DESIGNING FOR BELONGING

Six social needs for fostering psychological safety and belonging in community

THE BIG IDEA

Have you ever noticed how a small gesture — a compliment, an unkind joke, or an unfair decision — can change the way you think, learn, or show up?

It's not just you. **Our brains treat social interactions like survival experiences, lighting up the same threat and reward systems that help keep us alive in the physical world.**

Many of us were taught to rank human needs through Maslow's hierarchy: food and physical safety at the base of the pyramid, and belonging and self-actualization further up. But neuroscience now shows that social safety isn't secondary — it's a fundamental biological need. In fact, the brain registers social pain and exclusion in the *same regions* that process physical pain.

So how do we design for social safety and belonging? The following adaptation of the SCARF model (Rock, 2009) introduces six social interaction needs that determine whether the brain leans toward threat or trust, defensiveness or openness, disconnection or collaboration.

When these six needs are met, people feel safe enough to learn, create, and contribute. When they're violated, the brain shifts into protection mode, moving cognitive resources away from the prefrontal cortex and TP regions — narrowing attention, reducing empathy, and impeding higher-order thinking.

SIX SOCIAL INTERACTION NEEDS

Status	Do I matter here, relative to others?
Certainty	Do I know what to expect?
Autonomy	Do I have a say? Am I trusted, or controlled?
Relatedness	Do I feel connected and supported here?
Fairness	Is everyone being treated fairly?
Contribution	Are my efforts and gifts seen and valued?

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STRATEGIES FOR DESIGNING FOR BELONGING

Status

Our relative importance to others. The brain is constantly tracking social standing, scanning for cues about where we rank within a group as a signal of safety. Being recognized or respected activates reward pathways, while being excluded or diminished triggers a threat response.

Design tips: Celebrate growth, not rank. Give people visible pathways to progress. Rotate leadership or spotlight roles to broaden visibility.

Certainty

Our ability to predict what's coming next. The brain craves predictability; ambiguity activates the threat network (amygdala, ACC). Clarity and consistency reduce anxiety and strengthen trust.

Design tips: Clarify goals, roles, and expectations. Communicate what's known *and* what's still in progress. Share timelines and decision processes. Avoid surprises when possible; preview changes early. Create consistent rhythms and routines.

Fairness

Our perception of justice. The brain registers unfairness as a danger, as it creates uncertainty and undermines a sense of trust, reciprocity, and collaboration.

Design tips: Be transparent about how decisions are made. Apply norms and expectations consistently. Explain the "why" behind choices and feedback. Address inequities openly, not defensively. Be receptive to feedback.

Autonomy

Our sense of control over choices and actions. When we feel micromanaged, controlled, or unable to shape our own outcomes, the brain's stress response is activated. Autonomy boosts motivation and engagement.

Design tips: Offer meaningful choices in how work or learning happens. Involve people in decisions that affect them. Co-create norms. Encourage experimentation and safe failure. Focus on principles, not prescriptions.

Relatedness

Our sense of connection, trust, and support. The brain treats social connection as a survival need: isolation or exclusion lights up pain centers; bonding and trust releases oxytocin.

Design tips: Build community rituals and shared goals. Model vulnerability and empathy. Pair people intentionally to deepen relationships. Celebrate team milestones and shared wins. Create space for personal stories and play.

Contribution

Our opportunity to make a valued impact. We're wired to seek meaning and significance—to know that our efforts matter. When contributions go unseen or feel pointless, motivation drops and stress rises. When they're recognized and connected to a larger purpose, the brain's reward systems are activated.

Design tips: Create visible links between effort and impact. Acknowledge contributions publicly and show how each person's work advances the shared mission.

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