Stages of learning – A model for the development of knowledge and skills

According to Howell (1982) there are four stages of learning, each identified by different combinations of consciousness and competence, which every learner may pass through as they learn. These stages are outlined in the following quotation and illustrated in the model below.

Unconscious incompetence - this is the stage where they are not even aware that they do not have a particular competence.
Conscious incompetence - this is when they know that they want to learn how to do something but they are incompetent at doing it.
Conscious competence - this is when they can achieve this particular task but they are very conscious about everything they do.
Unconscious competence - this is when they finally master it and they do not even think about what they have such as when they have learned to ride a bike very successfully.

(Howell, 1982, p.29-33)

Stage 1  Unconscious incompetence
As an unconscious incompetent, a person does not know what they do not know. Note, this does not exclude the possibility that they think they know as much or more than others. Therefore, in this stage they may be in one of two positions.
• they may be happily naive, not realizing that they are not competent
• they also may be in a faking state, where they believe they are competent, and either do not realize that they are in this state or are covering up their incompetence

Stage 2  Conscious incompetence
As a conscious incompetent, they realize that they are not as expert as perhaps they thought they were or think they could be.
The transition to this state - from being unconsciously incompetent - can be a shocking and sudden realization.

Stage 3  Conscious competence
Becoming consciously competent often takes time as they need to learn either through experience learning opportunities.
The more complex the new area and the less talent they have for it, the longer this will take. The good news is that people have achieved remarkable feats of learning through sheer persistence.

Stage 4  Unconscious competence
Eventually they may reach a point where they no longer have to think about what they are doing, and are competent without the significant effort that characterizes the state of conscious competence.

Applying this theory in practice
Teachers, supervisors and trainers commonly assume trainees to be at stage 2, and focus effort towards achieving stage 3, when often trainees are still at stage 1.
Teachers, as well as supervisors and trainers, frequently assume that the trainee is aware that the skill exists, its nature and relevance, and their own deficiency in that area. Unfortunately trainees at stage 1 - unconscious incompetence – may have only some of these things in place, and will not be able to move into conscious competence until they have become consciously and fully aware of their own incompetence. This lack of congruence between the teacher's supervisor's and/or trainer's assumptions, and the trainee's actual stage of learning has been identified as a basic reason for the failure of a lot of training and teaching.

Based on this model, if a trainer expects the trainee to learn when they seem to be reluctant or unable to do so, the first step may be to hold up a mirror and help them to become consciously incompetent. Then the trainee can be guided through the subsequent stages.

This sound fairly simple, however, because it requires the trainee to acknowledge to themselves as well as to others that they don't know, the first change - from unconsciously incompetent to consciously incompetent – requires a very large emotional as well as cognitive effort. If it to be achieved successfully supervisors and trainers need to expect and recognise seemingly small improvements.

If, over time, it becomes clear that the trainee is not willing to acknowledge their incompetence then other processes need to be put in place.

References

Conscious and Competence