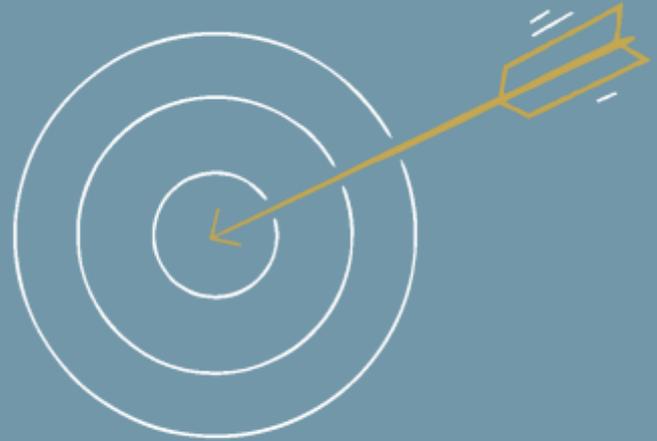**Ignite Series**

Leading with the Brain in Mind
Managing emotional energy
in meetings

Office of Strategic Consulting
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

Great meetings are less about agendas and more about managing emotional energy.

When threat states rise, collaboration drops.
When people feel safe and clear, they think better together.
We'll learn to read and reset the room.

In one word, what tends to drain energy in meetings you attend?

Think about recent meetings that went off-track or felt heavy.

The social brain at work in meetings

The Brain in Meetings: Predict, Protect, or Participate

Threat Response ("Avoid Mode") Perceived Social Threat → Protect		Reward Response ("Approach Mode") Perceived Safety & Clarity → Participate	
Common Triggers:	Resulting Behaviors:	Common Conditions:	Common Conditions:
• Loss of status • Unclear expectations • Public critique • Sudden change • Exclusion	• Defensiveness / rigid thinking • Silence / withdrawal • Dominating airtime • Multitasking • Increased urgency or impatience	• Clear purpose • Predictable structure • Choice and voice • Respectful challenge	• Curiosity • Open dialogue • Balanced contribution • Sustained attention • Creative thinking

- Too many agenda items
- Vague goals
- Information overload
- Multitasking

When cognitive load rises, emotional regulation drops.

The SCARF Model

Status

How important we feel compared to others; our sense of respect, recognition, and standing in a group.

Certainty

Our need to know what to expect, having clarity, predictability, and clear goals.

Autonomy

The level of control and choice we feel we have over our work and decisions.

Relatedness

Our sense of connection and belonging with others; feeling trusted, included, and part of the group.

Fairness

Our perception that decisions, rules, and processes are just, transparent, and equitable.

These five domains activate the same threat and reward circuitry we just discussed.

The SCARF model, developed by Dr. David Rock and the NeuroLeadership Institute.

Status & Certainty: The Fastest Way to Activate or Calm a Room

Common Triggers (Activates Threat)

Status Threats

- Being interrupted or talked over
- Public correction/ surprise critique
- Expertise ignored

Certainty Threats

- Unclear decision type
- Shifting goals mid-discussion
- No clear agenda or ambiguous next steps

Facilitator Moves (Increase Safety)

Supporting Status

- Publicly name contribution
- Protect interrupted voices
- Signal respect explicitly

Creating Certainty

- Clarify the purpose of the meeting
- Clarify time horizon and restate purpose
- Surface structure for how you'll move through the meeting

Activating Reward - Autonomy, Relatedness, Fairness

Autonomy (Control)

- Offer meaningful choice.
- Invite co-creation of process.
- Name decision boundaries clearly.

Relatedness (Connection)

- Use names intentionally.
- Create moments of human check-in.
- Normalize shared experience.

Fairness (Equity)

- Make criteria explicit.
- Apply norms consistently.
- Surface and clarify decision logic.

Behavior is Information: Diagnose Before You React

Behaviors
- Defensiveness / Arguing
- Silence / Withdrawal
- Dominating Airtime
- Multitasking / Disengagement

Interpretation Trap:
"They are being difficult"

SCARF Reframe
- Status → "Do I feel respected?"
- Autonomy → "Do I feel controlled?"
- Fairness → "Does this feel just?"
- Certainty → "Do I know what's happening?"

Diagnostic Question:
"Which SCARF domain might feel at risk?"

Which SCARF factor do you see triggered most often in meetings?

Think about recent meetings that went off-
track or felt heavy.
Annotate on the next slide.

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Facilitator presence and self-regulation

You cannot regulate a group
if you cannot regulate yourself.

Common Triggers Requiring Presence
Silence | Strong Emotion | Time Pressure | Power and Authority

Micro-Practices for Presence

1. Reaction

Pause. Stop before responding. Create a momentary gap between stimulus and your response.

2. Awareness

Label the sensation silently. "My chest is tight" or "I feel heat." Naming tames the limbic system.

3. Grounding

Feel your feet on the floor. Soften your jaw and drop your shoulders to release tension.

4. Re-Center

Deliberately slow your speaking pace. This signals safety to the brain and widens your choices.

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Guided Centering Practice

1. Reaction

Breathe. Take one slow inhale for a count of 4, and a long exhale for a count of 6.

2. Awareness

Locate the Tension. Scan your body for one signal of tension. Acknowledge and label it silently.

3. Grounding

Drop your attention to the soles of your feet. Feel the floor supporting you.

4. Re-Center

Come back to the room with one clear intention: to be curious.

Reading the Emotional Field

The Emotional Climate

Key Principles

- Every meeting has a "weather" pattern, whether named or not.
- The "Third Entity": The relationship is distinct from the individuals.
- Behaviors are signals of the system (the group), not just individual behaviors.

Skill: Reading the Room

What you can do

- Look at patterns over individuals (e.g., "Silence is high right now").
- Distinguish content (Topic) from energy (vibe/feeling).
- Normalize emotion without amplifying or fixing it.

Naming the Weather

Observation/ Neutral Naming

You notice something and name it neutrally.

- I'm noticing a lot of urgency right now.
- It feels like the energy in the room has dropped.

Open Inquiry

Get curious about what's underneath.

- What is happening for people right now?
- What is underneath the silence?

Needs Inquiry

Connect it to how we move forward.

- What do we need to continue productively?
- How can we use this energy to solve the problem?

Skills Practice: Noticing and Naming

Marcus (Dean, talking faster): "We're running out of time. Accreditation needs to see our student success metrics by the site visit. I need everyone to commit to the timeline I sent. Faculty, are you on board? Advising?"

[3-second pause. No response.]

Marcus: "I need a yes or no. We're moving forward."

Jordan (quietly): "I had a question about how this overlaps with the curriculum review we're already doing, but... it's probably fine."

Sarah (not making eye contact): "Advising can manage it. We're already stretched thin, but we're good."

Notice

1. Notice patterns, not individuals.
2. Distinguish content problems from energy problems.
3. Normalize emotion without amplifying it.
4. Naming emotional energy reduces threat and restores collective focus.

Naming

- "I'm noticing..." (observation, not judgment)
- "What's underneath..." (curiosity about the system)
- "What would help..." (autonomy restoration)
- "What's actually..." (grounding in reality vs. what should be)

Resetting meetings
when they go off-script

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Three steps to agility under stress

Ground

Pause, breathe, slow the pace.

"Let's just pause for a moment.."

Name and Reframe

Name what happened and clarify purpose or choice point.

"I'm noticing we have two different needs emerging here." and "I'm going to bring us back to the purpose of this meeting"

Redirect

Offer a next step that restores autonomy and clarity.

"We have two different needs emerging. Which do we address first to stay on top of why we are meeting?"

What is one micro-skill you will
try in your next meeting?