HEAD
HEART
+BRAIN

Brain-savvy
relationships

╋ Establishing and managing relationships is one of the crucial success factors for leaders. Recent research by Head Heart +Brain and others suggests that in the work context there is a long way to go to establish optimal relationships. This is particularly relevant in how leaders relate to their teams.

For example, look at some of the recent data from Head Heart + Brain's survey of 2000 UK workers:

╋ 47% of employees reported feeling threatened by their leaders

╋ Just 15% of employees say their leader is interested in how they feel

╋ Employees say 95% of leaders do not demonstrate critical "brain-savvy" leadership traits

Having an understanding of how the brain works in the context of relationships can help leaders better form, manage and influence them. This guide looks at some of the relevant neuroscience and applies it to relationships and influence. We have also written about its application to change in our guide Brain-Savvy Change.

The role of neuroscience

Neuroscience is the study of how the brain reacts at a biological level and how these reactions, impact social interactions and behaviour. Recent developments have shed a new and fascinating light on how people react in social situations, and therefore how we can form better relationships and better influence others.

One important development was in 2000, when Evian Gordon proposed a new theory that one of the primary organising principles governing social behaviour is the desire to maximise reward and minimise threat. Then in 2008, Lieberman and Eisenberger, found that in many situations the neural networks used to maximise reward and minimise threat are the same as those used for critical survival needs. This implies that the brain treats social needs in the same way as it treats the need for food and shelter.

The brain is highly evolved to work in a social environment. And if that social environment appears to be in any way threatening, then it will switch into some form of survival mode. If the working environment does not provide the social support that the brain feels is needed to survive – being included in the group, having a degree of knowledge of what will happen from moment to moment, feeling a connection with other people, there being trust in the working environment, congruence between stated values and behaviours… the list goes on.   If we don't have these things then the brain takes action and a number of things start to happen. Older parts of the brain, the ones that govern emotion, fight or flight become activated. They take resources away from the newer parts of the brain, the parts that help lateral thinking, connection making, creativity, and the regulation of emotions. This happens because from an evolutionary survival perspective we didn't need those parts the brain in order to protect ourselves from a threat in the environment. But in a modern business this impacts the ability to be engaged with others and perform well at work.

So, whenever the work environment creates any kind of threat, people stop being as productive and effective as they are able to be. If a leader can be more skilled at understanding this reaction in themselves and their team they can build more productive relationships and more productive relationships means they are more influential.

The brain's organising principle

THREAT   ◄─────────────────────────────────────►   REWARD
Away from   Towards

|	
Avoid	Approach
Uncertainty	Interest
Problem focus	Solution focus
Tunnel vision	Broad perspective
Data focused	Connect with others
Disengaged from others	Engages

Using neuroscience in relationships

✛ We have developed a memorable way for leaders to use the neuroscience of relationships. We call this our CORE model.

The CORE model

The CORE model summarises how people react in social situations. In particular, it helps leaders identify the drivers of threat and reward responses in people. The model is based on the two neuro-scientific insights we mentioned above:

1. Motivation driving social behaviour is governed by a principle of minimising threat and maximising reward.
2. The brain networks we draw on to minimise threat and maximise reward are the same brain networks used for our primary survival needs. In other words the brain treats social needs in the same way as it treats the need for food and water.

The brain is wired to look for threats rather than rewards. It's one of the reasons humans have survived so long. But it also means we need many more reward responses in order to feel good, and that one threat can override a number of rewards.

