



# Exploring a Neuroscience-based Model for Ombuds and Mediators

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## ABSTRACT

When the classical approaches used by informal conflict resolution practitioners - ombuds and mediators - are challenged by intense emotions or a rigid state of mind, insights from neuroscience can help visitors, or parties to a mediation, shift from reactive to reflective mode, and use their brain rather than be used by it. The factors that put the brain into reactive mode – “the scared brain” - and what is needed to help it relax and reflect in new ways, are set out in the book by David Rock, “Your Brain at Work.” Rock developed an acronym, SCARF® - Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness – to encompass the five elements that lead us to perceive a social situation as either threatening or rewarding, causing our brains to generate either a stress-laden “away” response or a comfortable “toward” response.

This paper sets out the authors’ understanding of how the SCARF® model can be applied by ombuds and mediators to help visitors move out of reactive mode - especially when their brains are “kidnapped” by intense emotions because of a perceived threat. A “scared brain” can be calmed down by applying the SCARF® model, with the result that the visitor will be more open to operate in reflective mode, which is the precursor to helping them to develop new insights about how to better address their situation.

## KEYWORDS

Neuroscience; Stress response; SCARF(r) model; option generation

## INTRODUCTION

As you read this, your brain is creating a mind map – a multi-neuron circuit - which it is comparing to the thousands of maps it has constructed in the past. In so doing, it will generate either a “toward” response, making you want to read on, or an “away” response, making you want to put the article down and forget about it.

The idea that we are constantly being subject to “toward” and “away” responses, is one of the key messages of an enlightening book, *Your Brain at Work*, by David Rock (Rock 2009). Rock explains how our brains – made up of billions of neurons, each capable of thousands of connections – are constantly deciding on a “toward” or an “away” response, consulting and creating maps, making connections, and generating new circuits. The maps are transient, chemical-electrical activity, but the circuits, or “flight paths”<sup>1</sup>, remain. These “flight paths”, which differ from one brain to another, create our own individual perception of reality.

Rock’s emphasis on the uniqueness of each individual’s perception of the world can help us strengthen the tools we work with and explain why some are more successful than others and why one works well with one individual and less so with another. Rock proposes several tools that can greatly help us to assist visitors to calm down their brains, and through that to find powerful insights to address the situation they are facing.

This paper outlines how one of these tools, a neuroscience-based tool, the SCARF® model, can be applied to the practice of ombuds and mediators. It is the result of the authors’ year-long participation in a virtual group discussion exploring how Rock’s concepts and tools can be applied to the Organizational Ombuds and Mediator disciplines (Cox 2012).

Rock’s work helped us to understand better 1) what puts the brain in conflict mode, 2) what helps the brain to relax and reflect in new ways, and 3), once in reflective mode, what can help it generate new insights and to identify actions to implement them. This paper will deal with 1) and 2).

An important caveat is that neuroscience’s understanding of the brain is evolving all the time, so the insights we are sharing here may also evolve and be enriched by future findings and scientific developments.

## THE SCARED BRAIN

Ensuring and promoting survival and well-being are the main driving forces of our brains. Evian Gordon has described this in a powerful way. “*The brain has an overarching organizing principle: to minimize danger (an “away” response) and maximize reward (a “toward” response)*” (Dr Evian Gordon 2016).

We cannot overstate the importance of Gordon’s insight. Whenever we see unusual, extreme, illogical reactions, it is not the person, it is a “scared brain”, a brain that is perceiving danger. Any threat to life or well-being is treated as a danger by our brain. Any situation that can protect life or enhance well-being is seen as a reward.

The brain moves from reflective to reactive mode when facing a threat to life, or well-being. In such circumstances, there is no time for deep reflection. Pre-established mechanisms that are

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<sup>1</sup> A neural circuit is illustrated by Rock through the flight path metaphor, or circuits are the ways in which airplanes travel from one airport to another. Sometimes they go straight between two airports, other times they may go through several stopovers.

automatically activated through the stress response, “fight-flight-freeze-and-fawn” (Marshall 2021), (LeWine 2024), help the brain to react quickly to a threat. Quick and appropriate reactions can save life. That is useful for physical challenges but not for social, interpersonal threats. A social threat activates the same cortical zone that is activated when suffering physical pain (Vangelisti 2020). Social threat turns on the stress response (Fazio 2001) where the Limbic System (LS) circuits, particularly the amygdala (Feinstein 2011), become highly triggered.

