

## Four Stages of Competency

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.

### History

The conscious competence theory is another name for the "Four Stages of Learning," a theory posited by 1940's psychologist Abraham Maslow. The Four Stages of Learning are an explanation of how people learn something, progressing from Stage 1 to Stage 4.

1. **Unconscious Incompetence;** you don't know that you don't know something
2. **Conscious Incompetence;** you are now aware that you are incompetent at something
3. **Conscious Competence;** you develop a skill in that area but have to think about it
4. **Unconscious Competence;** you are good at it and it now comes naturally

Several elements, including helping people 'know what they don't know' or recognize their blind spots, 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).

### The Four Stages

#### 1. Unconscious Incompetence

The individual neither understands nor knows how to do something, nor recognizes the deficit, nor has a desire to address it.

##### Example:

Babies. They babble constantly, but are unaware that their utterances aren't intelligible to adults. Similarly, when toddlers learn to scribble, they aren't aware that their drawings don't resemble the things they are trying to depict.

#### 2. Conscious Incompetence

Though the individual does not understand or know how to do something, he or she does recognize the deficit, without yet addressing it.

##### Example:

Novice readers. They sound out words phonetically because they aren't fluent readers. They are well aware of this, and know that they must practice before their ability to read is fully formed.

### 3. Conscious Competence

The individual understands or knows how to do something. However, demonstrating the skill or knowledge requires a great deal of consciousness or concentration.

Example:

Mariah Carey. The pop music diva possesses a remarkable five-octave vocal range. Watch her live performances, and you'll notice that she plugs one ear when she hits those extra high notes. She knows she can hit them, but she has to prepare herself to do it.

### 4. Unconscious Competence

The individual has had so much practice with a skill that it becomes "second nature" and can be performed easily (often without concentrating too deeply). He or she may or may not be able to teach it to others, depending upon how and when it was learned.

Example:

Michael Jordan. On the basketball court, he could execute spur-of-the-moment shots from just about anywhere on the floor--and make them. He didn't even have to think twice about flying through the air to perform one of his amazing dunks, he just did it!

Natural language is an example of unconscious competence. Not every native speaker who can understand and be understood in a language is competent to teach it.

Distinguishing between unconscious competence for performance-only, versus unconscious competence with the ability to teach, the term "kinesthetic competence" is sometimes used for the ability to perform but not to teach, while "theoretic competence" refers to the ability to do both.

Certain brain personality types favor certain skills (see the Benziger theory), and each individual possesses different natural strengths and preferences. Therefore, advancing from, say, stage 3 to 4 in one skill might be easier for one person than for another.

Certain individuals will even resist progression to stage 2, because they refuse to acknowledge or accept the relevance and benefit of a particular skill or ability.

Individuals develop competence only after they recognize the relevance of their own incompetence in the skill concerned.

**Sources:**

Wikipedia contributors. "Four stages of competence." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 3 Mar. 2010. Web. 4 Mar. 2010.

**Examples were taken from:**

Jolley, Willie and Robyn D. Clarke. "Cultivate your competence - get better - a brief article." *Black Enterprise*. February 2001. Web.