

The Conscious Competence Ladder: Understanding the Learning Journey

The Conscious Competence Ladder is a framework that helps us understand four stages of learning (the theory was developed at Gordon Training International by Noel Burch in the 1970s). The model highlights the factors that affect our thinking as we learn a new skill: Consciousness (awareness) and skill level (competence). It identifies four levels that we move through as we build competence in a new skill.

Unconscious competence. At this level, we don't know that we have the skills. We use our new skills effortlessly and perform tasks without conscious effort. We are confident of success. In order to keep growing, we need to teach these newly acquired skills to others. This deepens our understanding of the material and keeps our skills finely tuned; teaching the skills also can be rewarding. Be warned: We can go backwards down the ladder if we don't regularly use our skills.

Conscious competence. On this rung, we know that we have the skills we have worked to attain. As we put our knowledge and skill set into regular practice, we gain even more confidence. We still may need to concentrate when we perform these skills, but, as we get more practice and experience, these activities become increasingly automatic. We need to use these skills as often as possible in order to move into the next stage.

Conscious incompetence. At this stage, we know we don't have the skills we're trying to acquire. We realize that others are much more competent and that they can easily do things that make us struggle. We can lose confidence at this stage or give up on our learning. This is where we most need to manage discomfort, fear, and anxiety, and to boost our confidence.

Unconscious Incompetence. At this stage, we don't know that we don't have a skill or that we need to learn it. We are blissfully ignorant, and our confidence exceeds our abilities. Our task on this rung is to figure out what skills we need to learn.

