part of their body. Just biology and thoroughly normal. It will pass. They get better with practice at remembering through the haze of their own anger or fear that their thinking brain is not working so well. They vaguely remember that the temporary 'blankness' does not mean they are about to be exposed as a failure as a leader, parent, or partner. They just stop for a split second. Think SCARF. Then, instead of saying the thing that comes into their head from a brain that might only be 20 per cent functional, they have learnt to take a moment and take a breath first. This gives their body has chance to return the blood and oxygen to where it belongs and switch the brain back on. They then have a fighting chance of making sense and not saying



something that could do lasting harm to a relationship. Or retreat and look like they are sulking. Or counter the threatening behaviour they receive with more of the same in return – and put their colleague’s brain into 20 per cent functionality as well.

For all our high-tech living and our sophisticated conversations, human beings are pretty simple creatures. We move towards and repeat things that get us noticed or rewarded. We stop doing things and avoid things that don’t get a reward or make us feel threatened.

Remember what they used to say on the National Lottery ads – ‘It could be you’.

Sometimes people don’t do what you have asked – not because they don’t want to or are being childish, but because the part of the brain that needs to be working in order for them to operate just isn’t. However talented or experienced someone is, they are unlikely to come up with an idea or be able to understand where you are coming from if their thinking brain is working at only 20 per cent capacity at the point at which you explained yourself. So ‘it could be you’ because either:

- something that you said or how you said it made their brain not work properly, or
- something you said or did is contributing to their underperformance.



It's a pretty challenging thought. I have reflected on some of my past roles when I have led big teams, and realise now that some simple things I was doing were inhibiting the performance of my people.

I recall making a decision on someone's behalf and sending them a quick email to tell them it was all sorted. I intended to speed things up and be helpful so they could focus on a big event. But I wonder now, did I accidentally make them less effective that day as they fumed about me taking away their autonomy?

I remember during a meeting with our senior leaders, I had asked one of my most competent junior managers to come along in case there were any technical questions. We strayed off piste and I passed the conversational baton over to her and asked her to contribute her ideas when she wasn't expecting it – I thought I was giving her a chance to shine – and then was really confused about why, when she knew so much, she could offer so little. I reflect now that I may well have threatened her sense of certainty about what her role was at that meeting. In this case I wanted to give her the opportunity to show off her knowledge and take credit for her own work. Instead I now regret that I probably made her feel exposed and embarrassed.

My intentions were good in both cases. I have come to understand that when I 'threaten' people it is usually with the best of motives. It would not have bothered me to speak in the moment about a subject I loved, but I made the mistake of assuming that another person would feel as I did.



What sets off someone else's SCARF reaction is different from what sets off yours. You may feel you have been 'firm but fair' when you have actually sent your colleague's brain running for the hills. What you thought you said to a team member may not have been a message they were able to hear.

Remember, 'It could be you'.

GOT IT – NOW WHAT?

The lesson I have learnt the hard way when leading others is that you need to talk less, listen more, watch and really pay attention. Even more so when time is tight, the stakes are high and you are in a rush or on a roll. Because that is when you will miss a creep of red scrolling up someone's neck, or see them tapping their feet or looking for the door. Listen to the challenge you do get back for any sense that someone's SCARF reaction has been triggered. More importantly, listen to what they don't say. I have learnt to beware of getting a 'yes' too quickly to something I thought was going to be challenging to talk about. I learnt the hard way that a quick 'yes' often was the fast track to me leaving someone alone – which was exactly what they wanted me to do.

Here are some things that might help you to reflect on how to help yourself or others. And for you to make it safe for people to give you feedback when you get it wrong.

Prepare before you challenge

Think about SCARF when you are about to ask someone to do something. Prepare to look out for any tell-tale physical signs. Pay attention if you get a 'yes' more quickly than you were expecting, or you don't get the challenge you imagined. It is easy to congratulate yourself for getting a yes and ticking something off your to-do list, but before you do that, give the person some time to think and reflect. Have something that sounds like you're ready and waiting for when this happens. 'It might be a bigger ask than I can understand, so give it some thought. Could we catch up in about an hour so we can discuss how you feel about it?'



