

Being an Engaging Leader

by Michael J. O'Brien

April 2022



The
BluePrint
Toolset®

Contents

- Being an Engaging Leader 3
- Status 4
- Certainty..... 5
- Autonomy 6
- Relatedness 7
- Fairness..... 8
- Developing as Leader 9



Being an Engaging Leader

As leaders, our actions and reactions are under the microscope of our staff. Subconsciously and consciously, they look at every aspect of our behavior as clues to how they themselves should behave. For many of us, the nuance of our own behavior goes unnoticed. However, it is impactful to those around us, especially staff that reports to us. This can create frustration as we expect our staff to take initiative, be accountable, and fully participate in the work at hand. Instead, we get the opposite: delays, blame and disengagement. What we do not realize is the nuances of our leadership behavior is the difference between an engaged team and a disengaged team.

We have all experienced the positive and negative impacts a leader can have on our own performance. A simple statement from our leader can ruin our whole day, making it hard to focus on work. Thus, we become disengaged. Often the leader did not even realize the impact of what they said. This staff reaction is known as an Amygdala Hijack.

The amygdala hijack (Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman, 1995) is triggered when an individual experiences a significant emotional threat. When this happens, their rational thought process is compromised and the person defaults into a defensive position of fight, flight or freeze. In most situations it means hours of lost productivity and effectiveness.

While the amygdala hijack is usually referenced around threats of snakes and spiders, there are five critical areas where this happens daily in our workplace. Dr. David Rock¹ has identified these five common social threats as SCARF: the potential for a leader to threaten, or advance, someone's Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness or Fairness.

While the word "threat" may seem strong for most leaders, this is how our brains react to throw-away statements that we can all make without thinking of the impact the statement has on the other person. While we may notice that our staff are not fully engaged, we generally miss that we could have been the cause of it. The idea is not to coddle our staff but to understand that the way we lead will either engage them or disengage them. For the most part, the difference is just nuance, not needing to change the objectives, just the context and delivery of the objective.

¹ Rock, David. "SCARF: A brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others." NeuroLeadership Journal no. 1 (2008): 44-52.



Status

Status is the relative respect, competence and deference given to an individual. An individual whose status is not threatened will believe their effort in the work environment is making a difference. Therefore, they are more engaged and more productive as they are choosing to use their discretionary energy in the workplace.

As leaders, we can threaten status in many ways, from simply ignoring a staff member to outright public humiliation for an action deemed inappropriate in the moment. The most common issue where status can be threatened is when someone makes a mistake. How we handle mistakes from our staff is an important nuance of leadership. In looking at mistakes, we as leaders can either hold a fixed or growth mindset (Carol Dweck).

When we hold a fixed mindset, we see mistakes as permanent. If our staff member makes a mistake on this project, then that person is not capable of that work. We create a fear in our staff of making a mistake. This fear of mistakes holds back performance and innovation, as no one is willing to try something new for fear of making a mistake.

When we hold a growth mindset, we see mistakes as a temporary situation, and with a little work, can be overcome. As leaders, we do not need to accept mediocrity to prevent a threat to status. We just want to recognize how to give feedback in a way that maintains status and creates growth. One way to engage a growth mindset is to avoid asking why a person made the mistake (which focuses on the mistake and creates shame) and focus on getting back on track to the solution - "What do we need to do to get this project back on track?" The "we" is a key word, as that keeps their status in operating the project intact. When you use a mistake as a path for growth - from which your staff can learn and grow - you eliminate the threat and unleash their energy.

This recognition of mistakes as a path for growth is not about encouraging mistakes but taking the fear out of trying something new. It's Engaging Action. This reinforces that an individual's status is not based on being perfect, but on working hard and growing in performance. This increases personal accountability and innovation.





Certainty

Certainty is a firm conviction in the future. In the work environment, certainty connects staff to a predictable future. As leaders, we can threaten that certainty by focusing on the problems at hand and the potential failure of the department if something does not change.

