conscious competence learning model

four stages of learning theory - unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence matrix - and other theories and models for learning and change

Here is a summary of the explanation, definitions and usage of the 'conscious competence' learning theory, including the 'conscious competence matrix' model, its extension/development, and origins/history of the 'conscious competence' theory.

Related to the 'conscious competence' model also below are other theories and models for personal learning and change.

The earliest origins and various definitions of the 'conscious competence' learning theory are uncertain and could be very old indeed; perhaps thousands of years.

Several claims of original authorship exist for the 'conscious competence' model's specific terminology, definitions, structure, etc., as we recognize it today. The most notable claims are as follows, among which the evidence showing Martin M Broadwell as originator seems to be the earliest.

- For many years the US organization Gordon Training International has claimed a major role in defining the theory and and promoting its use since the 1970s.
- Separately, a 1974 technical personnel paper, 'Conscious Competency - The Mark of a Competent Instructor', effectively asserts creation/definition of the concept and basic ('conscious competence') terminology by its author, W Lewis Robinson, an industrial training executive.
- And in August 2013 I was informed (thanks Earl L Wiese, Jr) of an earlier description of the modern-day 'conscious competence' model, featured in the 'Teaching for Learning' article by Martin M Broadwell, dated 20 February 1969, in The Gospel Guardian, an American Christian periodical published from the 1950s-1970s.

These claims, with discussion of other influential/contributing/promotional origins of the 'conscious competence' theory and its modern definitions are shown below, see conscious competence model origins.

conscious competence theory - summary outline

The conscious competence theory and related matrix model explain the process and stages of learning a new skill (or behaviour, ability, technique, etc.)

The concept is most commonly known as the 'conscious competence learning model', or 'conscious competence learning theory'; sometimes 'conscious competence ladder' or 'conscious competence matrix'. Other descriptions are used, including terminology relating to 'conscious skilled' and 'conscious unskilled' (which incidentally are preferred by Gordon Training).

Occasionally in more recent adapted versions a fifth stage or level is added to the conscious competance theory, although there is no single definitive five-stage model, despite there being plenty of very useful and valid debate about what the fifth stage might be.

Whether four or five or more stages, and whatever people choose to call it, the 'conscious competence' model remains essentially a very simple and helpful explanation of how we learn, and also serves as a useful reminder of the need to **train people in stages**.

learning and training in stages

Put simply:

Learners or trainees tend to begin at stage 1 - 'unconscious incompetence'.

They pass through stage 2 - 'conscious incompetence', then through stage 3 - 'conscious competence'.

And ideally end at stage 4 - 'unconscious competence'.

Perhaps the simplest illustration of importance of appreciating the need for staged learning is that **teachers and trainers can wrongly assume trainees to be at stage 2, and focus effort towards achieving stage 3, when often trainees are still at stage 1.** Here the trainer assumes the trainee is aware of the skill existence, nature, relevance, deficiency, and that there will be a benefit from acquiring the new skill. Whereas trainees at stage 1 - unconscious incompetence - have none of these things in place, and will not be able to address achieving conscious competence until they've become consciously and fully aware of their own incompetence. **This is a fundamental reason for the failure of a lot of training and teaching.**

If the awareness of skill and deficiency is low or non-existent - ie., the learner is at the unconscious incompetence stage - the trainee or learner will simply not see the need for learning. It's essential to establish **awareness** of a weakness or training need (conscious incompetence) prior to attempting to impart or arrange training or skills necessary to move trainees from stage 2 to 3. People only respond to training when they are aware of their own need for it, and the personal benefit they will derive from achieving it.

conscious competence learning matrix - progression, examples, definitions

Here is explanation of how learners/trainees pass from stage to stage in the conscious competence model, and definitions and meanings of each of the stages.

The progression is from quadrant 1 through 2 and 3 to 4. It is not possible to jump stages. For some skills, especially advanced ones, people can regress to previous stages, particularly from 4 to 3, or from 3 to 2, if they fail to practise and exercise their new skills. A person regressing from 4, back through 3, to 2, will need to develop again through 3 to achieve stage 4 - unconscious competence again.

For certain skills in certain roles stage 3 (conscious competence) is perfectly adequate, and in some cases for the reasons which follow, may actually be desirable.

It can be argued that learners who become skilled at level 4 - unconscious competence - cease to be learners. In one respect this is a statement of the obvious, but a more subtle appreciation of this status is that people at this stage can be vulnerable to complacency, by which learning ceases and 'unconscious competence' may in time become an ignorance of or blindness to new methods, technologies, etc., and the expert finds himself once again unconsciously incompetent. There are excellent and revealing parallels here with John Fisher's Process of Personal Transition.

This aspect of 'fourth stage vulnerability' - the implication that stage 4 (unconcious competence) may become complacency or ignorance of new methods - has in part prompted suggestions (by various people since the model first emerged popularly) to extend the 'conscious competence'

model to a **fifth stage**, and understanding these ideas for a fifth stage stage is certainly helpful in addressing compacency and other weaknesses/opportunities relating to continuing development.

