

# THE NEUROSCIENCE OF TEAMWORK.

In today's interconnected world, there are very few of us who don't actually work in a team. Whether you are part of a traditional team, remote team or virtual team, the benefits of collaboration are infinite. Understanding how to foster quality teamwork, however, is the key to success.

Humans are actually hardwired to work in a team. Research has found successful teamwork stems from the neuroscience of our social brain, which responds to elements of our work environment as perceived threats and perceived rewards. These rewards and threats don't need to be physical, but can be experienced through social interactions. Studies show humans collaborate best when they work in an environment that nurtures a social reward response and avoids creating a social threat response. Rock (2008) developed the SCARF model to understand what motivates human behaviour in teams.

**S**

**STATUS**  
is about relative importance to others.

**C**

**CERTAINTY**  
concerns being able to predict the futures.

**A**

**AUTONOMY**  
provides a sense of control.

**R**

**RELATEDNESS**  
is about a sense of safety.

**F**

**FAIRNESS**  
is a perception of fair exchanges.

According to this framework, these five domains activate the same reward circuitry response that physical rewards (like money) and physical threats (like pain) activate. In fact, when looking at an fMRI scan, the same neural region of the brain (the dorsal portion of the anterior cingulate cortex, if you are interested!) is activated during physical pain as when a person experiences a social threat (e.g. social exclusion).

For teamwork, this means that if any of the SCARF domains are threatened, an employee is less likely to engage in teamwork, more likely to withdraw, become defensive and is less open to feedback. When these domains are rewarded, an employee's trust is enhanced, collaboration strengthens, and more information is shared.

Put simply, leaders and employees should take steps to minimise and eliminate threats, while maximising rewards in their team to foster successful teamwork.

## TIPS IN ACTION:

- To avoid a **STATUS** threat, leaders should promote regular team learning and offer opportunities for employees to provide feedback.
- When there have been significant changes to a team this creates a **CERTAINTY** threat, so it is important to establish clear structures and offer regular updates to provide clarity.
- Teamwork can challenge **AUTONOMY** but allowing individuals to make some decisions is rewarding.
- Successful teamwork also relies on a feeling of trust and understanding, so the introduction of new members should not be taken lightly. To foster **RELATEDNESS**, it is important to invest time in introducing new members and help build a trusting connection. For remote teams, video conferences over phone calls can establish closer relationships.
- Finally, to reduce **FAIRNESS** threat responses, introduce greater transparency across processes and rules.