The Cycle of Competence theory was developed at the Gordon Training International in the 1970s. A model for learning a new skill, this is often presented in either a ladder or a chart format to show that stages builds upon the previous one. And while it is absolutely true that none of the four stages can be skipped, I see these four stages as a continuous cycle of learning.

So the Four Stages of Competence are:

1. Unconscious Incompetence – I don’t even KNOW what I don’t know
2. Conscious Incompetence – I know what I don’t know and I still cannot do it
3. Conscious Competence – I know how to do it and it takes focus and energy
4. Unconscious Competence – I have embodied the skill and I can do it effortlessly (more complete and articulate descriptions of each stage are below as described on several business/training sites including http://www.businessballs.com/consciouscompetencelearningmodel.htm)

As I see it, some sort of insight brings us from Stage 1 to 2: we see the need to gain a skill that we never before even realized we needed. Then learning is the awkward and uncomfortable process that brings us from Stage 2 to 3, and practice is the diligent repetition that brings us from Stage 3 to 4. BUT, once in Stage 4, it can be easy to be entrained in what amounts to a skill that is a habit. And that entrainment can keep us from changing how we do what we do and even blind us to new and better ways of doing it. Which puts us right back to Stage 1: I don’t even see that there is something I can’t do.

I see the Four Stages like this:

![Four Stages of Competence Diagram](https://focuspocusnow.com/the-cycle-of-competence-based-almost-entirely-on-the-four-stages-of-competence/)

except I would draw one more arrow that goes from Unconscious Competence, back to Unconscious Incompetence. Once Unconscious Competence is reached, we are not finished, but ready to begin the cycle again.

**Descriptions of the Four Stages of Competence:**

1. **Unconscious Incompetence**
   - the person is not aware of the existence or relevance of the skill area
   - the person is not aware that they have a particular deficiency in the area concerned
   - the person might deny the relevance or usefulness of the new skill
   - the person must become conscious of their incompetence before development of the new skill or learning can begin
   - the aim of the trainee or learner and the trainer or teacher is to move the person into the ‘conscious competence’ stage, by demonstrating the skill or ability and the benefit that it will bring to the person’s effectiveness

2. **Conscious Incompetence**
   - the person becomes aware of the existence and relevance of the skill
   - the person is therefore also aware of their deficiency in this area, ideally by attempting or trying to use the skill
   - the person realizes that by improving their skill or ability in this area their effectiveness will improve
   - ideally the person has a measure of the extent of their deficiency in the relevant skill, and a measure of what level of skill is required for their own competence
the person ideally makes a commitment to learn and practice the new skill, and to move to the ‘conscious competence’ stage

3 – Conscious Competence

the person achieves ‘conscious competence’ in a skill when they can perform it reliably at will
the person will need to concentrate and think in order to perform the skill
the person can perform the skill without assistance
the person will not reliably perform the skill unless thinking about it – the skill is not yet ‘second nature’ or ‘automatic’
the person should be able to demonstrate the skill to another, but is unlikely to be able to teach it well to another person
the person should ideally continue to practice the new skill, and if appropriate commit to becoming ‘unconsciously competent’ at the new skill
practice is the single most effective way to move from stage 3 to 4

4 – Unconscious Competence

the skill becomes so practiced that it enters the unconscious parts of the brain – it becomes ‘second nature’
common examples are driving, sports activities, typing, manual dexterity tasks, listening and communicating
it becomes possible for certain skills to be performed while doing something else, for example, knitting while reading a book
the person might now be able to teach others in the skill concerned, although after some time of being unconsciously competent the person might actually have difficulty in explaining exactly how they do it – the skill has become largely instinctual
this arguably gives rise to the need for long-standing unconscious competence to be checked periodically against new standards

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