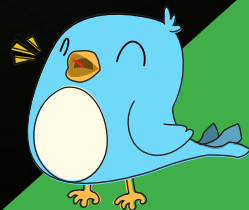


LEARNING HOW TO LEARN: STEP-BY-STEP STAGES

To improve the learning process,
climb the learning ladder in stages.

By Ken Revenaugh



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Have you ever learned something the wrong way? For me it was golf. I play occasionally, but never bothered to really learn the basics. Recently, I decided to focus on improving my game. I realized that I had skipped some learning steps along the way and needed to start from scratch if I really wanted to master the game. In essence, I needed to apply the same learning model I employ when teaching my “Communicate to Win” workshop.

This model is a variation of the one popularized by the late psychologist Thomas Gordon about 30 years ago. It assumes that all learners mastering a new skill (whether it’s playing a sport, speaking a language or managing people) must take a step-by-step approach without skipping stages.

Knowing Gordon’s learning stages will help you recognize and identify how you can successfully reach the top rung of your learning ladder.

STAGE 1 - UNCONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

This stage is best described as “blissful ignorance.” This learner can be described in one of three ways:

1. He does not even recognize the need to understand a particular skill.
2. He assumes the skill is beyond his abilities.
3. He believes the skill is so easy that he doesn’t bother to practice.

Moving to the next stage requires a wake-up call – often in the form of “pain.” Learners need to realize they are struggling and actually need to focus on specific skills

Let’s go back to my golfing example...

Initially, I assumed that I had the required basic skills: how to hold the club, how to stand and where to aim. I was no scratch golfer. I had fun, enjoyed the game and got the ball in the hole with a reasonable score. One morning, I played with some very serious golfers who videotaped and studied their techniques. That was the day I learned I had clearly been in the stage of Unconscious Incompetence.

Turns out, I had the wrong grip and the wrong stance. With the combination of my swing mechanics and less-than-perfect aim, it was a wonder the ball ever made it to the hole. But I was motivated to improve. I learned the game’s most basic steps: setup, back swing, transition, downswing and follow-through. Focusing on each step would improve my game.

STAGE 2 - CONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

This is the most painful stage for learners, particularly adult learners who are accustomed to enjoying a certain level of competence. It’s sobering to realize that you are not very good at a new skill, it can be humiliating for the vulnerable learner. At this stage, the learner needs instructions and information repeated and delivered in several different formats: visual, auditory and kinesthetic.

It is very tempting at this stage for learners to give up. They need encouragement, support, frequent performance feedback, gentle reminders of their initial motivation, and successful examples to follow.

To return to my golfing example, lessons, support, encouragement and practice helped me improve my golfing fundamentals.

STAGE 3 - CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

At this stage, learners practice their skills, but only with full conscious effort and attention. Practice is key to moving to the next stage. Mentoring, coaching, tutorials and self-learning resources are critical support elements at this point.

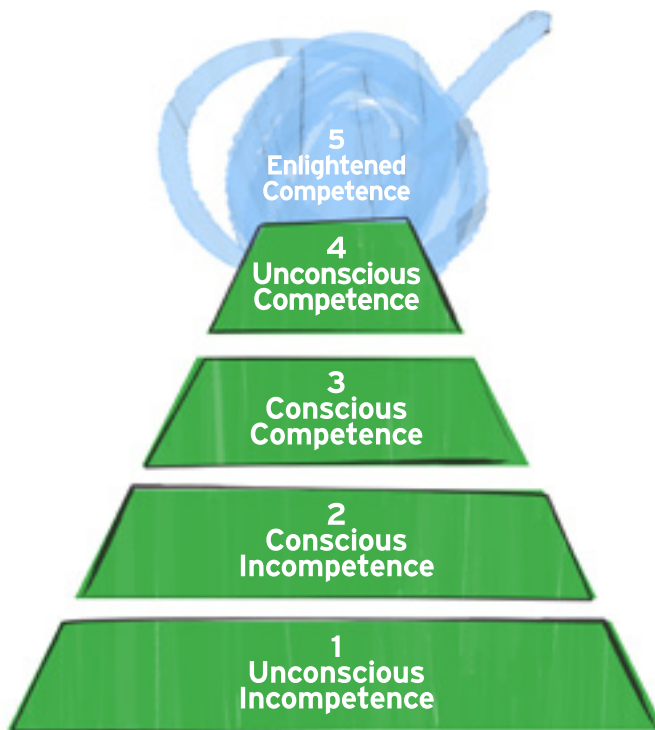
In this stage of golfing, I visualized the instructor’s examples and followed instructions to a “T” with painful accuracy – repeating instructions to myself and checking the guidebook. I gradually began to gain confidence and realized that, while my golfing skills still felt unnatural and forced, I was actually making progress.

STAGE 4 - UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

Have you ever crossed the street but couldn’t remember if you looked left or right before crossing? When you do something without thinking, you’re demonstrating Unconscious Competence.

Think about Tiger Woods. At some time, most of us have seen him take a swing on TV. You may have seen those old videos of Tiger as a child with his dad teaching him at Stage 1. In contrast to his early years, Tiger’s graceful and confident approach indicates that he reached Stage 4 and is now performing at Stage 5. I wish I could tell you that my golf game had progressed to Stage 4, but I remain at Stage 3, where I continue to practice.

At this level, a skill looks effortless. This can be a dangerous stage to a leader because it’s very easy to forget that what is now effortless for me, is still Stage 1 or 2 for many of those I am leading.



STAGE 5 - ENLIGHTENED COMPETENCE

At this level, the learner has mastered the targeted skill efficiently and accurately and performs it instinctively, reflexively and with minimum effort. Deliberate and careful execution is not necessary.

In the stage of Enlightened Competence, the learner understands the dynamics and scientific explanation of his own physical skills. In other words, he comprehends the “what, when, how and why” of his own skill and can correctly assess the skill levels of others. In addition, he can transcend and reflect on the skill itself and improve on how to acquire and learn even more efficiently with lower investment.

On mastering Stage 5, the person fully understands all necessary steps and components of the skill. As a result, the person now has the ability to effectively teach the skill to others.

YOUR LEARNING LADDER

At this rarefied place, you use your conscious mind to deconstruct and modulate the elements of your performance. This also means you can explain it to others.

It takes time to attain level four, where you're no longer thinking. You just do.

You've learned a particular task, but only with great mental effort.

Now you're motivated to improve. It's here that you learn the various steps of a particular task.

The lowest level is a comfortable place. You think you know everything.

IN SUMMARY

The steps or stages of learning are sequential; the learner should master each one individually and in order. Coaches, trainers, mentors or peer leaders encounter a wide variety of learners who enter into a relationship with us for the purpose of achieving something important. By understanding the stages they must go through to make desired changes, it is more likely you'll be able to help them get there quickly.

By understanding that we all go through these steps as learners, you can maximize your own learning experience and coach yourself through the challenges and obstacles that prevent you from gaining knowledge and new skills.

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