Don't beat yourself up – reflect positively instead

You aren't likely to rid yourself of a million years of human nature, so rather than berating yourself for blurting out something ridiculous or untrue when you were in a tight spot at work or were having an argument with your partner, take a few minutes to think about what you could do next time and how could you remind yourself to do it.

Don't make a bad situation worse

Think about the language you use to talk to yourself about it. 'God you idiot! Why on earth didn't I say XYZ? It's so obvious, they must think I'm stupid. Maybe I'm losing it.' isn't going to help you to get out of your SCARF thinking and switch on your thinking brain. Use more positive and less judgemental question on yourself: 'What could I do to buy some time to get my brain back in gear the next time I feel myself going red?'

Have a well-worn ‘get out of jail’ phrase you can remember

Find and practise a response that gives you time to think at that point where you can barely string a sensible sentence together. I’ve found I can pull out – ‘Great question! Can I reflect on that for a moment?’ even when my brain is only working at 20 per cent of its thinking capacity. Then be still and quiet (people will assume you are thinking, not panicking). And *breathe!*

Be wary of making (or accepting) promises you (or they) can’t keep

Hopefully you now appreciate that your mind doesn’t go blank when the stakes are high because you are stupid (well, not for more than a second or two, anyway). It cuts both ways – someone who just told you a ‘lie’ in response to a challenge might not be being deliberately untruthful. Simply reading this may have been enough to help you remember that clamming up or saying things you don’t mean under pressure can be simple biology. A friend of mine who used to be plagued with insecurity about her performance under pressure now accepts her ‘temporary stupid brain’ for what it is. A lack of blood and oxygen. Don’t make your stupidity permanent by allowing your mouth to say something that your brain does not mean! And if you do, apologise quickly and explain why you said it. Don’t compound the problem by creating a web of deliberate ‘lies’ to cover up your first accidental one.

Pay attention to your body

Be mindful. When I get tingling palms, something in my brain vaguely remembers a stripy scarf and something about blood and oxygen. Now, rather than carrying on speaking when I feel my palms tingle, I take a deep breath (to replenish some oxygen) and try NOT to speak for a moment. It takes practice but it does work.



Use what you know

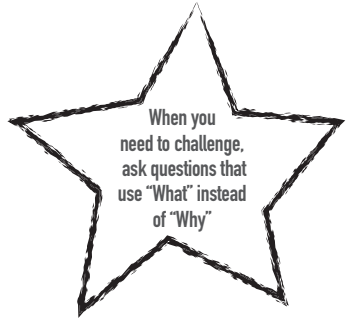
A smart choice to save time and get better results is to find ways to give other people a minute before you get them to respond when the stakes are high and tensions are higher. Or you might spend hours unravelling what they promised when they had a SCARF on! Can you prepare them in some way by saying something like, 'It's OK. Take a minute to think'? Just make sure your body language is giving them the same impression ... tapping your foot or looking at your watch as you give them a moment is not likely to help them unravel their scarf.

Make it safe to say difficult things

I ask some really tough questions of my clients and I don't apologise for that, but I also look for physical signs of SCARF. If I see them, I know that, whilst I might be getting somewhere, I will need to adjust the rapport and be more supportive to make it safe for them to answer and to have time to think.

Mind your language

When you need to be challenging or to explore underperformance, ask questions that use ‘what’ instead of ‘why’ – it’s much less judgemental and so less likely to trigger a SCARF reaction. Equally, replacing ‘Yes, but’ with ‘Yes, and’ can work too. However, do ask questions. Apparently being asked a good open question sends blood and oxygen back to the problem-solving area of our brains. So asking a question gets someone’s brain back in the conversation.



Train your brain

Remembering these steps won't come easily. You will need a lot of practice to recall these tips because you are trying to remember them with a brain that might only be 20 per cent functional. There is a fantastic book by Dr Dave Alred called *The Pressure Principle*. Dr Alred has worked with many professional sports people (Jonny Wilkinson is quoted on the front cover saying 'Dave Alred is a genius – he changed my life'). In the book he shares how to take control in high-pressure situations and train yourself in the skill of getting your brain back in the game. He describes taking control of the adrenaline and energy you generate when you are in fight-or-flight mode and channelling it into fantastic performance. He is at pains, however, to describe dealing with pressure and stress as a skill that needs practising over and over. So just as Jonny

Wilkinson practised kicking the ball over and over, he also practised training his brain to deal with the fight-or-flight hormones that we all naturally create.



