

The four stages of competence

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. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.