Interestingly, progression from stage to stage is often accompanied by a feeling of awakening - 'the penny drops' - things 'click' into place for the learner - the person feels like he/she has made a big step forward, which of course they have. Very clear and simple examples of this effect are seen when a person learns to drive a car: the progression from stage 2 (conscious incompetence) to stage 3 (conscious competence) is obvious, as the learner becomes able to control the vehicle and signalling at the same time; and the next progression from 3 to 4 (unconscious competence) is equally clear to learner when he/she is able to hold a conversation while performing a complex manoeuvre (usually some while after passing the driving test..).

There are other representations of the conscious competence model besides a 2x2 matrix. Ladders and staircase diagrams are popular, which partly stem from the Gordon Training organization's interpretations. The principles remain the same though - it's a simple model and regardless of the varying formats and terminology it is always best presented and used as a basic stage-by-stage progression.

The matrix is particularly useful in addressing training obstacles. Trainers and learners can ask themselves: "What stage is the learner at and what is preventing the learning from progressing?"

In this way the conscious competence theory helps trainers and learners to understand far better why an obstacle exists, and how best to deal with the challenge.

And since the conscious competence theory forces analysis at an individual level, the model encourages and assists individual assessment and development, which is easy to overlook when so much learning and development is delivered on a group basis.

We each possess natural strengths and preferences, (due to brain-type, and personality, and life-stage/experience, etc) and this affects our **attitudes and commitments** towards learning, as well as our **abilities in developing competence** in **different disciplines**. People begin to develop competence only after they recognise the relevance of their own incompetence in the skill concerned. Certain brain-types and personalities prefer and possess certain aptitudes and skills. We each therefore experience different levels of challenge (to our attitudes and awareness in addition to pure capability) in progressing through the stages of learning, dependent on what is being learned. Some people will resist progression even to stage 2 (becoming aware of incompetence), because they refuse to acknowledge or accept the relevance and benefit of a particular skill or ability. Denial may also be a factor where there is a level of personal fear or insecurity. Other people may readily accept the need for development from 1 to 2, but may struggle to progress from 2 to 3 (becoming consciously competent) because the skill is not a natural personal strength or aptitude. Some people may progress well to stage 3 but will struggle to reach stage 4 (unconsciously competent), and then regress to stage 2 (consciously incompetent) again, simply through lack of practise. We see this last scenario very commonly in the teaching of new computer skills, or the use of complex machinery, and in such situations the conscious competence theory quickly enables a reliable analysis of what the problem is, and how to rectify it.

The conscious competence model can be useful in all sorts of training situations. You will see other applications when you explore the definitions and progressions outlined in the matrix here.

conscious competence matrix

	competence	**incompetence**
conscious	**3 - conscious competence** • the person achieves 'conscious competence' in a skill when they can perform it reliably at will • the person will need to concentrate and think in order to perform the skill • the person can perform the skill without assistance • the person will not reliably perform the skill unless thinking about it - the skill is not yet 'second nature' or 'automatic' • the person should be able to demonstrate the skill to another, but is unlikely to be able to teach it well to another person • the person should ideally continue to practise the new skill, and if appropriate commit to becoming 'unconsciously competent' at the new skill • **practise** is the singlemost effective way to move from stage 3 to 4	**2 - conscious incompetence** • the person becomes aware of the existence and relevance of the skill • the person is therefore also aware of their deficiency in this area, ideally by attempting or trying to use the skill • the person realises that by improving their skill or ability in this area their effectiveness will improve • ideally the person has a measure of the extent of their deficiency in the relevant skill, and a measure of what level of skill is required for their own competence • the person ideally makes a commitment to learn and practice the new skill, and to move to the 'conscious competence' stage

unconscious	**4 - unconscious competence** • the skill becomes so practised that it enters the unconscious parts of the brain - it becomes 'second nature' • common examples are driving, sports activities, typing, manual dexterity tasks, listening and communicating • it becomes possible for certain skills to be performed while doing something else, for example, knitting while reading a book • the person might now be able to teach others in the skill concerned, although after some time of being unconsciously competent the person might actually have difficulty in explaining exactly how they do it - the skill has become largely instinctual • this arguably gives rise to the need for long-standing unconscious competence to be checked periodically against new standards	**1 - unconscious incompetence** • the person is not aware of the existence or relevance of the skill area • the person is not aware that they have a particular deficiency in the area concerned • the person might deny the relevance or usefulness of the new skill • the person must become conscious of their incompetence before development of the new skill or learning can begin • the aim of the trainee or learner and the trainer or teacher is to move the person into the 'conscious competence' stage, by demonstrating the skill or ability and the benefit that it will bring to the person's effectiveness

suggested fifth stage of conscious competence model

As with many simple and effective models, attempts have been made to add to the conscious competence model, notably a fifth stage, which is commonly represented, among other suggestions, as:

'Conscious competence of unconscious competence', which describes a person's ability to recognise and develop unconscious incompetence in others.

Arguably this is a development in a different direction: ability to recognise and develop skill deficiencies in others involves a separate skill set altogether, far outside of an extension of the unconscious competence stage of any particular skill. As already mentioned, there are plenty of people who become so instinctual at a particular skill that they forget the theory - because they no longer need it - and as such make worse teachers than someone who has good ability at the conscious competence stage.