

THE CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE LADDER //

KEEPING GOING WHEN LEARNING GETS TOUGH

When we learn new skills, we experience different emotions at different stages of the learning process. For instance, at the beginning, we may not appreciate how much we need to learn. Then, when we discover what we don't know about a subject, we may get disheartened, and we might even give up.

This is why it helps to understand the emotions that you're likely to experience at each stage of the learning process, so that you can manage the emotional ups and downs that go along with learning a new skill.

The Conscious Competence Ladder helps you do this. In this article, we'll look at this model, and we'll highlight how you can use it to learn new skills more effectively.

UNDERSTANDING THE MODEL

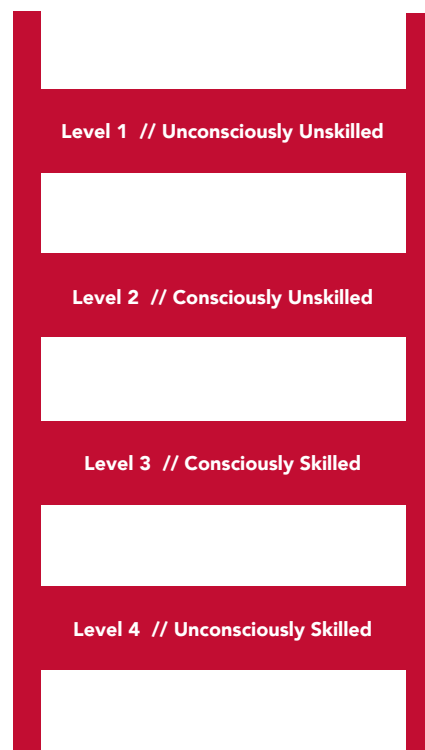
Noel Burch, an employee with Gordon Training International, developed the Conscious Competence Ladder in the 1970s. It helps us understand our thoughts and emotions during the sometimes-dispiriting learning process. The model highlights two factors that affect our thinking as we learn a new skill: consciousness (awareness) and skill level (competence).

According to the model, we move through the following levels as we build competence in a new skill:

- + **Unconsciously unskilled:** We don't know that we don't have this skill, or that we need to learn it.
- + **Consciously unskilled:** We know that we don't have this skill.
- + **Consciously skilled:** We know that we have this skill.
- + **Unconsciously skilled:** We don't know that we have this skill (it just seems easy).

This "ladder of learning" is shown in figure 1, below.

Figure 1 – The Conscious Competence Ladder
(reproduced with permission from Gordon Training International)
The Conscious Competence Ladder is useful in several ways.



First, you can use it to understand the emotions you'll experience during the learning process. This helps you stay motivated when times get tough, and it helps you manage your expectations of success, so that you don't try to achieve too much too soon.

For example, during the consciously unskilled phase, you can reassure yourself that, while learning this skill is difficult and frustrating right now, things will improve in the future. And, when you're unconsciously skilled, the model reminds you to value the skills that you've gained, and not to be too impatient with people who have yet to gain them.

It's also useful in coaching and training situations, because it allows you to be in touch with what your people are thinking and feeling. You can then help them understand their emotions as they learn new skills, and encourage them when they're feeling disillusioned.

Tip: Some people prefer to think of this as a matrix, with incompetence/competence on the horizontal axis and unconscious/conscious on the vertical axis. Use the representation that works best for you.

APPLYING THE MODEL

Let's look at each level in more detail, and highlight strategies that you can use to move yourself through each stage successfully as you learn a new skill.

LEVEL 1 // UNCONSCIOUSLY UNSKILLED

At this level, you are blissfully ignorant: you have a complete lack of knowledge and skills in a specific area, and you're unaware of this. Your confidence, therefore, far exceeds your abilities.

To move out of Level 1, use tools like Personal SWOT Analysis and a Training Needs Assessment to identify your strengths and weaknesses, and to understand which skills you need to learn. As part of this, ask other people for their input so that you can uncover weaknesses and skill needs that you might otherwise miss.

Also, make sure that you understand your learning objectives—there's no point learning skills in areas that don't align with your personal or work goals.

LEVEL 2 // CONSCIOUSLY UNSKILLED

By this stage, you've discovered that you need to learn new skills. You realize that others are much more competent than you are, and that they can easily do things that you are struggling with.

This level can be demoralizing, causing people to lose confidence or even give up on their learning efforts altogether. Therefore, it's important to stay positive at this stage. Use tools like affirmations and Treasure Maps to combat negative thinking and to refocus your energy on days when you feel down. Remember, learning might be uncomfortable in the short term, but these skills will help you reach your goals and build a better life.

LEVEL 3 // CONSCIOUSLY SKILLED

At this level, you know that you have acquired the skills and knowledge you need. You put your learning into practice regularly, and you gain even more confidence as you use your new skills. You still need to concentrate when you perform these activities, but, as you get more practice and experience, these activities become increasingly automatic.

To move successfully through Level 3, look for opportunities to use your skills as often as you can. For example, you could volunteer for projects that require your new skills, or craft your job to use these skills more often in your current role.

LEVEL 4 // UNCONSCIOUSLY SKILLED

At this level, you use your new skills effortlessly, and you perform tasks without conscious effort. You are completely confident of success. Once you master one set of skills, it's important to learn more if you want to continue to grow.

A good way to do this is to teach these new skills to others in your organization. This will keep information fresh in your mind, deepen your understanding of the material, and give you a rewarding way to pass this knowledge on to others. Also, bear in mind that you may go backwards down the ladder if you don't use your new skills regularly.

COACHING WITH THE CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE LADDER

You can also use the Conscious Competence Ladder when you're guiding people through the learning process. Let's look at strategies that you can use with people at each stage:

LEVEL 1 // UNCONSCIOUSLY UNSKILLED

At the beginning of the process, people may not know how unskilled they are, so you'll need to make them aware of how much they need to learn. You'll also need to explain why they need to learn these skills. Be sensitive at this early stage, and give plenty of positive feedback to keep people's motivation high.

LEVEL 2 // CONSCIOUSLY UNSKILLED

During this stage, provide plenty of encouragement and support, and explain the idea of the Conscious Competence Ladder, so that people understand any feelings of discouragement that they are experiencing. Also, help them improve their self-confidence, if required.

LEVEL 3 // CONSCIOUSLY SKILLED

At this stage, keep people focused on the skills that they need to learn, and give them plenty of opportunities to practice these skills. For example, you could assign them projects that use their new skills, or set them relevant training exercises.

LEVEL 4 // UNCONSCIOUSLY SKILLED

At this level, you'll need to make sure that people avoid complacency, and that they stay up-to-date with their skills. You may also need to remind people how difficult it was to reach this level, so that they are kind to people who are at an earlier stage in the process.

KEY POINTS

Noel Burch, an employee with Gordon Training International, developed the Conscious Competence Ladder in the 1970s. You can use it to manage your emotions during a potentially challenging learning process.

The model has four learning levels:

- + Unconsciously unskilled.
- + Consciously unskilled.
- + Consciously skilled.
- + Unconsciously skilled.

The model can be a useful guide for your own learning, but you can also use it when you are coaching others, to guide them through the emotional ups and downs of acquiring new skills.

This was originally published at MindTools.com in the winter of 2016.

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