Such a stress response not only prepares us to fight, to defend ourselves, or to flee, but inhibits the Prefrontal Cortex (PFC) activity. Conversely, the PFC circuits are activated and the Limbic stress-related activity decreases when the brain perceives a reward. The PFC enables us to think, reflect, empathise, innovate, remember, etc. (Mather 2006). Thus, to better assist our visitors, we need our and their PFC to be placed in the driver’s seat, with the Limbic System safely seated as a quiet co-pilot.

Workplace conflicts are perceived as social threats (Eisenberg 2004); the visitor’s brain is sending the signal that there is a real and intense threat to life or well-being (Porges2004). One key element is that, in the absence of sufficient information, the brain automatically switches to reactive mode and sees the other person as a foe and the situation as a threat(Naccache 2005). This happens because it is safer for the brain to assume a situation to be a threat even if it ends up not being one, than to miss a real threat by mistakenly taking it as a reward or a neutral occurrence (Elliot 2013).

However, workplace interpersonal issues are usually not life-threatening and risks to well-being are better addressed not by a stress reaction, but by an appropriate, self-determined response. Furthermore, if workplace issues are well managed, they can be turned into a real enhancement of the well-being of the parties involved. Conflict can be an opportunity, but a scared brain cannot see this, literally.

## **CONSTRAINTS IMPOSED BY A SCARED BRAIN ON OUR PRACTICE**

The principles of informality, neutrality, independence, self-determination and confidentiality that are applied by ombuds and mediators aim to create an appropriate and safe space for assisting our visitors, but they may not suffice.

The conventional model of the ombud’s process (IOA 2011) states that after explaining their role through an opening statement, the ombud’s work phases are to hear the story, identify the issues and goals, explore the visitor’s options, and define the ombud’s interventions. A similar approach is followed in mediation (Mediate University 2023).

These are useful models; however, putting them into practice brings many challenges. One such challenge is how to assist visitors when their brains are “scared”, trapped in the drama caused by the situation experienced. In this state of mind, the brain’s capacity to engage, reflect, identify key issues, or generate options is seriously impaired (Feinstein 2011).

Another challenge lies in helping the parties to see the situation from a different perspective and to move from entrenched positions to their underlying needs. Parties often come with strict positions and already firmly established interpretations about their situation. They seem to be stuck in the same position and to be entirely driven by their side of the story. Scared brains are in confrontational/defensive rather than collaborative mode. They are not ready to listen, reflect, reinterpret an event, or reposition a perspective. In such a situation, it is less likely that the methods used by the ombud, or mediator, will positively influence the parties as their capacity to engage is impaired.

Our brains are key to determining and enabling our thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. We might be dominated by our brain reactions, which are often automatic and unconscious. Visitors may feel that **they** are responding to a situation, but in fact it is **their brains** that are reacting. One challenge we have when assisting visitors is to stimulate them to voluntarily move their thinking and emotional processes from reactive to reflective mode. In other terms, to use and not to be used by their brains. The following section explains how this is done.

## DEALING WITH A SCARED BRAIN

Neuroscience offers concepts and tools to help the practitioner to “calm” their visitor’s brain, allowing them to regain control, to reflect, and generate options.

If ombuds and mediators can help visitors and other parties to relax their scared brains, they will pave the way for reflection, and even for seeing a potential reward, if the situation is well managed. To that end, it is important to understand which mechanisms are utilised by the brain to identify whether a social, interpersonal situation implies danger or reward.

“If my boss doesn’t return my phone call, is this a rejection (threat), or does it mean that my boss is waiting until the time is right to talk with me (reward)?” “If I am not invited to an important meeting, is this a deliberate exclusion (threat), or is it a way of protecting me from experiences for which I am not prepared (reward)?”

