Managing Threat Response in the Workplace

Reduce the impact of threat responses on our perceptions, decisions, and behavior.

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We are very sensitive to potential threats in our environment, and for good reason. Our ability to detect threats and respond quickly and efficiently increases our chance of surviving dangerous situations. In the workplace, while physical threats are rare, social threats are common. Unfortunately, our threat detection system doesn't discriminate between social and physical threats, often resulting in a maladaptive physiological and behavioral response to social threats.

In the workplace, these maladaptive responses can impact our emotional and physical well-being and inhibit our ability to be productive and innovative. That's why it's important to understand the threat response, learn how to regulate our emotions, and implement preemptive measures to counteract and prevent detrimental responses.

In this paper, we explain the neuroscience, physiology, and behavior of the threat response and provide tools to help mitigate and prevent detrimental threat responses in the workplace. We give advice on how to determine the severity of threat responses and engage in mitigation strategies, including emotion labeling and reappraisal, as well as the benefits of using a shared language to discuss and defuse socially threatening situations.

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Key takeaways:

1. In times of heightened uncertainty and emotions, our responses and reactions are often derailed by swift threat responses.

2. Threat responses, while needed for our survival, may detrimentally shape our perceptions, choices, and work performance.

3. The levels of threat response can be managed using a shared language to optimize performance and improve engagement.

4. The first step toward managing your own threat response is learning to identify your threat response level so you can implement the appropriate strategy.

5. Managing threat responses can also be collaborative. Utilizing a shared language together can help manage tension across your workforce, from one-on-one interactions to teams and organizations.

Introduction:

We are wired to scan for threats

Imagine you are taking a jog down your favorite nature trail. You feel good, taking in the sights while exercising, when something ahead catches your attention. You feel a jolt in your belly, and your body tenses up — your alertness skyrockets. You can't quite tell what it is, but it appears to be slender and long, sticking out of some bushes on the side of the trail, and you think, "It's moving! It's alive! It's a snake." This thought sends your mind reeling, and your jog comes to a screeching halt. All of this took a split second. Quickly, you veer to the other side of the trail as you approach the object. Your heart is racing, and you are less sure of yourself as you get closer. But the image becomes more apparent as you approach: It's the branch of a bush blowing in the breeze. Just as you feel a sense of relief and begin jogging again, you realize you aren't running on the trail anymore, and your foot hits a root, causing you to fall hard to the ground.
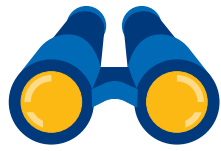
Now, imagine you are a team manager in your organization and are about to present some exciting data to the board of directors and CFO, with whom you have had rocky interactions. Before you open your mouth, the CFO asks what you thought about a negative newspaper article on your company that was published the day before. Instantly, you feel a robust reaction: Your face flushes, your heart rate increases, and your throat feels dry. You tell the CFO you haven't read the article yet and offer to continue with your presentation. But as you begin, your thoughts become jumbled, and you start stuttering. You are still thinking of what the article might have said, which derails your entire presentation.

Most of us can relate to experiencing a version of these situations. The jolt in the stomach and the rushing or freezing mind don't only kick in when we mistake a branch for a snake. This "better safe than sorry" reaction has one goal: survival. Our brain processes information in a split second and triggers a cascade of physiological responses (i.e., fight, flight, or freeze) to keep us alive, even when what we experience may not threaten our lives (Mobbs et al., 2015). While our threat response is fast, efficient, and necessary, it can also lead to errors in judgment. The response to a possible snake would be justified, but it's hard to say a stress-inducing email poses a real threat to our survival. Yet, it often is processed by the brain with a similar intensity as if it were a snake.

In our modern world, especially in the workplace, such an immediate threat response can be counterproductive. Only later, when we have time to assess the situation rationally, can we make sense of what happened. But why is that?

Why we react before fully processing

The split-second reaction to a real or perceived physical threat is rarely distinguishable for us in the moment. We might have that same reaction when asked a question that we are not prepared to answer or after receiving an email that portrays a bleak future for our organization.