My own repeated practice has enabled me to ask myself a simple question when I am getting really mad and about to let rip. I ask myself, ‘Dulcie, what do you *really* want from this conversation?’ It’s not a perfect question, but after practising it for years, it now *does* come to mind and it *does* do the job.

The influence matrix . . . again

You might be thinking to yourself that this whole chapter doesn’t apply to you and any underperformance you have in your team, because you are a great and supportive boss. Mmmm. The science suggests that, however ‘nice’ you are, the very fact that you are in a position of authority means that any question you ask is significantly more likely to trigger the SCARF reaction than if it had been asked by someone less senior. If you are a parent, you might have felt nervous going into a head teacher’s office – even if you match them for salary and experience. Think about how your mouth goes dry when you see a blue police light behind you, even if your conscious brain knows you aren’t doing anything wrong. Authority makes SCARF more likely. So just accept that as normal.

Get your head ready

One of the things my clients have noticed and fed back is that SCARF (and Imposter Thinking from Chapter Four) is more likely to happen when you are feeling low, tired or unprepared. The negative “can’t do” mindset that comes with being flustered or exhausted seems to exacerbate SCARF and the feeling that you aren’t up to the job. So if you have an important meeting coming up with someone who can catch you off guard and make you feel less than your best, make sure you arrive early and take a little extra time to prepare. As well as doing some physical preparation and having all the information you need, put some time aside to get yourself into the right head space. Deliberately adopting a positive mindset and getting your head in a good place can lessen the impact of SCARF and Imposter Thinking.



TOP RIGHT QUESTIONS

For you

- Is there a pattern? When am I most likely to experience the SCARF reaction? Does it happen more at a particular time of day, after a specific event or with a particular person or group of people?
- How could I use my knowledge about SCARF and the patterns I experience to help me to plan to deal with SCARF differently?
- What could I do to build a different relationship with someone who SCARFs me or who I might SCARF?
- What could I rehearse saying or doing that would buy my body time to redirect the blood and oxygen back to the clever part of my brain?
- What will I do if I see the SCARF reaction in others to take control of my own emotions?

For others

- What could you learn to say or do that would at least not make the problem worse?
- Can I share this science with you? [Explain SCARF] Would you be OK to let me know of any times during the past week where I triggered this reaction in you?
- Imagine the person who makes you feel this way is listening to our conversation now. How might they feel? What could you do with that?
- What can you do to put right what you said and didn't mean?
- What could you do differently to make sure people still hear your challenging messages but without the thinking part of their brain being temporarily disabled?
- Which part of you might like to some extent that you can exert control in this way?
- To what extent are you assuming their reactions are the same as yours?
- How could you get feedback that could help you if we assume that you do inadvertently threaten the thinking of your team?



LEARN MORE AND SHARE

Really great reads

Quiet Leadership by David Rock

This book talks about SCARF in detail and also includes some other great insights on how to use your brain to lead well.

The Pressure Principle by Dr Dave Alred

Easy to read and relate to, and full of brilliant suggestions and good sporting anecdotes.

Blog

There is a blog you can share that summarises what SCARF is at:

<https://toprightthinking.com/2016/11/11/performing-under-pressure/>

Internet resources

The inventor of the acronym SCARF is David Rock. Google him and watch him talk about it on YouTube.

PARTING SHOT

Some of my clients have told me that just knowing about the SCARF reaction has literally been life changing. When you feel the tingle or get reaction, just stop and breathe for a moment. When you see it in someone else, don't kick them whilst they are down. Give them a moment so you can argue with a fully functional grown-up – and not a lobotomised zombie.

When faced with underperformance, think about what you might be contributing to the problem. Are you absolutely certain that your team are firing on all cylinders with their thinking brains fully engaged? Before you reassure yourself there is nothing to know, think about how hard you might find it to tell your boss that they make you feel nervous or threatened. Very hard? Thought so. There's more help on this in Chapter 9, where we'll explore how to lead with a high-support, high-challenge approach. But for now, perhaps just assume SCARF might be happening. And don't do anything to make it any worse!