Conscious

Unconscious

Social

Threat

Reward

Certainty   Options   Reputation   Equity
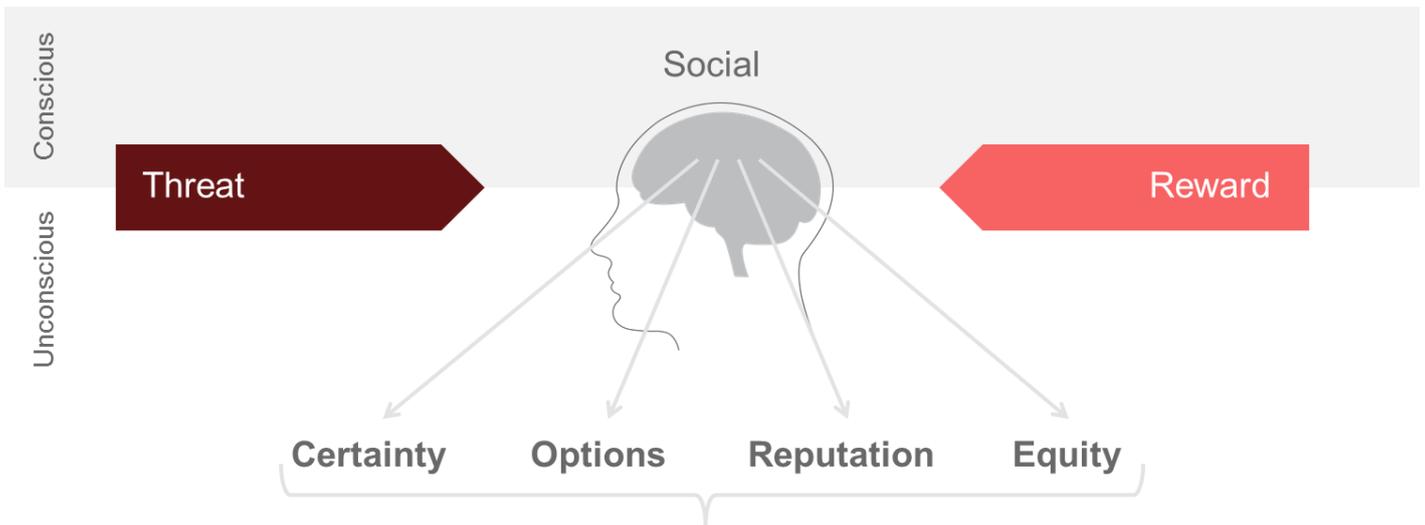
The core elements operate at an unconscious level. Once triggered by a perceived threat or reward take the following steps:

1

Sense what has happened

2

Explore which element has been triggered

3

Take action by mitigating, compensating or removing (threat) or maximising or magnifying (reward)

CORE elements

+ The CORE model identifies the common factors that activate both reward and threat responses in social situations. These fall into four elements of human social experience:

Certainty the knowledge that we can predict the future
Options the extent to which we feel we have choice
Reputation our relative importance to others
Equity our sense that things are equitable

These four elements activate either the 'primary reward' or the 'primary threat' circuitry of the brain. For example, a perceived threat to one's sense of equity activates similar brain networks to a threat to one's life. In the same way, a perceived increase to your reputation activates the same reward circuitry as receiving a monetary reward. The reaction happens in a nanosecond and is automatic, driving behaviour before the individual has a chance to rationally consider their response.

How CORE works – an example

When we first meet someone and interact we unconsciously categorise people as friend or foe. Foe is the default; the category we will give others unless we receive signals that suggest otherwise. With people the brain is constantly scanning for threat or reward signals. This was very useful from an evolutionary point of view but can mean we react to things more strongly or more quickly before we have had a chance for our rational brain to assess the situation. So we may experience an interaction or a new acquaintance as a threat in all or some of these four CORE elements. Circumstances may also trigger threat or reward responses for individuals such as changes to members of the team, new roles, recognition etc.

So for example, consider when you have a new team member joining. The established team may categorise the newcomer as foe because they are uncertain (CERTAINTY) about how the person fits into the team. They are uncertain about how the new comer will impact them. On the other hand, if they were given the choice to meet the new person as part of the selection process and had a say in who was hired they might feel they were given some control and choice and perceive a reward response (OPTIONS). Also if an existing team member is asked to be involved in showing the newcomer the ropes and another to buddy him or her those people may experience a reward response to their perceived hierarchical position in the team (REPUTATION). Finally they may feel that, although they will need to make an effort to get to know the new comer in the end the process for choosing who joined the team was robust and transparent – and so they experience this as a reward to their sense of equity (EQUITY).

Lets take another example relevant to a leader. Imagine the leader is giving presentation to a CEO and it is important they agree to a new project. To manage the CEO's sense of certainty it's important to think about how the presentation material links to existing business knowledge or activity thus reducing the threat of uncertainty (CERTIANTY). The leader will also want to give the CEO some choice so they feel they have control over the decision (OPTIONS). They will want to point out how adopting the idea will enhance the CEO's future success and want to avoid threatening their reputation by suggesting that current work methods which the CEO is associated with are not working (REPUTATION).

Finally the leader will want to ensure that the way the idea is positioned is equitable in the culture of the business (EQUITY).