Our brains assess potential threats to keep us alive.

These fast, intuitive responses to different contexts are coded into the old software we came equipped with for a good reason: They helped us survive (Mobbs et al., 2015). The challenge, nowadays, is that the software does not undergo sufficient updates to override the hidden code and triggers intense physiological and emotional reactions to social situations as if they were physical dangers.

We are wired to survive

We encounter various events throughout our lives, some of which may have negative aspects. Our brains tend to generalize a threat response to similar situations or stimuli associated with these events. This generalization can result in perceiving similar events as threatening, even when they might not be (Dunsmoor et al., 2011). It is no coincidence that there is an uncanny resemblance between your physiological and psychological responses to something you took to be a snake and your responses when the senior leader asked you about the newspaper article. Even though real physical threats are relatively rare in our modern world, our brains evolved under conditions when physical threats were plentiful, and even minor injuries (by today's standards) could be life-threatening.

In the modern world, especially the corporate world, we rarely face physical threats. Yet, the same neural system processes all threats, whether they are real, perceived, physical, or social.

Since the brain's primary goal is to keep us alive, it constantly scans the environment for potential threats. When it does register a possible danger, either real or perceived, it responds fast with a rapid shift in our attention to the source (Blanchard et al., 2011). While this is a highly evolved process that is essential to our survival, it often goes awry. Overestimating the severity of a threat, or failing to mitigate a counterproductive response, can negatively affect executive functioning, such as cooperation, critical thinking, creativity, and emotion regulation (Arnsten, 2009; Schmader et al., 2008; Vogel & Schwabe, 2016).

What is the biology behind our response?

The evolutionary origin of the threat response can be examined by studying animals. Animals' threat responses, both physiological and behavioral, are contingent on the perception of the severity and imminence of the threat (van Wingen et al., 2011). For example, threat assessments in prey animals are based on the predator's directionality, lethality, velocity, and previous experiences the animal has had with the predator (Stankowich & Blumstein, 2005). Similarly, humans assess physical and, by default, social threats in this way (Mobbs, 2018) because we only have one neurological system to process threats, regardless of their source. Assuming you unconsciously view having to give a presentation as a threat, you could consider, for example, the presence of a board member who asks tough

questions as an indicator of the threat's severity and the schedule for your presentation as an indicator of the threat's imminence. You might feel less threatened if you find out the board member will not be attending the meeting or that the presentation is months away.

Our brains constantly scan our environment for potential threats to launch an adaptive response, which we often have little control over. There is a reason for this: These "behind-the-scenes" neurological processes trigger a response before we can consciously process what is happening to us (e.g., our eyes see a potential snake before we become consciously aware of the fact) (Mobbs et al., 2015). In many ways, our threat response is contingent on our conscious or unconscious perception of the threat. Once we detect a possible threat, in addition to changes in our brain's locus of activity, our heart rate increases, we begin breathing more rapidly, our digestion decreases, and our liver releases glucose for energy. These responses all have one goal: to allow us to react quickly to avoid danger. Yet, they come at a cost because they impact how we interact with others, how we process the flow of information, and what decisions we make under pressure.

When we assess a potential threat, we rapidly proceed through three steps:

1 We identify the presence of the threat,

2 determine its severity,

3 and decide how imminent it is.

This is important because we respond differently depending on these factors. The threat assessment system dictates which behavioral response to initiate: freezing or fight-or-flight responses. Different situations have been shown to elicit specific responses to a threat, and it is clear that neural processes dictate these responses (Blanchard et al., 2001).

The neurological responses associated with processing threats are complex. While many areas in the brain are activated, certain situations and behavioral responses are associated with more or less activity in specific regions of the brain: the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and the set of areas commonly known as the limbic system (Herman et al., 2005; McEwen & Morrison, 2013). The PFC is responsible for our more sophisticated and complex cognitive abilities. In the

context of a threat response, the PFC is particularly beneficial when assessing whether a threat is present and weighs complex options regarding how we might deal with the threat.

