Improve the Quality of Interactions

Creating Safety: Minimize Threat – Maximize Reward

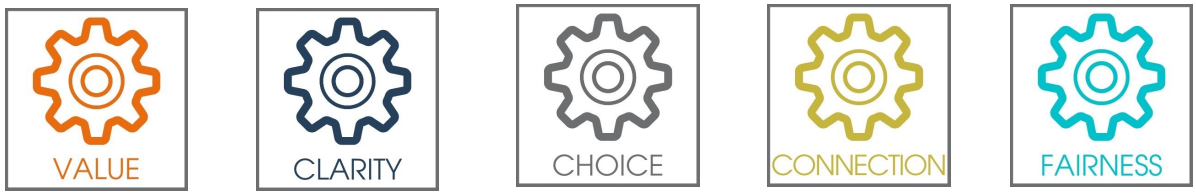
Our brain is constantly scanning the environment for potential **threats and rewards**—a fast, largely unconscious survival mechanism driven by structures like the amygdala and broader limbic system. When something is perceived as a threat, the brain shifts resources toward protection (narrowed attention, defensiveness, stress chemistry); when something feels like a reward, it opens access to higher-order thinking (creativity, collaboration, problem-solving).

- ✓ Enhance the quality and impact of feedback
- ✓ Reduce defensiveness
- ✓ Increase engagement
- ✓ Build buy-in for *change*
- ✓ Strengthen collaboration
- ✓ Improves trust and cross-functional teamwork
- ✓ Increase motivation and performance



5 Social Domains*

Our brains are wired to detect social threats and rewards, the 5 Social Domains: Value, Clarity, Choice, Connection and Fairness give us a practical framework for understanding – and intentionally shaping – those reactions in leadership and workplace interactions.



Less than or better than	Knowing what to expect	Feeling of control	In-group or out-group	Perception of treatment

VALUE	Our relative importance or standing compared to others. Threats to status feel like criticism or being diminished; rewards feel like recognition and respect.
CLARITY	Our ability to predict what will happen next. Ambiguity triggers threat; clarity and clear expectations create a sense of safety.
CHOICE	Our sense of control and choice. Micromanagement triggers threat; having options and ownership creates reward.
CONNECTION	Our sense of connection and belonging with others. Exclusion or distrust triggers threat; trust and shared purpose create reward.
FAIRNESS	Our perception of equitable treatment. Injustice triggers strong threat responses; transparency and fairness create stability and trust.

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5 Domains of Threat + Safety

Value

Value is the drive we feel to stand out from the crowd. When we share our new ideas and receive credit for a job well done, *value* is that glow of importance and acknowledgement we're looking for.

Leaders may erode team members' sense of *value* if they disregard those new ideas or take credit for others' work. On the other hand, they can bestow *value* when they share team members' accomplishments with the wider team — or better yet, give team members the floor to do so themselves.

Clarity

Humans naturally like to know what's going on. We like to understand our surroundings and be able to predict outcomes. At work, we feel threats to our *clarity* when our roles or responsibilities aren't certain or clear, or when leaders announce changes are coming without being transparent about what they are and who they'll impact.

Leaders can offer up *clarity* by making their expectations known and by being as transparent as possible.

Choice

We all like to feel a sense of control over the work we do and the decisions we make.

When leaders involve themselves with every little detail of their team members' work, they risk creating threats to people's choice. (This is why micromanaging feels so offensive.) However, when leaders give team members the time and space to do their work, or the option to choose the work location that allows them to be most productive, they send a much more rewarding signal that they trust and value the person's ability to get things done.

Connection

Whether or not we mean to, humans draw boundaries around their groups. Some people are part of an "in- group," while others fall in the "out-group." In-groups and out-groups crop up all the time at work. For leaders, the goal is to expand the in-group and shrink the out-group to increase the sense of connection across the organization.

Connection is the sense that we belong — that we're in the in-group. Leaders can use language such as "we" and "us" to promote that feeling instead of language like "you," "me," and "they," which signals a clear boundary between groups.

Fairness

Lastly, humans innately want to feel a sense of fairness in social interactions. We prefer what's justified over what's tilted in one party's favor.

Leaders can go a long way in promoting fairness through acts of transparency. For example, when making decisions, leaders can communicate their thought process behind picking one choice over another. When team members don't get the full picture and start to invent alterative stories, it may increase the chance people feel slighted.

*Adapted from the NeuroLeadershipInstitute

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