Sometimes it is not possible to just create a sense of reward so it is important to also think about the specific person to be influenced or bond with. What might trigger their sense of threat and which of the elements are likely to be most important to them in the situation?

Why so important?

Whether people feel a threat or a reward will have significant impact on their problem solving, decision-making, stress-management, collaboration and motivation. Knowing the drivers that cause a threat response enables us to design initiatives to minimise threats. Knowing about the drivers that can activate a reward response enables us to motivate people more.

In a stable environment there is clearly great value in being able to recognise these many responses (using them to light up reward pathways in ways that don't just require material rewards like money or promotion, for example). In times of change, understanding these responses is even more important. When the status quo is disrupted, we are constantly and unconsciously scanning for ways in which we are threatened in all of the CORE elements. Our brains are wired to look for threats rather than rewards, and when a threat is found there is a significant decrease in the resources available to the prefrontal cortex: the part of the brain responsible for planning, decision making and moderating behaviour. Our focus is on dealing with the threat until it is resolved. Performance and productivity invariably suffer as a result. If leaders can take the sense of threat from an unconscious to a conscious level, people are able to deal with it. To do that, leaders must mitigate the threat by removing it or triggering a reward to compensate for it.

Mitigating threat triggers

The table below shows some of the typical threat triggers in each of the CORE elements in a social context. It also shows actions that are more likely to trigger reward or mitigate the threat. Understanding these responses in ourselves, being sensitive to them in others and equipping leaders to consider them provides an enormously valuable tool in managing and developing relationships:

Area of human experience	Common threat triggers	Mitigating actions/increase reward
Certainty	• Lack of information about the business • Unclear expectations • Lack of clarity on how company goals relate to individual goals • Inconsistent manager behaviour • Frequent changes to the team • Limited information about colleagues • Big changes in work or the team	• Clear purpose and goals • Create positive outcomes • Have employees create their own goals in line with purpose and strategy • Link individuals goals to peer/ manager/organisation goals to create big picture view of connections • Open communication • Involve the team n hiring • Make efforts to share information both professional and personal • Break down large projects into steps • Contract with the team for how you will work with them and what they need from you
Options	• Excluding people from shaping plans • Appointing people to task group/ teams • Being told what to do • Restrict available ways of working / dictate how tasks are to be completed • Hard coding career paths and progression – i.e. this is the route you must follow • Micro managing	• Give people choices • Create flexible work patterns • Set the overall direction, define the details as a team • Allow people to create the details and routes to achieve goals • Create policy guidelines rather than rules • Give people choices and personal control • Give people choice autonomy to carry out their job

Reputation	• Giving feedback, especially in public • Leaving people out of activities • Excluding people from meetings / discussions relevant to their work • Ignore individual's ideas • Giving critical feedback, especially publically • Reducing the power of an individual's role	• Ask for self- assessment of performance, keep negative feedback private • Give positive praise and recognition in the moment • Having clear criteria for who attends what • Providing opportunities to learn and grow • Allow team/individual to take credit • Create learning and improvement opportunities • Assign work according to best person for the job, not by job title
Equity	• Perceived favouritism • Uneven workload • Lack transparency • Restricted access to learning opportunities, e.g. Hi-Pots only • Inconsistent decisions	• Clearly explaining actions and context • Transparency about how and why decisions are made • Set out and follow clear management policies • Provide open access to learning • Celebrate innovation and new ideas

Using the brain to build better relationships

Using this model in practice

╋ The model can be used in three main ways:

1. To understand your feelings about a relationship, this is especially useful when it is a difficult relationship
2. To understand your team or another person better
3. To plan how to position an idea or project where you want to gain agreement and to influence a key stakeholder or colleague

CORE and relationships

+ Take the example of Andy and Sue. Andy knows that Sue is crucial to his future success on an important project but he just can't get around to engaging with her. Andy has postponed a few meetings and now it is even more difficult because he feels on the back foot. Every time they are due to meet he finds some more important and satisfying task he has to do. Andy just can't put his finger on why he never gets around to meeting with Sue. He worries about it but when the day for the meeting comes up manages to convince himself that he has more important things on.