The limbic system is responsible for, among other things, memory, emotions, and the connection between the two (Starcke & Brand, 2012). In terms of threat assessment, it rapidly compares our current situation to ones from our past to gauge whether we are facing a threat, the severity of the threat, how we responded to similar situations in the past, and the result of those responses. However, our threat response is not a zero-sum response. Instead, different behavioral and neural responses correspond with the intensity of our perception of the threat. In fact, researchers have identified three levels of the threat response that have neural, physiological, and psychological signatures (Mobbs et al., 2007; Mobbs et al., 2010).

Three levels of threat response

One study explained the levels by having participants navigate a virtual maze while being chased by a predator. When the predator "caught" the participants, they received an electric shock. The researchers discovered that as the predator approached the participants in the virtual maze, the increase in threat imminence was associated with distinct neurobiological activity patterns in functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans of the participants' brains (Mobbs et al., 2007). These findings were reaffirmed by another study in a real-world threat encounter scenario. The researchers showed these same distinct neural patterns were found when a tarantula approached participants. As the tarantula got closer and the threat became more imminent, the neural patterns changed in ways that represented an increase in threat level. The neural pathways responsible for our ability to detect and respond to potential threats is complex but can be summarized by a progressive shift of activity from the PFC to the periaqueductal gray (PAG) as our perceived level of threat increases (Mobbs et al., 2010). The PAG is most active when experiencing a high level of threat because it is the main contributor to our ability to elicit the most extreme reactions to threat (e.g., fight or flight) (McNaughton & Corr, 2004; Mobbs et al., 2007).

1 **Level 1 Threat: Alert but not alarmed**
At Level 1, we notice danger but it does not impact us immediately. We become more alert but we are still in control of our emotions and ability to be deliberate in our responses. This is the level of threat we want to maintain for productivity and during times of conflict.

2 **Level 2 Threat: Somewhat Alarmed**
At Level 2, as we begin to feel alarmed, the body prepares for a fight-or-flight response. Perception and cognition are impaired and we become more likely to react out of emotion rather than reason.

3 **Level 3 Threat: Highly Alarmed**
Level 3 is survival mode. We are now very alarmed, and the body is recruiting all its resources to fight or flee. At this level, it is nearly impossible to control our emotions and make thoughtful decisions.

While there aren't clear boundaries between levels of a threat response, there are behavioral and biological changes that can be grouped into increasingly extreme threat responses (Mobbs et al., 2015).

◯ *Level 1 — Alert, not alarmed*

This level of threat response shares commonalities with an optimal level of arousal and is indicative of being alert but not alarmed. You are alert enough to notice potential risks, but they do not immediately impact you. For instance, imagine having an approaching deadline that motivates you to work efficiently without feeling overly stressed. Your PFC would be highly functional at this level of threat response, allowing you to strategically navigate your environment.

This is the optimal response level during times of emotional and psychological pressure, and it helps sharpen your focus and attention without taxing your system with a physiological response. A Level 1 threat is akin to what we call the "sweet spot" for learning and cognitive performance. The right balance of tension and heightened attention allows our brain to process information with more salience.

We have evolved various mechanisms that help keep us at a Level 1 threat state, avoid potential threats, or optimally respond when we encounter one. The first of these tools allows us to predict possible threats. This mechanism is highly developed in humans (Corballis, 2013) and allows us to envision future scenarios and modify our behavior to prepare for or avoid potential threats (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). Our ability to do this stems partly from the neural connectivity between the medial PFC and the fusiform gyrus (responsible for object and facial recognition). Researchers have shown that the connection between these brain areas is responsible

for matching what we anticipated to what we are currently observing (Summerfield & Koechlin, 2008). This suggests that the brain makes predictions about what we are likely to encounter, allowing us to make faster and more accurate decisions about potential dangers (Mobbs et al., 2015).

