Embedding with empathy

(UXLibsV workshop)

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Introduction

Has it ever happened to you that a co-worker, or maybe even a line manager, reacted emotionally when you suggested changes, improvements or new services based on your UX research? Maybe they snapped at you, seemed angry, or just said something that seemed like a rather irrational response. If you are really unlucky, the person having the adverse reaction to your design or suggestions is someone who can also stop your plans from happening, or someone who is actually key to have on board for successful implementation. I would like to claim, based on my own experience as well as that of my workshop participants, that this kind of emotional reaction is not uncommon. It typically occurs at the design or implementation stage of a UX project and even though it can sometimes be mitigated by Andy Priestner's go-to phrase: "it's only a prototype," it can also be prevented. My workshop at UXLibsV explored how we can use neuroscience and, more specifically, the SCARF model to better understand and empathise with our colleagues, and ourselves, for better UX embedding in our organisations.

The SCARF model

The SCARF model was developed by David Rock in 2008, as he was doing his PhD in leadership and neuroscience. The model suggests that there are five social domains that activate the same threat and reward responses in our brain that we rely on for our physical survival. The idea is that our social standing in a group and our relationships with others were of such great importance for our survival during the development of the early human brain that we still can react very strongly when triggered in certain ways. The five social domains are:

- **Status** – this is our relative importance to others. In the workplace this translates mostly to our formal or informal role in the group or in a team. Threat or reward can for example be linked to feedback, a promotion, or our skills being recognised or ignored.
- **Certainty** – this is our ability to predict the future, during a project or just in general in the workplace. Threat or reward can be linked to how well-known the future is. This is very likely a domain often threatened for many during UX work, as there is naturally an element of uncertainty to UX research and design.
- **Autonomy** – our sense of control over events. Threat or reward can be linked to our influence over our circumstances, such as workflow, time, and process.
- **Relatedness** – how safe we feel with others. Threat or reward can be linked to a sense of belonging in a group or team, being ignored or being included in activities.
- **Fairness** – how fair we perceive the exchanges between people to be. Threat or reward can be linked to amount of speaking time, workload, or office space.

The workshop

Participants at the workshops were asked to first think about situations at work when someone, maybe themselves, had reacted emotionally to UX work, or change in general. They then shared their experiences with each other in small groups. A rule at the workshop was that we do not share what has been said at the workshop with the outside world, so I cannot share here what the outcome of this exercise was, except maybe that one participant said it was "therapeutic" and another commented that it was striking how the workshop participants shared the same experiences. I think the latter statement supports my idea that UX work can easily trigger SCARF-related reactions. This is mainly because change in general might be triggering, but also because UX work forces us to change our perspective on what is important: from our own ideas and wants to the needs of our audiences or library members.

The next part of the workshop focused on how we can try and prevent or mitigate negative emotional reactions by rewarding the different SCARF domains, instead of threatening them. Participants were asked to first work quietly by themselves to come up with ideas and then share their ideas with their small group.

Several participants suggested more communication around projects within their workplaces, and we also talked about involvement of co-workers in projects. Doing UX work this way might feel, or actually be, more time-consuming at the research phase but might very well be worth the investment if things go smoother and more people are on board at the UX design phase.

As I reflect on the workshop now, I remember the participants felt they did not have enough time to let everyone share during the group discussions (only five minutes for each group discussion). I am happy to admit that maybe this workshop had content that would have been more suitable for a longer time frame, but I also think it is quite possible that however long the participants might have had to discuss, they would have felt the same, that time was too short, simply because the topic is engaging and we also very rarely have a chance to discuss emotions at work. However, I do regret not being clearer when introducing the workshop that it would probably be preferable not to sit in the same group as a co-worker. I mentioned it to the second group, but only before we really had started and one participant who had arrived late decided to switch seats as the first exercise began.

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Taking into account that participants were asked to share personal experiences of emotional behaviour and possibly conflicts at work, the setting of UXLibs was ideal to run the workshop, as participants come from many different libraries and no one has to share anything sensitive with co-workers, unless they want to. For this reason I would not recommend anyone to run this workshop in the same way at their home institutions, as it might surface feelings and conflicts that the workshop leader might not be equipped to deal with (or should have the responsibility to deal with).

How to make friends and not alienate people

At the very end of the workshop I gave participants a simple but practical tip when arranging UX workshops (which I think is relevant especially during ideation and design) and that was to use the IDOARRT model when planning and explaining the workshop.

- **I**ntention. Why is this meeting or workshop taking place?
- **D**esired **O**utcome. What are we going to take away from it, be able to look at/show at the end? Can also be learning outcomes, if an educational workshop.
- **A**genda. Let participants know what is going to happen during the hour/day/week.
- **R**oles. Facilitator and participants have different roles during a meeting or workshop, and participants might also need to take on different roles in a group setting, like being the 'time cop'.
- **R**ules. What are the rules that apply during the workshop or meeting? Participants can also add to these at the beginning of the event.
- **T**ime. When do we start and finish and how much time do we have for the different tasks? Can often be combined with agenda.

All the elements of IDOARRT that are explained above can reward most of the social domains in the SCARF model. Understanding why we are doing something, when we are doing it and in what order makes us feel safe and rewards the certainty domain. The roles aspect also helps us find our role in a group setting, and, together with the rules, helps us understand what is expected of us to fit in, which rewards the relatedness domain. Setting a rule such as 'we make sure everyone gets a chance to contribute' rewards the fairness domain. Getting to set rules themselves rewards participants in the autonomy domain. Adding a few words about why it is

important that this particular group of people participate in the workshop might also reward the status domain.

The above is not to say you must use the IDOARRT framework, or that it is the only way to reward the social domains in the SCARF model. I am simply using it as a way of showing that quite small measures that might seem insignificant can make a big difference when doing UX work, or in the workplace in general. Another thing I tried at the workshops, though I am not sure all participants even noticed :-), was to try and make eye contact and say hello to everyone as they entered the room, with a short instruction on where they should sit. It might seem trivial, but making sure your co-workers are seen and that you are happy that they are there and willing to contribute can be the grease your UX machine needs.

Further reading

Rock, D., 2008. SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. *NeuroLeadership Journal*, 1(2008). Available at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20100705024057/http://www.your-brain-at-work.com/files/NLJ_SCARFUS.pdf>.

IDOARRT explained by *Hyper Island*: <https://toolbox.hyperisland.com/idoarrt-meeting-design>.

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