As we mentioned above, the brain responds to feelings of threat in a nano second and reacts before consciously understanding why. The brain's organising principle suggests that when someone avoids people or situations they are experiencing threat. One way to deal with this is to bring the unconscious reactions into consciousness. The CORE model can help do this by analysing which elements of social experience are threatened and then mitigating the threat response. So in the example, maybe Sue creates a sense of threat because:

Certainty Andy is uncertain of Sue's support
Options Andy feels Sue has strong views on the project and will want it done in her way
Reputation He feels his reputation is at threat as he will not be the instigator of the project plan

Equity Andy feels it is unfair that Sue has a say in his project

Bringing these concerns to conscious awareness can sometimes be enough to mitigate them. Alternatively, Andy can work through how he can increase the likelihood of Sue supporting his approach to the project, can present her with options he is willing to use on the project, thus giving himself more control, can ensure that other stakeholders understand his role on the project thus protecting his reputation and finally by doing all of this he will be in a better position to debate with Sue the right approach rather than have her dictate a course of action. Thus increasing his sense of equity.

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CORE and the team

+ CORE can help leaders to analysis how individuals in the team may be feeling and what can be done to mitigate any feelings of threat.

Consider this scenario. Some team members are engaged and performing well. Others flip in and out of engagement. Yet others puzzle the leader. He/she can't make them out at all, they do their job but keep their head down barely connecting and it is unclear what is important to them.

CORE can help the leader to understand more about team members and what may motivate them. Over all neuroscience is showing the people are more productive when there is a good connection between people, they work under mild pressure, not stressed but not to easy either. This is usually when there are high expectations but high support too. In this context there is also some evidence that people have a preference in one or two of the CORE elements in different situations; that is they have one of the elements which is more likely to produce threat or reward when activated in a social setting. So for example equity may be the most important element for some team members and certainty for others. It is also useful to understand what certainty means to the individual. For some, it may be the little things; knowing when meetings will start and end, what the agenda is and who is running the meeting. For others, it maybe more big picture issues like how to their

goals link to the purpose of the work unit.

One way to help people understand their own response to threat and reward is to share CORE with them and then have them write on a post-it the element which is more important to them in a work setting, how they behave when they feel a sense of threat, what their colleagues will see and how they would like others in the team to respond to help them overcome the threat. This is good for team building as well as giving a sense of how different people behave when they feel threatened. Knowing this, can help the leader modify their approach to individual team members, thus reducing threat and creating more reward opportunities.

CORE and influence

+ Many leaders will recognise this situation. The leader believes they have the solution to a long standing problem or a creative idea for getting more sales but the person they need to agree has batted the suggestion away once, asked for more data and the leader feels apprehensive about going back to them because of the response to the suggestions. How does the leader influence them?

Reducing threat

Use CORE to analyse what might feel like a threat to the decision maker who needs to be on board. What about the suggestion that might activate a threat response to their certainty, options, reputation or sense of equity?

Certainty - Do they have information about how this solution will impact their work or role?
Options - Do they have some control over how the solution will be implemented, communicated and used?
Reputation - Is their reputation impacted negatively by adopting this solution?
Equity - How might this seem inequitable or unfair?

Creating reward

The leader can also look at how they can build a sense of reward into the positioning and presentation of the idea.

Certainty - What details and links to existing activity or information can be made to be certain the solution stands a good chance of working?
Options - What options can be given to this stakeholder to increase their sense of control?
Reputation - How will this solution enhance their reputation or the reputation of their work unit?
Equity - How can it play to their sense of equity?

These are just some of the applications of the CORE model to relationships. Once you begin to think about relationships through the lens of how the brain works and the threat and reward response provoked, you are able to adjust your own approach to achieve more productive relationships and gain greater influence.

Further information

+ The Head Heart + Brain team have a deep understanding and experience of helping leaders succeed. If you'd like to find out more about CORE or any of our other leadership development tools please get in touch at partners@hhab.co.uk or visit our web site www.headheartbrain.com.

The team at Head Heart +Brain work with the rational and cognitive content -the head; with the emotions focusing on how people are successful -the heart and with the brain using the findings from neuroscience to inform their work. There are many notable scientists in the field who have produced a mass of data relevant to how the brain responds in social situations. Some of the challenge is sifting through all the information and drawing together the meaning for leaders. It's an ongoing process that we undertake at Head Heart + Brain. For leaders, we present this in our blog articles in Master Your Mind and in our MasterMind leadership development social learning site. We then use the relevant information in our leadership programmes, and we've used the positive results, we've seen to develop tools and models to help leaders apply some of the neuroscience findings in a practical way at work.