The next mechanism involves changing our environment to avoid future threats. This includes both building physical structures to prevent threats (Odling-Smee et al., 2003) and forming social groups to work cooperatively to stave off threats (Hamilton, 1971).

While these mechanisms have been elucidated through research on how humans and other animals avoid and prepare for physical threats, they also play a role in how we manage social threats. For instance, recall the scenario where your CFO mentions the negative newspaper article and asks you about it during your presentation. Now, imagine you had a similar experience a while back that you can relate to the current situation — one that seemed insurmountable at the time but, upon reflection, had no adverse results. Based on that experience, you can swiftly prevent the slight rush of adrenaline from derailing you because you know you can "survive" the questions and manage the aftermath. This allows you to avoid an overwhelming physiological response and instead use the slight boost of adrenaline to focus your mind as you prepare your response — keeping yourself from escalating above a Level 1 threat state.

○ Level 2 — Highly alert and somewhat alarmed

At this level, you become hyperalert, feeling alarmed and distracted, which shifts the balance of your cognitive resources. Your PFC is less active, and your limbic system becomes more active as you process potential behavioral responses. This causes your perception and cognition to be temporarily impaired, and you are more likely to react emotionally than rationally.

The shift in our cognitive resources is designed to help us prepare for flight, fight, or freeze, but it is otherwise maladaptive when we would greatly benefit from doubling down on logical thinking.

This level of threat response can be harmful to collaboration, problem-solving, and creativity because our attention is preoccupied with managing our stress and anxiety instead of the high-stakes talk we are giving to the board.

In this scenario, a Level 2 threat could be induced even if you predicted you'd be asked difficult questions. Questions about your presentation won't entirely catch you off guard, but you were not prepared for a novel context (the negative newspaper article) to arise. You may be able to construct a reasonable response in a Level 1 threat state, but once you progress to Level 2, you may no longer have the optimal level of PFC activity necessary to do so. Your thoughts may become scrambled, and you may struggle to compose yourself and provide thoughtful responses. Afterward, when your threat level diminishes, you may construct better responses that you wish you could've come up with in the moment.

○ Level 3 — Highly alert and highly alarmed

This level of threat response often throws us straight into panic mode, causing our reactions and decisions to reflexively divorce from deeper considerations. We experience a temporary yet severe cognitive impairment. Fear and distress overwhelm us, and the PFC's optimal function is secondary to survival needs. When our brain triggers fast reactions in response to threats, it inadvertently suppresses the optimal engagement of the PFC — otherwise responsible for deliberate, reflective thought and action.

Driven by the limbic system, high alertness will divert resources to fuel a physical response that allows us to get out of a dangerous situation. In other words, we are actively recruiting every bodily resource to fight, flee, or freeze. That is why it becomes nearly impossible to keep our emotions in check and make thoughtful, controlled decisions when experiencing a Level 3 threat.

More specifically, when we believe we are in close proximity to a potential threat, we cease all other behaviors to direct our cognitive resources toward scanning our environment to identify the source of the potential threat (Blanchard et al., 2011). We also heighten our awareness of potential danger posed by other humans or predators in our environment. This involves increased activity in the amygdala and parietal cortex when, for example, perceiving people

with angry facial expressions (Mohanty et al., 2009). High levels of anxiety have been shown to bias our attention toward potentially threatening stimuli, increasing amygdala activity when experiencing threats (Bishop et al., 2004).

Finally, when we don't have the chance to prepare for a threat before encountering it, we react rapidly to extract rudimentary information about the threat. This involves various cortical regions, including the inferior parietal cortex, which is known to be critical to our ability to quickly direct attention toward novel stimuli in our environment (Gottlieb & Balan, 2010).

In this scenario, you're giving the presentation to the board with no prior awareness of the article, and you're completely caught off guard when your CFO brings up the topic. Your threat detection system results in hyper-focusing on facial expressions, where even the slightest sign of negativity triggers ever-increasing fear and anxiety. Your PFC activity is subdued, making it impossible for you to construct a coherent response. You feel a powerful urge to flee from the situation. You claim to need to use the bathroom as you rush out of the room.