When we are managing, it seems that focusing on the problems at hand is what we are supposed to do. This problem-focus is based on the limiting beliefs of scarcity and perfectionism, the thought being that the true path to success comes from solving all the current problems. This problem-focus fails to realize that a perfect, problem-free organization is an impossibility. Followers quickly recognize the impossibility of the strategy. They disengage their personal energy, as they come to understand that no matter how hard they work, it will not be enough. Since reaching the leader's goals will never happen, the followers shift to avoiding mistakes or making sure they aren't being blamed for making a mistake.

We create certainty in our staff by tapping into their teleological nature. Creating vivid pictures of the future engages followers to realize that vision. This approach is consistent with the appreciative inquiry method, where we recognize what is currently working and set plans to expand on the current success. This instills an abundance mentality and helps to create certainty in the organization.

As we connect our staff to our goals, through painting a vivid picture, or vision, of the future, we also want to bring that future closer to reality by articulating a strategy to achieve the vision. This simple cause-and-effect path helps the staff see how they can contribute to achieving the vision. The effective leader then reinforces current actions that are already moving the department toward this vision. Followers see where their individual effort will make a difference and they engage their discretionary energy in the pursuit of realizing the organization's vision. This, in turn, drives more proactive and innovative actions by the staff.

As a leader, Connect the Dots and create Certainty by articulating a vivid image of the future, the strategy to achieve it, and how each person can contribute to the successful achievement of the vision.

Autonomy

Autonomy is the ability to make an un-coerced decision. In the work environment, autonomy is the ability to operate in a culture where everyone wants to engage, as opposed to being forced to engage. As leaders, we can threaten autonomy by overusing our positional power. This overuse of power creates a “my way or the highway” approach, with little respect or consideration of staff.

The paradox of power is that the more we use it to control, the less control we actually realize. When we attempt to control (think micromanage), we believe we are assuring a certain outcome. The reality is that nobody likes being forced as a part of the culture, so our staff do the minimum effort to get through. They do not bring any of their own energy into the project. In fact, they will even give up accountability for the final product. When the outcome is not correct or short of target, our staff say, “I did it the way you told me, not my fault.”

As effective leaders, we recognize the choice our staff really have: to follow us or not. As effective leaders, we operate with an open

agenda and preemptively answer the question “why,” so that our staff have context for their work. This transparency creates a sense of autonomy and increases their ownership to the outcome. They truly feel accountable for the task and demonstrate higher levels of dedication, resilience and accountability as they strive for excellence.

When we create this culture of willing engagement, it may seem that we are letting everything go to chance that our staff will do the right thing, that we have empowered them to do what they want. The reality is that we are actually holding them accountable for the outcome (the performance), so instead of a push by micromanaging it is a pull of clarity of outcomes and transparency of the “why.” This creates legitimate power: the power our staff give us, and that is the power that allows us to have real control, as we get the outcome we want - successful completion of the task.

As a leader, Connect the Dots by providing a clear vision of success and a strong “why” and then get out of the way. This level of Autonomy allows the staff to bring their own energy and accountability to the task at hand.





Relatedness

Relatedness is a sense of safety with others through factors like trust and empathy. In the work environment, Relatedness is the bond the staff have with each other, driving collaboration for the accomplishment of shared goals and objectives. As leaders, we can threaten relatedness by driving internal competition for our attention and resources. The use of favoritism creates in-groups and out-groups and sets up the potential for a highly volatile and potentially unethical environment.

Managers inadvertently create in- and out-groups in one of two ways. Traditionally, managers hold the belief that their reports are inherently lazy and need either financial incentives or a threat of punishment to get them to perform. This philosophy leads to the idea that people are unworthy of trust and need constant supervision. This leader finds the need to micromanage the whole process which disengages the followers' commitment and energy.

The second way managers threaten psychological safety is the opposite of micromanaging - completely ignoring direct reports. In this case, the manager's fear of micromanaging causes them to avoid

the potential conflict of holding people accountable for their performance. Without a strong sense of accountability within the group, work flows to the competent and the ones who are not productive are ignored. Being ignored is worse than being fired! And not only does this situation create an ineffective disengaged culture, it also creates higher overhead as unproductive people are left on the payroll, with very little to do.

