
To Really Engage Staff & Drive Performance, Help People to Feel Safe

Over the past 2 years, I have written extensively about staff engagement and the opportunity for leaders to drive the discretionary efforts of their people. It is not the employment contract that determines how hard and effectively a person works but the quality of the relationship a person has with their boss and their organisation. This is known as the psychological contract, one built on mutual expectations; on trust and respect and fairness.

Building on this, I recently watched a *TED Talk* from one of my favourite thinkers, Simon Sinek, who said, in essence, that great leaders make you feel safe. Sinek says that when people feel their leader is in their corner, then co-operation and trust is engendered; people will strive harder and will achieve more. Sinek says that if leaders get the environment right, one where people feel safe and secure, then people can achieve extraordinary things, or as we have seen time and time again, they over-achieve.

Leaders set the tone for the organisation and people are very sensitive to whether the organisation is safe and secure.

Thinking about this prompted me to once again pick up David Rock's great book, *Your Brain at Work*. Rock, who is at the forefront of organisational neuroscience, writes that the brain experiences the workplace as a social system. This is why feeling safe is such a driver of our performance at work.

As Rock tells us, when people feel betrayed, rejected or unrecognised at work, a neural impulse is set off as powerful and as painful as a blow to the head. And like a blow to the head, the result is a drop in commitment or engagement - work becomes a transaction rather than something we feel emotionally or psychologically committed to. In short, social pain is experienced in the same way as physical pain.

In fact, any social threat can have a big impact on cognitive performance (decision making, creativity, accuracy) because like in the case of a physical threat, oxygen and glucose are taken from the areas of the brain where they are needed and directed to areas that can deal with the threat, that is, away from the pre-frontal cortex or executive function area of the brain. This threat response is mentally taxing and kills productivity, analytical thinking, creative insights and problem solving.

Rock argues that we can mitigate this threat response by managing the way people experience the following domains: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness (SCARF). As leaders, every action or decision you take either supports or undermines these domains. Let's see how:



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Status – This is about how we compare to others. Mastering new skills at work leads to increased feelings of status which is why learning and development are so important for engagement – if you feel that you are better than your old self then your status has increased relatively. Likewise, your status increases with positive feedback because you feel that you are getting better and becoming more valuable. Some say our greatest urge is to feel significant and people who do not feel significant, rarely make significant contributions.

Certainty – Ambiguity, uncertainty or confusion trigger the threat response and this draws oxygen and glucose from where it is needed in the brain. On the other hand certainty allows us to function on auto pilot and to do other things rather than deal with the threat of uncertainty. The brain is a pattern recognition machine – we crave certainty so that we can predict – otherwise we must use more cognitive resources to process the moment by moment experience. Uncertainty can be debilitating and it takes attention away from our work. If we satisfy our need for certainty, then we don't have to think situations through. This is so important for leaders managing change - communication has to build certainty.

Autonomy – This is about control and choice. Autonomy ultimately feels rewarding and leads to better engagement and better health. Daniel Pink, another great thinker, talks about autonomy as critical for our psychological engagement. He says that self-determination is one of our natural inclinations and that leaders could allow employees far more scope to determine how and what they do at work.

Relatedness or belonging – In the past we have said leaders' efforts to build engagement should focus on making people feel that they belong. We need to feel trust, empathy, friendship and goodwill in our workplaces. We should strive for inclusion and prevent situations where people feel marginalised because isolation and being cut-off are bad in terms of performance. Relatedness leads to a release of oxytocin which leads to affiliative behaviour and this leads to better collaboration.

Fairness – This is relative or compared to others. Fairness engenders great commitment but favouritism kills trust. This is why transparency is so critical; it is how we demonstrate that we are treating others fairly. Not being treated fairly, or any threat to our social needs, leads to diminished cognitive performance and a diminution of creative moments.

As Rock argues, rewards or economic incentives only work when they are perceived as supporting social (SCARF) needs. All leaders should understand the importance of social (internal) rewards as opposed to money or external rewards.

Our social experience draws on the same brain networks as physical or primary survival needs. The 5 domains of SCARF (social dimensions) activate the same primary reward or primary threat circuitry of the brain and we ignore these at the cost of true engagement and true effort in our workplaces.



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