inspire confidence

CASE STUDY | LEADING THROUGH CHANGE

Turning threat into reward

How the SCARF model helped a day surgery team see a new service as something to gain rather than something to lose, and how any leader can communicate change more successfully.

- **Setting** Day surgery department, major hospital
- **Sector** Healthcare
- **Timeframe** Nine weeks to launch a dedicated cataract service
- **Model** SCARF, by David Rock 2008
- **Used for** leading change, intentionally moving feelings of threat into reward.

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THE CHALLENGE

What the change threatened to take away

The real challenge

Just nine weeks to establish a dedicated cataract surgery service inside the day surgery department of a major hospital, including a new waiting area for eye patients. The operational work was considerable. But one of the most important challenges was human: how would the nurses experience the change?

Uncertain shifts

Nurses were regularly redeployed to other departments when patient demand was low. Arriving for a shift and being sent somewhere entirely different created the threat of Uncertainty.

A threat to status

Cataract surgery is quick and needs no ward stay. The senior sister feared her nurses were being deskilled and losing the full breadth of nursing, leading to the threat of Status.

More than operations

Leading with the operational benefits would have missed both concerns. The communication had to address what the change meant to people, not only what it was.

WHAT WE DID

Three moves that reduced the threat

Each one was aimed at a specific concern the day surgery team held.



Established in nine weeks, with a dedicated waiting area for eye patients.

01 INCREASE CERTAINTY

Start with what stays the same

We were still a day surgery department and nursing expertise still mattered. Nurses would add ophthalmic skills, not lose existing ones. A dedicated service meant a steadier flow of patients into day surgery, so fewer redeployments and more predictable working

02 INCREASE STATUS

Restore meaning to the work

Eye surgery was seen as de-skilling nurses as it was so swift. Malcolm, a friend, fell and broke his hip after waiting for cataract surgery. His story showed what a short procedure protects.

03 INCREASE AUTONOMY

Get people to design the change

Nurses and consultants were asked to design the end to end process, including the layout and the design of the new waiting area. Student nurses decorated it with stencils! But everyone voted on the new equipment and agreed the communications to patients.

THE SCARF MODEL

Five triggers that can turn change into threat

David Rock's 2008 SCARF model. Each dimension can be experienced as a threat or a reward, depending on how a situation is handled.

THREATENED HERE

S

Status

Do I feel valued and respected?

THREATENED HERE

C

Certainty

Do I understand what is happening and what comes next?

THREATENED HERE

A

Autonomy

Do I have some control over what happens to me?

R

Relatedness

Do I feel connected, included and supported?

F

Fairness

Am I being treated fairly?

Instead of asking only, "How do we communicate this change?" leaders can ask, "Which aspects of this change might feel threatening, and what could we do to flip threat into reward?"

WHAT IT CHANGES

Less threat, more engagement

In the day surgery team

- Nurses heard what was staying the same before they heard what was changing - CERTAINTY
- A steadier patient flow meant fewer redeployments and more predictable shifts - CERTAINTY
- Malcolm's story tied a short procedure to independence and dignity. The nursing was no less important to patients - STATUS
- Colleagues across the hospital began asking how Malcolm was doing. His story brought the importance of their role to life.
- Nurses and consultants had autonomy – they designed the end to end process, layout and equipment - AUTONOMY.

How leaders can use SCARF

- **Status** Recognise expertise and explain why contributions matter.
- **Certainty** Begin with what stays the same, then say what is known and when people will hear more.
- **Autonomy** Give people real choices in how change is implemented.
- **Relatedness** Make space for honest conversations and shared understanding.
- **Fairness** Explain decisions openly and listen to concerns about their impact.

"We can be so focused on telling people what is changing that we forget to consider what the change means to them. Never underestimate the power of storytelling."

Paula Beattie, Inspire Confidence

BEFORE YOUR NEXT CHANGE ANNOUNCEMENT

Three questions to ask first

1. What might people believe they are losing?

2. Which SCARF dimensions could be threatened?

3. How can we address those concerns honestly while giving people something meaningful to move towards? Can we flip threat to reward?

Successful change is not only about designing a better future. It is about helping people feel able, valued and supported enough to help create it.

Paula Beattie

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