Successful leaders work to build healthy interdependence within their staff that results in collaboration within the department and with other departments. This interdependence comes from a healthy regard for the value each team member brings, as well as an investment into the growth and development of others' success. In-groups and out-groups are avoided as all team members are expected to perform and be active members of the team. Serious performance issues are dealt with directly and respectfully and not just sidelined. The result is a real, high-functioning team with a shared purpose.

When we Energize Action and hold people accountable for their individual and collective performance, through clear objectives, effective feedback and coaching, we enhance Relatedness and create a strong culture of Psychological Safety, interdependence, and cooperation.

Fairness

Fairness is a perception of impartial and just treatment, free of bias or injustice. In the work environment, fairness is working together with a shared purpose and a single set of shared expectations of behavior and treatment of one another. As leaders, we can threaten fairness by a narcissistic tendency to focus on what we can gain from our position and power. We create an environment where the staff's sole focus is to please us and, at the extreme, followers will tell the leader what he or she wants to hear rather than the actual truth. The leader then becomes disconnected from the reality of the situation.

The narcissistic manager's tendency to favor those who share their narrow view of reality creates opportunities and advancement for a select few, regardless of their true value to the organization. This lack of individual effort making a difference can cause the outgroup to be extremely disillusioned and disengaged. Since only a few of the team are actually heard and can contribute, the organization creates blind spots to new opportunities and threats. This results in an organization that is slow to adapt to changes in the marketplace.

Enlightened leaders demonstrate a balance of confidence and humility, practicing gratitude to all who contribute to the success of the department. This connects everyone to a compelling shared purpose. These leaders establish a clear set of values and principles for which all staff are held accountable. The shared purpose and fairness in the department builds not only trust but strong loyalty among the members—reinforced by genuine gratitude. Through the diversity of opinion and perspectives, new opportunities are capitalized on and threats are dealt with proactively. The genuine dignity provided to all staff creates a firm but fair style that holds people accountable for their performance, yet also provides them with the opportunity to grow and develop.

When we have a set of clear values and expectations, to which we hold all members of our team, we can Nurture Growth and develop a culture that is truly fair and just, resulting in an agile approach to the marketplace and innovation within the industry.