This scenario may seem far-fetched to some, but it represents the reality that we only have one threat detection system, which is often maladaptive when faced with social threats. The key is to recognize each level of threat, distinguish them from each other, and regain control if and when you get to these threat states.

⚠️ How threat response management is useful, and why it matters

Fast reactions to potential dangers serve us well when our life is threatened by physical forces; however, they also lead us to rely on habits, cognitive biases, and assumptions rather than facts and data when our PFC isn't functioning optimally (McEwen & Morrison, 2013; Vogel & Schwabe, 2016). Instead of letting a question about the newspaper article derail your presentation to the board of directors, you can proactively mitigate the impact of a threat response. In this instance, maintaining the ability to think critically may have allowed you to realize you could counteract the newspaper article during your presentation with data showing the company is doing well financially.

Staying calm under pressure will help manage the impact of a threat response on our behavior.

Therefore, it is critical to understand just how unhelpful the physiological threat response can be when faced with a social threat and what to do instead across all three levels of the threat response.

Managing Level 1:
Reframe and reappraise

When we experience a Level 1 threat, we can often respond thoughtfully and constructively. One helpful method for addressing a Level 1 social threat response is to reappraise the threat itself (Ochsner, 2008; Buhle et al., 2014). As discussed above, a Level 1 threat is the optimal state of arousal. However, our experiences are dynamic: If we aren't cognizant of our emotional responses and proactive in how we address them, a relatively mundane situation can devolve into an increasingly threatening experience.

Reappraisal refers to actively changing the meaning of a situation that could elicit an emotional reaction (Gross, 2015). Simply changing the narrative of the social threat you are experiencing can prevent an escalation of threat. Reinterpreting a situation in a way that decreases your emotional response has been shown to increase PFC function and reduce the response of the amygdala toward negative stimuli. For instance, we can use a similar example that Dr. Brene Brown describes, examining how one seemingly small negative interaction can turn into a moderate threat response and how reappraisal could be used to prevent this escalation. Imagine, after your presentation to the board, you casually approach your co-worker to ask how his weekend was. The co-worker, with whom you are usually on friendly terms, looks at you and rolls his eyes as he walks away.

You instantly worry that you must have said or done something that upset him. You spend the rest of the day ruminating on every interaction you had with him over the past week, and your confusion and fear gradually shift into irritation. While this situation may be perceived as a minor social threat, it can quickly

escalate into interrupting your productivity and mood for the entire day as you ruminate on the possible reasons your co-worker might be upset with you. While this is a reasonable interpretation, it is entirely likely that, instead, your co-worker had a terrible weekend and got very little sleep. His irritation at your cheerful mention of the weekend has nothing to do with you or your actions.

It is difficult for us to know the cause of somebody else's mood. It's not always possible to communicate with the co-worker to immediately resolve the confusion. In those times, it is beneficial to reframe the situation in our minds and recognize that there could be alternative reasons for the co-worker's behavior outside of our influence.

Reappraising the encounter this way not only helps you process the situation, but it can also fine-tune your coping strategies to better perceive threats (or the lack thereof) in the future. For instance, surmising that you have upset your co-worker may result in feeling threatened next time you encounter him. This can lead to a particularly counterproductive set of behaviors, distancing yourself from a colleague when it's unwarranted and harming your workplace relationship.

While it's true that some people are better at reappraising than others, you can improve your ability to reappraise (Denny & Ochsner, 2014). One way is to consider the short-term nature of the stressful situation (Ochsner & Gross, 2008; Ochsner et al., 2012). For instance, you could focus your attention on the fact that while you don't know the content of the article mentioned by your CFO, you will soon, and you're likely not the only one in the boardroom who hasn't seen it. Also, you can practice focusing on a detail of the situation: Why did the CFO choose to bring the article up with you? Probably because they highly value your opinion. Ultimately, you get better at reappraisal with practice, which starts with the belief that you can do it and that, over time, you'll see improvements.

