



Crisis Leadership or Leadership Crisis?

WE ARE CERTAINLY LIVING IN INTERESTING TIMES. COVID 19 ARRIVED FROM NOWHERE AND HAS CHANGED EVERYTHING.

We used to talk about the business environment being VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous). Covid 19 has shown us what those four words really mean and, more importantly, how those words make us feel.

As we try to identify how best to respond to the changes, fundamental questions emerge:

- Will this be over soon, or will there be a significant second wave of the virus (the deadliest phase of the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918)?
- If and when this current phase is over, how will the world economy put itself back together? What shape will that future world take? How will my organisation, and myself, find relevance in that uncertain future?

The thing that really puts the U into VUCA is the unsettling truth that nobody can honestly answer these existential questions. As we look to our politicians and scientists for certainty, we come to the realisation that nobody can be sure how things will unfold. Of course, we never really know what is around the corner, either as individuals or organisations. We create our five-year plans under the illusion that things will progress slowly and predictably, but history shows that this is not true. A time of peace has been, historically speaking, a brief interlude between states of war. The current situation is a reminder of that.

The problem with uncertainty is that most humans do not do well with it. Uncertainty is stressful and it brings with it a sense of social threat. Recent advances in neuroscience show us that the same primitive areas

of the brain are activated by a social threat as are engaged by a physical threat. We could argue that Maslow's hierarchy should be flattened to show social and belonging needs in the foundation level as they are equivalent in importance to physiological and safety/shelter needs. In the same way, Herzberg's Hygiene Factors could be expanded to include social safety and belonging. Herzberg made the point that Hygiene factors need to be taken care of first otherwise we focus on them and the result is de-motivation. Before we can think about motivation of our people to take advantage of the current opportunities, we need to eliminate the demotivators by minimising social threats such as uncertainty. This underlies much of the current enthusiasm for topics such as employee trust, workplace meaning and psychological safety which we explore in our client work. Lack of certainty (or VUCA Uncertainty) is a cause of social threat, but there are other factors at play too.

In his 2008 paper *SCARF: A Brain-Based Model for Collaborating with and Influencing Others*. David Rock proposes the SCARF model which stands for the five key "domains" where humans can perceive threat (and reward, of course). These are:

1. **Status** – our relative importance to others.
2. **Certainty** – our ability to predict the future.
3. **Autonomy** – our sense of self-directedness
4. **Relatedness** – how safe and connected we feel with others.
5. **Fairness** – how fair we perceive the exchanges between people to be.

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Rock confirms that these five social domains have the potential to activate the same threat and reward responses in our brain as their physical equivalents. Our threat alert system (primarily powered by the amygdala) is indifferent as to whether the threat is a saber-toothed tiger or an unfair performance appraisal. A threat is a threat and our classic responses are fight, flight or freeze. These are powerful reflexes and they have helped us to survive throughout history. We should occasionally take a moment to thank that long chain of ancestors who survived truly challenging environments in order to have the opportunity to breed successfully and pass on their DNA to us. We each come from a line of world-class Fighters, Flighters and Freezers!

These “survival imperatives” help to explain the strong emotional reactions that we have to SCARF threats and why it’s often hard to control them.

When we feel threatened – either physically or socially – the amygdala hijacks us and the consequent release of cortisol (the “stress hormone”) closes down the sophisticated part of our brain where creativity, problem-solving and even language reside. This leaves us in the grip of what Steven Peters refers to as our “inner chimp”. We can’t think straight, we feel out of control, and this only serves to increase the feeling of threat.

If we go back to SCARF, we can see that, in addition to the Certainty/Uncertainty element we have explored above, the other four dimensions are all potentially triggered in the current climate and any one of them can create the threat reaction.

The challenging work that organisations need to do right now requires creativity, collaboration, sharing, generosity, openness, authenticity and trust. Unfortunately, these

things are simply not present when we are in “fight or flight” mode. If we are to get the best out of our people in the current situation, we need to minimise the issues around SCARF and get people to the point of being “not de-motivated” by social threats. Only then can we think about positive motivation towards rewards and purpose.

So what are our top tips for high human performance in the current climate?

Five action points in the current climate:

- Start with ourselves. Acknowledge our levels of stress and express our own SCARF challenges to help others feel able to do the same.
- Be open about feeling “out of control” and then we can explore the realities.
- Name your feelings. This forces your chimp to release its grip so that you can fire up the supercomputer to find and express the appropriate words.
- Explore mindfulness as a great tool to develop the ability to notice and manage your emotional responses. You can find all kinds of resources on the internet.
- Learn about the broader topic of Emotional Intelligence (Daniel Goleman) which is crucial in these times and especially the potential to expand the gap between stimulus and response which Viktor Frankl called the “last of the human freedoms”.

There is always opportunity in crisis and the current situation is no exception. Some organisations and individuals will use this knowledge to stay calm and productive in order to make things happen. Others will wake up at the end of this and wonder what happened!

I would love to explore with you what can you do today to reduce perceived threats in an authentic way so that you can be the best version of yourself and so that you can lead others to be the best versions of themselves? Contact me for a no obligation dialogue and I can share what we are learning in these interesting times. ■

References:

Your Brain at Work, David Rock, Harper Business (1 Nov. 2009)
The Chimp Paradox, Steven Peters, Vermilion; First Edition edition (5 Jan. 2012)

PAUL BLACKHURST is a Client Director at Mannaz, with particular focus on individual and business impact. He has delivered leadership programmes in 48 countries over the last 20 years.
pbl@mannaz.com

