

# Four stages of competence

In psychology, the **four stages of competence**, or the “conscious competence” learning model, relates to the psychological states involved in the process of progressing from incompetence to competence in a skill.

## 1 History

Initially described as “Four Stages for Learning Any New Skill”, the theory was developed at the Gordon Training International by its employee Noel Burch in the 1970s.<sup>[1]</sup> It has since been frequently attributed to Abraham Maslow, although the model does not appear in his major works.<sup>[2]</sup>

The Four Stages of Learning provides a model for learning. It suggests that individuals are initially unaware of how little they know, or unconscious of their incompetence. As they recognize their incompetence, they consciously acquire a skill, then consciously use it. Eventually, the skill can be utilized without it being consciously thought through: the individual is said to have then acquired unconscious competence.<sup>[3]</sup>

Several elements, including helping someone 'know what they don't know' or recognize a blind spot, can be compared to some elements of a Johari window, although Johari deals with self-awareness, while the four stages of competence deals with learning stages.

## 2 The Four Stages of Competence

### 2.1 The four stages

#### 1. Unconscious incompetence

The individual does not understand or know how to do something and does not necessarily recognize the deficit. They may deny the usefulness of the skill. The individual must recognize their own incompetence, and the value of the new skill, before moving on to the next stage.<sup>[2]</sup> The length of time an individual spends in this stage depends on the strength of the stimulus to learn.<sup>[3]</sup>

2.

#### 3. Conscious incompetence

Though the individual does not understand or know how to do something, he or she does recognize the deficit, as well as the value of a new skill in addressing the deficit. The making of mistakes can be integral to the learning process at this stage.<sup>[4]</sup>

4.

#### 5. Conscious competence

The individual understands or knows how to do something. However, demonstrating the skill or knowledge requires concentration. It may be broken down into steps, and there is heavy conscious involvement in executing the new skill.<sup>[3]</sup>

6.

#### 7. Unconscious competence

The individual has had so much practice with a skill that it has become “second nature” and can be performed easily. As a result, the skill can be performed while executing another task. The individual may be able to teach it to others, depending upon how and when it was learned.

### 2.2 Alternative

#### 1. Unconscious incompetence

The individual is often unaware he/she does not understand or know how to do something, because no situations have arisen to demand the skill and alert the individual to the deficit. He or she often knows there is a skill lacking but denies the usefulness of the skill. The individual must recognize his/her own incompetence and the value of the new skill, before moving on to the next stage. The length of time an individual spends in this stage depends on the strength of the stimulus to learn. The individual must experience an increase in motivation to add new skills to her/his repertoire.

2.

### 3. Conscious incompetence

The individual becomes aware he/she does not understand or know how to do something. She or he also begins to recognize the deficit is significant and it would be valuable to learn new skills in order to address the deficit and gain competence. The making of mistakes can be frequent and may be central to the learning process at this stage, as the learner refines the skills through practice.

4.

### 5. Conscious competence

The individual understands or knows how to do something. He/she can demonstrate the skill or knowledge but it requires concentration and effort. It may need to be broken down into steps or detailed processes. There is often heavy conscious involvement involved executing the new skill. The frequency of mistakes begins to decline.

6.

### 7. Unconscious competence

The individual has had so much refining practice with a skill that he or she does not really need to think about what to do. It has become “second nature” and can be performed with very low frequency of errors. Because the skill is not occupying much of the individual’s conscious thoughts, it can often be performed while executing another task. The individual has become so comfortable with the skill she/he will often be able to teach it to others.

## 3 Fifth stage

The model is expanded by some users to include a fifth stage, which is not part of the original model from Gordon Training International. The exact composition of this stage varies between authors. Some refer to reflective ability, or “conscious competence of unconscious competence”, as being the fifth stage, while others use the fifth stage to indicate complacency.<sup>[2]</sup>

Another definition refers to the fifth stage as 'enlightened competence' described as “the person has not only mastered the physical skill to a highly efficient and accurate level which does not anymore require of him conscious, deliberate and careful execution of the skill but instead

done instinctively and reflexively, requiring minimum efforts with maximum quality output, and is able to understand the very dynamics and scientific explanation of his own physical skills. In other words, he comprehends fully and accurately the what, when, how and why of his own skill and possibly those of others on the same skill he has. In addition to this, he is able to transcend and reflect on the physical skill itself and be able to improve on how it is acquired and learned at even greater efficiency with lower energy investment. Having fully understood all necessary steps and components of the skill to be learned and the manner how they are dynamically integrated to produce the desired level of overall competence, he is thereby able to teach the skill to others in a manner that is effective and expedient.” (Lorgene A Mata, PhD, December 2004)<sup>[2]</sup>

## 4 See also

- Dunning–Kruger effect
- Illusory superiority
- Decision theory, including grand strategy:
  - Unknown unknown
  - Known unknown
  - Known known
  - Unknown knowns
- Motivation
- Transtheoretical Model
- Solution focused brief therapy
- Psychosocial development
- Kübler-Ross model
- Formula for Change
- Learning styles
- Taxonomy of Educational Objectives
- Theory of multiple intelligences
- Dreyfus model of skill acquisition

## 5 References

- [1] “Learning a New Skill is Easier Said than Done”. Gordon Training International.
- [2] “Conscious competence learning model matrix - unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence”. Business Balls.
- [3] Flower J (1999). “In the Mush”. *Physician Exec* **25** (1): 64–6. PMID 10387273.
- [4] “The Four Stages of Learning”. Process Coaching Center.

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