Managing Level 2:
Regulate your emotions to rebalance your response

Certain emotional situations have been shown to be better candidates for reappraisal than others. For example, when the emotional intensity of the situation is particularly high, people tend to prefer other strategies, such as focusing their attention elsewhere (Sheppes et al., 2011; Sheppes et al., 2014). In fact, the efficacy of reappraisal has been shown to decrease with emotional intensity (Sheppes et al., 2009). Said another way, if you're already in a high threat state, you may not have the ability to reappraise the situation.

This could be because when you are in a Level 2 threat state, you are feeling your emotions too strongly to be able to muster the cognitive effort required for reappraisal. In this case, one simple step to tame a Level 2 response is to label your emotions. Labeling emotions, a well-studied strategy that involves putting feelings into words, can help mitigate our fear response by activating regions of the PFC in charge of self-control while decreasing the amygdala's response (Lieberman, 2009). In one study, subjects with a fear of spiders were divided into four groups and asked to get closer and closer to a container with a live tarantula (they could touch the container if they were comfortable) (Kircanski et al., 2012). The first group was asked to say something that described their emotions as they approached the container (for example, "I am frightened by this ugly, terrifying spider"). The second group was instructed to say something that downplayed their fear (for example, "I am not afraid of the spider"). The third group was asked to say something irrelevant about the spider, while the fourth group was told to say nothing. When the researchers retested the subjects again after a week, they found the first group managed to get closer to the container than the other three groups. In other words, by labeling and thus acknowledging their emotions honestly, the subjects from the first group reduced their fear of spiders and tackled the situation more effectively. When experiencing a Level 2 threat in social contexts, this strategy can be effective. So, to tame your threat response, label your emotions.

Research suggests that in some cases, labeling emotional aspects of the situation may be more beneficial than labeling your own emotional experience (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019; McRae et al., 2010; Ortner, 2015). For example, if you're afraid of approaching a spider, you could say, "This situation is scary," instead of, "I'm scared." This could be because labeling external aspects allows one to distance themselves from the situation, diminishing the emotional response (Ortner, 2015).

When emotions run high, managers ought to intentionally interact with their employees in a way that reduces threat responses. By understanding the impact a threat response has on cognition and behavior, managers can preemptively offset the threat to decrease the chance of further escalation. You can manage your stress and others' by communicating in a way that lowers everyone's reactivity. Specifically, you can implement a shared language to discuss the most common stressors, making it easier for your team to discuss and address tensions more productively across various workplace interactions, including career conversations, power dynamics, performance conversations, and feedback.

The NeuroLeadership Institute's SCARF® Model provides an easy-to-remember framework representing the domains of psychological needs we all have: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness (Rock, 2008; Rock & Cox, 2012). Each SCARF domain can be triggered during, or even in anticipation of, interactions with others. When you're at a heightened threat level, you're more likely to misinterpret neutral, positive, or even absent statements. In the earlier example, you might have felt that your status was in jeopardy when you were unaware of the article the CFO brought up that criticized your organization. The emotional charge associated with that threat results in a declining quality of thought processes. This may lead you to lose control of the meeting in the presence of the board of directors and your employees.

The SCARF Model was designed to be used as a tool to label the nature of potential social threats in the workplace, creating a shared language. For instance, all parties could recognize that the CFO bringing up the article could be perceived as a status threat. This could be used in the moment to bring awareness to the threat, detaching the presenter from feeling the emotions of the threat and, instead, labeling the situation. Someone could acknowledge that the article itself is a status threat to the organization, and they should schedule a meeting to discuss it instead of having an impromptu discussion that could result in those involved feeling threatened. Also, knowledge and awareness of how status, along with the other domains of The SCARF Model, could be triggered in social situations might have dissuaded the CFO from bringing up the article right before your presentation.

The opposite of a threat response is a reward response.

