



LEADING WITH THE BRAIN IN MIND:

Guiding Your Team Through the
Uncertainty of a Global Pandemic

BY DAVE STRIEGEL, PH.D.

**We are overwhelmed. We are afraid.
We are human. To lead our teams most
effectively through this global crisis
requires us to understand the brain.**

I've been studying the neuroscience of leadership and applying it to dentistry for several years now and am convinced it can serve as a beacon of light in this storm for all of us who are responsible for leading teams. A critical resource for anyone in this position is the work by Dr. David Rock, author of the outstanding book, **Your Brain at Work**, and co-founder and director of the Neuro Leadership Institute. Rock's work is based on the knowledge that when something happens to us, the brain's primary organizing principle is to assess a situation's level of threat versus reward. When something of the magnitude of the current pandemic occurs, our brains respond swiftly and strongly. Rock's **SCARF** model (**Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness**), explains how the threat response is commonly triggered in the brain and is squarely in play right now. The model provides an approach backed by science for leading our teams confidently through these very challenging times.

BIG PICTURE

When events happen to us, our brains instinctually lean toward the threat response in an effort to insure our survival. Our first inclination is to fight or flee. With the global pandemic threatening both our physical and economic well-being, our brains are exploding with fear. The key at this point is to strive to **BALANCE** the biological need to react with the functional need to stay even-keeled. The five components of the SCARF model can give you a good idea of where to focus your efforts to calm your team's minds so you and they can come out the other side of this looking forward to working together to serve your patients.

STATUS

Status refers to how we fit into our teams. Are we valued? Do we contribute? Even more than whether or not they make a contribution, your teams are wondering what will happen to their jobs. Be transparent about what you are able to do. People may not like the message, but they can handle bad news if it's delivered with compassion and honesty. If you can, let them know your number one goal is to make sure everyone has a job when the pandemic is over. Consider using this time to evaluate and plan where your team can take positive steps up to improve. Let them know your expectation is that when this is all over, you want to be ready to hit the ground running. There are many unknowns and such a statement will send a strong message that you expect and are planning for a positive outcome in the future. As you obtain more information and need to make decisions, you'll let them know.

CERTAINTY

Certainty refers to the level of predictability in our jobs and our knowledge of what is going to happen. Do we have a predictable rhythm? Uncertainty is a way of life right now. Of the five SCARF components, our desire for certainty is being challenged the most right now. No one knows what's going to happen. Acknowledge this. Establish a regular time each week when you will talk with the team to give them updates on plans and to allow for questions. Be organized and predictable. However, allow time for chit chat and having fun. This bit of certainty in the form of a weekly meeting time will help them feel "in alignment" with you as their leader and will help quiet their brains. In addition, encourage them to minimize chatter amongst themselves about what "might" happen and instead focus on facts from only trusted sources of information, aka NOT social media.

AUTONOMY

Autonomy refers to the amount of control we have over our work environment. Do we get to choose how we accomplish our tasks? Uncontrollable stress feels big. Explore ways your team can experience choice while the practice is open limited hours by giving them options whenever possible.



Even the most basic choice such as the time and day of the weekly meeting or what agenda topics to discuss can have a huge impact on their sense of control. Be particularly mindful and understanding of the stress placed on team members with children at home whose schools are now closed. Parents of school-aged children may be monitoring on-line school sessions, which can feel like a "new" job they didn't ask for.

RELATEDNESS

Relatedness refers to our connection to the people with whom we work. The requirements we must follow to stay healthy and safe are directly in conflict with our need to feel connected to each other. Our instincts and upbringing combine to make the concept of "social distancing" unnatural and even stressful. We may find ourselves feeling every person near us is a potential threat. At a time of high stress when we need each other the most, we are instructed to stay away. This can lead to feelings of isolation, especially among those staff and patients who are in a high risk group or live alone. Yet relatedness is the component of the SCARF model that we have the greatest opportunity to leverage right now. Make the weekly team meeting a video gathering. Your brain responds better to video than audio only. Though you may not be able to greet and hug one another as normal, find other fun and creative ways to stay connected. For example, celebrate birthdays and company anniversaries, hold virtual happy hours, play a game remotely, do a group yoga class. Most importantly, extend grace toward everyone on your team since you know what's happening in their brains.

FAIRNESS

Fairness refers to how we're treated compared to the rest of our team. The biggest trigger to the fairness doctrine will likely pertain to work assignments. Make every effort to reduce hours fairly across your teams. Our capacity to sacrifice for each other is enormous if we feel everyone is sacrificing equally within reason. If that's not possible, then be transparent and direct with what will happen and why. You may have some team members volunteer to bear more of the burden than others. This is admirable. However, guard against allowing one or two people to take the brunt of the sacrifice. A wonderful gesture may not be fair or right.

The future is unknown which is causing extremely high stress levels. By applying the SCARF model to how you are leading your team, you can be confident you and they will experience a greater sense of calm and increased peace of mind as we gradually work our way toward a new normal.



DAVE STRIEGEL

If you are interested in learning more about Dr. Dave's "brain focused" video meetings and webinars for your team, please email him at drdavestriegel@gmail.com or fill out the contact request on his website at www.drdavestriegel.com.

Dr. Dave Striegel's unique background, with a Ph.D. in sport psychology, coupled with his highly engaging, no-nonsense communication style have led to over 25 years of success as a performance coach and speaker. He has worked with individuals and organizations including professional and elite amateur athletes, Fortune 500 executives, business owners, top educators, law enforcement specialists and, yes, dentists of all types. A sampling of his client list includes executives from Merrill Lynch, Morgan Stanley, Smith Barney, athletes on the PGA, LPGA, ATP & WTA Tours, MLB, NBA, NFL, NHL and US Ski Team as well as members of FBI Hostage Rescue Teams and the military's Special Forces. While he passionately applies his concepts and principles to anyone wishing to improve their performance, Dr. Dave specializes in helping dentists utilize the latest advancements in leadership science to guide their teams and build a high performing practice culture.

