

Neuroscience of working in prison

I worked with inmates with mental health issues in an intermediate psychiatric care facility inside a maximum security prison. In addition to interacting with “dangerous criminals,” I and other prison staff faced many challenges:

- Function of our institution was influenced by many administrative agents and agencies with often conflicting goals and interests, including the hospital licensing committee, CA state hospital administrators, CA Governor and law makers who control the budget, Colman Court (who oversees treatment initiated by lawsuits), unions, and more. This situation was amplified following the economic downturn, which resulted in constrained budgets and a consequent reshuffling of this administrative network.
- In this intermediate care facility, patients stayed from 6 to 9 months, limiting the time available for treatment. Patients were often sent back into the main prison population, often without continuity of treatment and support; thereby, increasing the chance of recidivism and reducing staff morale.
- Many, if not most, of the mental health staff were motivated by extrinsic rewards (money, benefits, etc.) rather than intrinsic fulfillment. Extrinsically motivated staff were especially unhappy with the prison environment, raising overall stress levels and making it more difficult for intrinsically motivated staff
- Prison environment (stark cement walls, electric fences, and clanking noise of metal doors) itself was very stressful to the senses.
- Many staff commuted long distance (up to 2hrs one-way) to work, which added to overall stress.

I worked at Salinas Valley Psych Program, inside maximum security prison for five years. Looking back, it is a wonder that, in spite of the chaotic environment, I not only survived but grew stronger and made a difference in patients’ and staff’s life. The 6-Seconds Emotional Intelligence (EI) model describes Emotional Intelligence Competencies, which are abilities and skills that allow one to transform challenge into opportunity (<http://www.6seconds.org/2010/01/27/the-six-seconds-eq-model/>).

Neuroscience

Research shows that our brain constantly evaluates inputs from all our senses as threats or rewards [see “Your Brain at Work,” by David Rock]. The “SCARF” model (Figure 1) describes the evaluation by the brain according to five criteria. If Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness

(feeling safe in relationship), or Fairness is compromised, the brain perceives a threat, whereas improvements in these factors are perceived as reward. The brain generates “Away” emotions in response to threatening situations and “Towards” emotions in response to rewarding situations.

Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging shows that when we perceive a threat the limbic system (emotional center) becomes active while the prefrontal cortex (cognitive center central to decision-making) activity decreases. Fortunately, labeling our emotions during threatening situations and/or reappraisal (or reinterpretation) of the situation shifts activity from limbic to the prefrontal cortex, thus reducing emotional reactivity and improving our ability to act consciously.