We can give others a positive boost in any of the five SCARF domains by proactively sending positive signals. For example, the CFO could have given status rewards by approaching you after your presentation and saying they'd really value your thoughts on the newspaper article after you've had a chance to read it. By sending SCARF rewards, we can de-escalate a heated discussion and prevent ourselves and others from sliding into a Level 3 threat.

Managing Level 3:
Break out of the threat response cycle by managing physiology

During a Level 3 threat, psychological strategies, such as reappraisal, often fail to disrupt the threat response. For instance, one study found that students demonstrated a significant increase in irrational beliefs during times of high distress, leading to greater levels of catastrophizing, self-doubt, and frustration (DiLorenzo et al., 2007). These irrational beliefs are amplified during Level 3 threat states, and mitigation requires physical, rather than psychological, interventions to break the threat cycle. Exercising, physically distancing yourself from a threat, disengagement, a change of focus, or simply taking a break can help you manage these kinds of threats better in the moment.
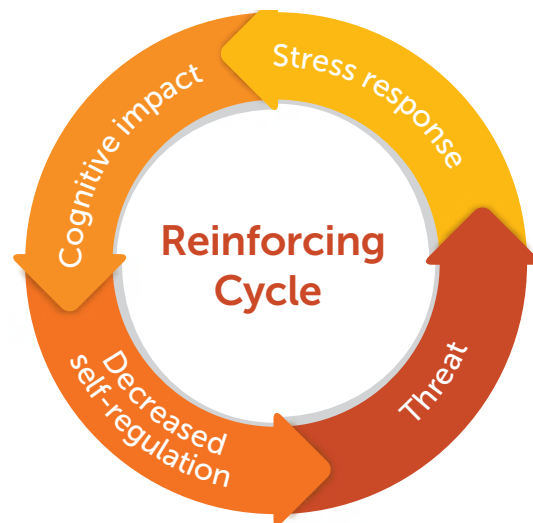
A Level 3 threat creates a robust physiological response in the body. Therefore, a physical reaction to release that energy is likely to help. Detaching yourself from the situation and participating in physical movements, such as going for a walk or dancing, can reduce the stress response (Hanna, 2006; Quiroga Murcia et al., 2010). Dancing provides a unique combination of a creative outlet along with physical activity, which

signals your nervous system to release endorphins (commonly called "feel-good" chemicals) that work to decrease your pain and stress response (Sprouse-Blum et al., 2010). A simple walk around the block can also release endorphins and reduce your threat state. In addition, physically distancing yourself from the stressful situation enables you to remove yourself from the visceral and often irrational psychological response to the stressor and allow new perspectives to arise. Even partaking in a minor action, such as a five-minute walk, can help, as any incremental progress to decrease the threat response can help remove yourself from a Level 3 state.

How understanding and mitigating our threat response is relevant for business audiences and the bottom line

While there are many ways that organizations can benefit from their employees' ability to mitigate a threat response, here we focus on one: psychological safety. It might not be obvious just how beneficial threat response management is to an organization until we realize the impact it has on our workforce, interpersonal interactions, and team dynamics.

Psychological safety refers to the perception people have regarding the consequences of taking interpersonal risks, such as proposing a new idea, speaking up when something is wrong, or questioning authority (Edmondson, 1999). Mitigating employees' threat responses is a key aspect of psychological safety. In fact, Dr. Amy Edmondson, best known for her pioneering research on psychological safety, underscores just how important threat management is to instill psychological safety:

> "One of the most fundamental challenges organizations face is how to manage the interpersonal threats inherent in employees admitting ignorance or uncertainty, voicing concerns and opinions, or simply being different. These threats are subtle but powerful, and they inhibit organizational learning. For people to feel comfortable speaking up with ideas or questions — an essential aspect of organizational learning — without fear of ridicule or punishment, managers must work to create a climate of psychological safety" (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 39).

The recommendations presented here can be used as strategies to create a psychologically safe organizational culture, and the benefits of a psychologically safe organization are vast. For instance, research shows that psychological safety promotes information and knowledge sharing (Collins & Smith, 2006), voicing ideas for organizational improvements (Liang et al., 2012), organizational learning (Bunderson & Boumgarden, 2010), initiatives to develop new products and services (Baer & Frese, 2003), and overall organizational performance (Carmeli et al., 2012).