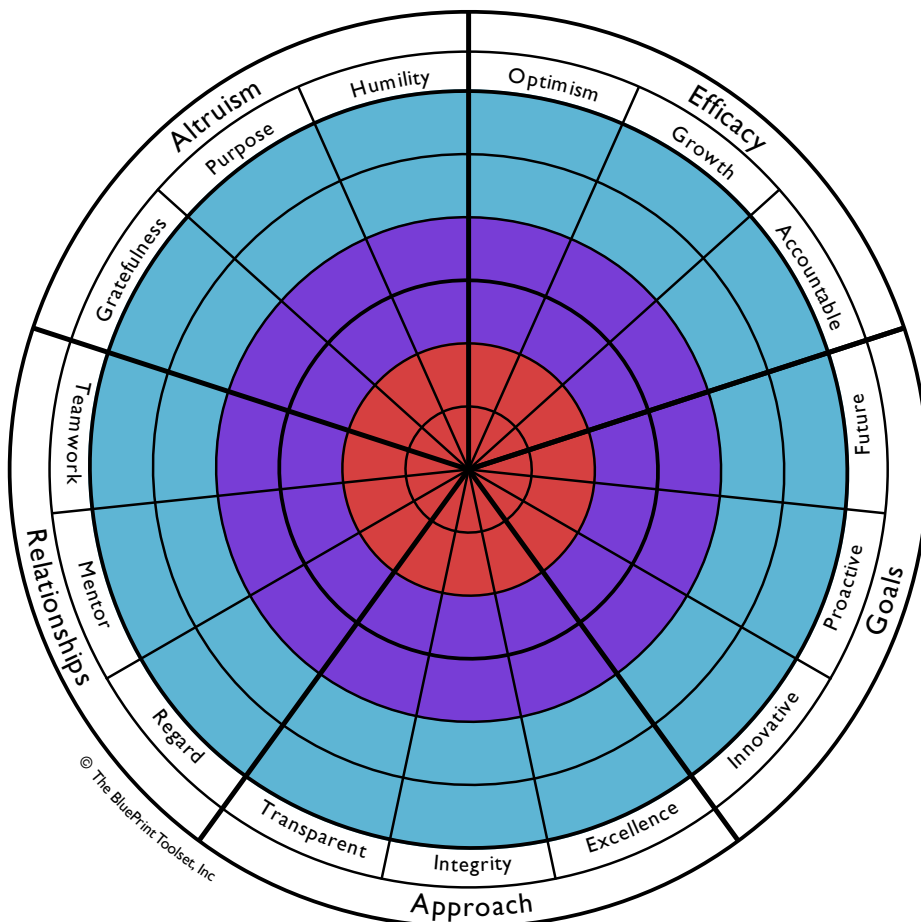
Developing as Leader

With [The Leadership Blueprint™](#), you gain insights into two important aspects: your own mindset and the impact you have on the mindset of your direct reports. Your own mindset reveals which of the SCARF threats you are most resilient to and which you are most likely to be triggered by. The impact you have on your direct report's mindset provides you with insight into where you tend to engage performance and where you are disengaging your staff along all five social threats.

The five factors of **The Blueprint Toolset®** track with the five social threats of SCARF. The **Efficacy** factor, which measures the level of confidence an individual has, and the impact a leader has on that confidence, relates to Status. The lower the efficacy scores both on mindset and impact increase the likelihood of causing a Fight, Flight or Freeze response due to the perception of a threat to someone status.

The **Goals** factor, which measures the energy towards the achievement of goals and objectives, relates to Certainty. The clearer the goals, both internally and as the impact from a leader, the more likely staff has resilience to setbacks while maintaining their certainty of the future. Lower scores in this factor cause individuals to feel less certain of their future, and less productive.

The **Approach** factor, which measures the amount of trust in the organization, relates to Autonomy. With higher scores on this factor, micromanaging is less likely and people are more engaged because they are empowered to achieve the goals with autonomy.



The **Relationship** factor, which measures belonging, is linked to the Relatedness social threat. Higher scores in this factor create a sense of belonging, connection, and collaboration. These insulate individuals from threats around relationships and fitting in.

Finally, the **Altruism** factor, which measures purpose and meaning, is related to the social threat of Fairness. Higher scores in this factor support a level of interdependence and humility supporting a more just system for all members.

As leaders, we recognize that we are under the microscope by our staff. As we become more conscious of the impact we are having on the mindset of our staff, we can grow into more engaging leaders resulting in increased productivity and innovation.



Michael J. O'Brien
Founder
The BluePrint Toolset[®], Inc.

Since 1985, Michael's diverse background in finance, economics and human behavior has organizations around the world seeking his ability to bring the seemingly intangible aspects of organizational culture and performance to light. His consulting expertise has enabled hundreds of organizations to achieve their goals through transforming their culture. He has one-on-one coached over 4,000 senior executives on six continents on how to improve their leadership to drive those culture transformations.

Michael has worked with an extensive and diverse group of clients. These client's successes include a \$3 Billion dollar increase in production in a single manufacturing facility, a successful merger of petrochemical companies, achieving the best place to work in a regional hospital, increased engagement in a professional sports franchise, and increasing the graduation rate from 30% to 115% of national average in a secondary school.

One of Michael's biggest joys is sharing his experience with fellow consultants and developing lifelong collaborations. He has had the pleasure of working with thousands of internal and independent consultants across the globe.

Michael is the co-creator of The BluePrint Toolset[®] – a suite of products used in the measurement and development of organizational cultures, leaders, teams, and individuals. He also co-authored "ThinkBanking & Corporate Webbing – 50 Secrets to Success in the Digital Age."

Michael is married with three adult children. He was raised in Canada and now resides in Houston, Texas with his wife Angela and their two dogs.



The
BluePrint
Toolset[®]