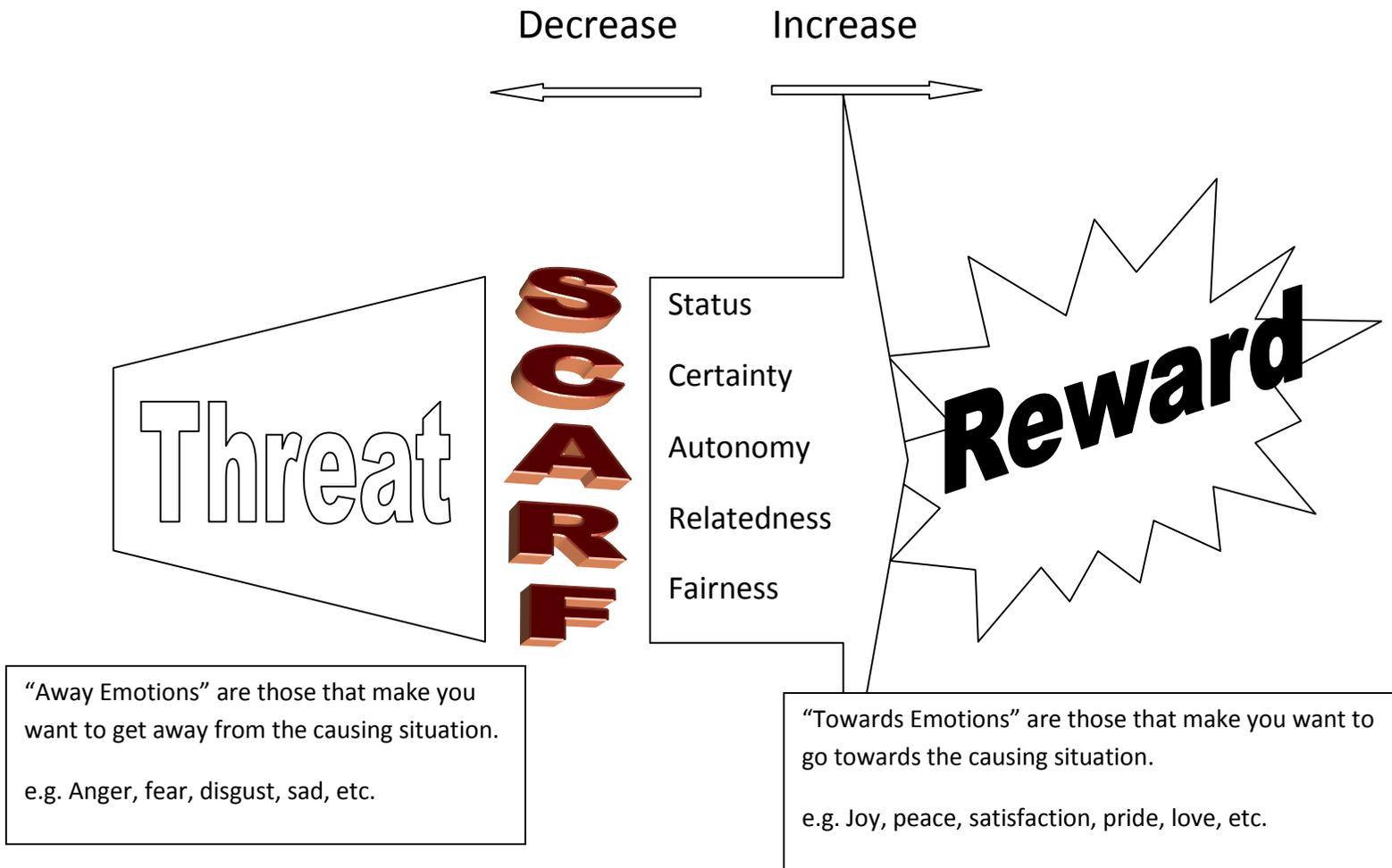


Figure 1: The SCARF model

Although emotions responding to threats or rewards are generated in the limbic system, interpretation of situations as either rewarding or threatening is governed by conscious thought in the pre-frontal cortex. Emotional Intelligence Competencies allow us to reappraise and transcend threatening situations. One important competency is to have a “Noble Goal.” A noble goal provides a focus for seeing opportunities for reward in the midst of threatening situations, thereby generating “toward” emotions that help us preserve our cognitive capacity and clarity.

Two Noble Goals helped me to meet the challenges of the prison system; I wanted to achieve self-growth and help others grow and overcome their challenges. I saw opportunity in the chaotic prison environment to fulfill these goals. Two quotes that helped me in this endeavor: “Control is illusionary” (Helen Keller) and “Security is having wisdom of uncertainty” (Deepak Chopra.) I considered the prison environment to be a playground to develop my wisdom of uncertainty while helping others. To me, facilitating groups for patients was very therapeutic and, I believe, created new neural pathways and new reaction patterns. Thus, my noble goals provided intrinsic motivation and allowed me to make constructive choices in the face of chaos. I went beyond my job requirement and became certified as an EI Advanced Trainer and EI Advanced Practitioner. Using this training, I facilitated workshops for staff to improve their competencies and initiated a grass-root program, “Council to Improve Climate,” to improve the culture at work.

Although I was unaware of the SCARF model at the time, the SCARF model (Figure 1) explains how I was able to create rewarding results in an otherwise unbearable situation. Personal achievement helped me gain respect, recognition, and *status*. In 2008, I received, “The State of California Superior Accomplishment Award”. I was also granted more *autonomy*; so I introduced two new unique group therapy programs, Breaking Barriers (<http://www.ggco.com/correctional.html>) and Epictetus Club (<http://epictetusclub.com/>), and brought in a guest speaker to inspire patients. My contributions were beneficial and popular with patients. Driven intrinsically I was able to focus on constructive actions and this increased my connection to others (improving *Relatedness*). By viewing events from others (including administrators) point of view, I was able to interpret their choices in a better light (*fairness*; see criteria in figure 1).

I appreciate the knowledge David Rock and 6 Seconds have provided to understand how the human brain works and how one can use this knowledge to succeed in a chaotic and challenging environment.