Getting better at resolving conflict and tensions within and across your workforce is one of the key differentiating factors that sets great leaders and managers apart from the pack and promotes psychological safety across the organization. We can do that by using simple language to disrupt our thought processes in a frequent, visible, and replicable way. To identify and disrupt our maladaptive thought processes, and also to better understand the mental states of others, we can rely on shared language and terminology.

A shared language helps make things less personal.

To keep ourselves and others in a Level 1 threat state whenever possible, we can turn to frameworks that offer a shared language (e.g., SCARF) to verbalize what may be happening without making the experience personal. Utilizing a shared language to discuss complex or personal challenges aids communication among team members and diminishes Level 2 threats. For example, imagine initiating a new team project. You describe the task to your team, and you notice discomfort on the face of one of your team members. With a shared language, you can quickly identify the source of this discomfort without making it personal. It could be that the team member feels they weren't given a big enough role in the project, diminishing their status. Without a shared language like SCARF, they may struggle both to identify why they don't feel good about the assignment and how to communicate their concerns to you. An understanding of SCARF provides a streamlined way to go from the physiological and emotional threat response they are feeling to clarity around exactly why they are feeling this way, which can be communicated to you and the rest of the team. Having a common language that allows

everyone to speak about the same things across your organization will lead to a better understanding of what you can do to minimize a threat response and adjust your strategies accordingly.

Using a shared language to interpret the experiences and reactions of yourself and others aids in your ability to speak openly with your co-workers and ensures they understand precisely where you are coming from. Additionally, it provides members across an organization with a shared understanding of the threat responses faced by their co-workers — whether they are speaking up about their feelings or being made aware of the feelings of others — and provides everyone with the ability to defuse these situations using everyday social rewards (Rock & Cox, 2012).

This involves communicating about what's happening with their team, their responsibilities, and the overall business. A manager's elevated threat state often worsens their team's threat state and ultimately leads to poorer decision-making. This is in part because emotions can be highly contagious, resulting in empathetic responses that cause team members to take on the same emotions as their colleagues instead of formulating a constructive response that diminishes threat in themselves and others (for review see Banerjee & Srivastava, 2019).

Threshold and frequency matter:
When and how often to intervene

Once we understand the circumstances in which a threat response may be triggered and how it impacts our behavior, we can develop better strategies and language to reduce the threat response in ourselves and others. The contexts to consider are how we might experience threat responses in one-on-one interactions at a team level and at an organizational level.

On the individual level, you may encounter situations where you feel tension with a co-worker or are tasked with giving a high-stakes presentation. At the team level, you may perceive stress among multiple team members, including yourself. And at the organizational level, you may become aware of how the organization responds to significant events, such as how corporate leaders implemented changes in response to the pandemic.

Initially, team members will need to actively track how often these threat mitigation strategies are used, in which situations, and their effects. This will lay a foundation for organizational behavior change, resulting in the strategies being used routinely across the organization. Said another way, being motivated and encouraged to utilize these strategies can result in real long-term culture change, ingraining these beneficial behaviors into the fabric of the organization's culture. Over time, engaging in these strategies will become less effortful and more routine, improving the way members of the organization interact and handle stressful situations. Ultimately, this results in a more productive and collaborative environment that increases the overall well-being of the entire organization.

Conclusion

We have evolved a highly sensitive threat detection system that can be triggered by both physical and social threats. In the workplace, physical threats are rare, but social threats are commonplace. These social threats can result in a powerful and maladaptive threat response. With an understanding of our threat detection system, along with emotion regulation techniques such as reappraisal and emotion labeling, we can minimize the strength and deleterious impact of threat responses, helping to instill a psychologically safe and productive work environment. More specifically, we can ingrain organization-wide behavior, such as the use of a shared language, to help support ourselves and our colleagues' ability to mitigate threats in the workplace.

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