Biases, previous experiences, assumptions, and brain mechanisms determine the answer to these questions. We will focus here on brain mechanisms.

Neuroscience has identified five elements that are treated by our brain as primary threats or rewards, no matter what the actual situation is. These five elements have been grouped by Rock under the acronym SCARF® (Rock 2009), which offers a model to help explain how our brain is permanently judging whether a person is a foe or a friend, and whether a social situation is a threat or a reward.

SCARF® stands for Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness. When *any* of these elements are not respected in an interaction with persons, the brain perceives a threat and generates negative emotions and the stress response (Rock 2008). When *all* these factors are respected, the brain generates an automatic reward where collaborative-reflective mode and positive emotions are easily triggered (Rock 2008).

It is as if our brain is constantly asking the following questions to assess the situation we are experiencing.

1. **Status:** Am I being treated as an equal, as an inferior or as a superior?  
Status is particularly important when many people become aware of the way a person is being treated. This explains why being criticised in public may generate enemies for life and why being publicly acknowledged is so gratifying.
2. **Certainty:** Do I have the necessary information to predict what is going to happen in terms of threat or reward?  
Our need for certainty explains why it is so unpleasant to be excluded from key information, for instance not knowing what is expected from me or that a director is going to be in a meeting where I will be presenting a subject.
3. **Autonomy:** Do I have a clear area under my control? Am I empowered to make my own decisions?  
The need for autonomy explains why micromanagement is so hard to deal with.
4. **Relatedness:** Are we facing this together or are we against each other? Do I feel connected to others? What do we have in common?  
The need for relatedness shows why being excluded from meetings or interactions is perceived in a very negative way.

5. **Fairness:** Is this a fair exchange, access to resources or support?  
The need for fairness explains why favouritism in the workplace creates conflicts (Cox 2012).

The SCARF® model is a powerful explanatory framework that helps us understand why it is so difficult for a person to see and to think when their brain sees danger. At the same time, it helps us to calm the brain down by protecting the SCARF® elements that have been threatened. Indeed, if a person's brain can see that their status, their need for certainty, their autonomy, their need to belong, to be part of a group and their need for fairness are respected, at least in the interaction with the ombud or the mediator, an automatic reward mode will be triggered (Baumeister 1995). Then, the area of the brain that facilitates collaboration and deep thinking, the PFC, will become more active, and the area where the stress response is triggered, the LS, will become less active (Phelps 2006).

The ombud and mediator practices implicitly include many elements of the SCARF® model but being explicitly aware of it can help the ombud or the mediator to proactively include SCARF® elements at several points of the interaction with the visitor or other parties participating in the mediation.

A few examples of how this can be done by ombuds, or mediators are given below:

- **Status** can be acknowledged by reviewing a visitor's HR records in advance and commenting on the time the person has spent with the organisation and on elements of their CV.
  - The visitor's **status** is also protected through active listening and acknowledgement of their efforts to seek an informal resolution.
  - **Certainty** is provided by making clear the ombud's or the mediator's role, the ground rules and the various steps in the process.
  - **Autonomy** is promoted by explaining that the ombud or the mediator is not a decision-maker, and that the final choice resides with the visitor or the other parties to the mediation.
- Relatedness** is signalled by extending support and accompanying the visitor through the process.
- Finally, a sense of **fairness** is maintained by paying equal respect to the visitor and to all the other parties. **Fairness** is also addressed when the ombud or the mediator states that they will conduct a fair process and properly apply the organisation's rules and regulations.

Furthermore, during the option-generation phase, it is not uncommon for visitors to stick to their initial positions, unable to change their perception of the situation. At this point, the ombud or the mediator can also consider the SCARF® elements. This can be done by saying: "I see you have a taken position on what the solution should look like" (status). "Do I have your permission to explore with you other ways in which your interests can be met" (autonomy, status, and relatedness)? "I believe that after identifying a good number of options you will be able to make a fair decision" (autonomy and fairness). It is worth noting that whenever you ask the visitor or other parties for their permission, their status and autonomy are immediately being respected.

During an interview or a mediation session, the SCARF® model can even be explained to visitors/parties as a general characteristic of human beings. That will help them to better understand and manage their reactions and to consider SCARF® when discussing options or when planning interventions that involve other parties. During the session, one may even highlight the importance of treating any person's SCARF® well in order to have a collaborative instead of a confrontational dynamic. Furthermore, the lack of respect for one or more SCARF® elements is usually the origin of a conflict; hence when thinking through how to protect SCARF®, the mediator or the ombud will be addressing root causes of a conflict. In addition, when thinking

about ways to protect SCARF®, visitors may move from feeling that they are the passive victim of a situation to being an agent of positive change.

The SCARF® model can also be used as a preventive tool because if individuals and teams learn how to routinely “make their SCARF® happier”, a safer, creative, and engaged working environment can arise.

Finally, the SCARF® model can also be used to help visitors to recover from a conflict that has left wounds. Reflecting on which SCARF® elements have been damaged and on how to restore them to normal working order is an essential part of recovering from a conflict.

To finish this introduction to SCARF® and the ombud’s/mediators’ practice, we set out in table 1 some practical ways in which this model can be used by managers and teams to promote a healthy working environment.

Table 1 - SCARF® model and workplace issues

<b>SCARF® Component</b>	<b>Is compromised by:</b>	<b>Ways to strengthen each SCARF® element:</b>
<b>Status</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Lack of respect for one’s dignity, in particular when done in public.</li><li>● Someone looking to augment their importance through exaggerating, openly displaying their status.</li><li>● Ignoring someone else’s constraints (agenda, availability etc.)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pay attention (upwards and downwards) to ways in which people’s status might be threatened.</li><li>• Reduce status threats in others by giving people positive feedback where their contributions or skills are valued.</li><li>• Never criticise someone in public.</li><li>• Praise colleagues privately and publicly (be fair in not leaving anyone out).</li></ul>
<b>Certainty</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Not being given important information</li><li>● Being denied access to critical information</li><li>● Not knowing why you have been called to a meeting.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Watch out for situations where uncertainty creates a feeling of threat; become accustomed to noticing this.</li><li>• Share the information collaborators need for them to develop a reasonable idea of what comes next.</li><li>• Anticipate possible negative outcomes, avoid negative surprises.</li></ul>
<b>Relatedness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Excluded from a team activity.</li><li>● Not welcomed as a new member of the team</li><li>● Blamed as having all the responsibility for an issue, not acknowledging that in a team the responsibility is usually shared.</li><li>● Forgetting the “we”, only using the “I”.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Be inclusive, never discriminate.</li><li>• Separate the problem from the person.</li><li>• Try to connect on the human level as early as possible in any interaction.</li><li>• Actively encourage connection on the human level to create better collaboration.</li><li>• Create a sense of intimacy with the people you work with by sharing personal experiences or create opportunities for shared experiences without excluding anyone.</li></ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reducing our own status through sharing vulnerability or mistakes increases trust and connection.</li><li>• Create shared goals with people you feel you might be in conflict with.</li></ul>
<b>Fairness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Favouritism.</li><li>• Giving someone access to information, meetings, etc., because they are friends.</li><li>• Misconduct, misbehaviour, acting against the rules.</li><li>• Opaque processes.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Be open and transparent about your dealings with people, remembering that feelings of unfairness are easy to trigger.</li><li>• Find ways to promote increased fairness around you, perhaps by proactively helping others, volunteering, or donating time/money regularly.</li><li>• Don't let unfairness go with impunity.</li></ul>

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude, just like an actual scarf supplements but does not replace warm clothing in the winter, the SCARF® model can supplement a practitioner's toolkit in stormy sessions. By asking ourselves if we are acknowledging status, providing certainty, promoting autonomy, signalling relatedness, and offering fairness at every stage of the process. Through this, we assist the visitor's brain in perceiving a reward, thus becoming less scared and more prone to move from reactive to reflective mode, which is the precursor to triggering insights. Each ombud/mediator can and should find their own way of using the SCARF® model when dealing with scared brains. It cannot be over-emphasised that this is a highly flexible tool with huge and possibly unexplored applications in better assisting our visitors.



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