

Unleashing the Consciousness to Learn

Written on 25 March 2013 by Irene Chia

One day, around this time last year, my eldest son returned from school and, hyper-ventilating, he exclaimed, “Mummy, I am panicking over the upcoming ‘O’ level exams”. Not catching his breath, he continued, “But I wonder why nobody in my class is panicking except me!” Curious and empathetic, I turned my full attention to him. He narrated that he later discovered that they were not one bit anxious as they did not know what they were ill-equipped about then. Apparently, my son had asked for help on some subject contents and his classmates were equally clueless.

I turned to my pale-looking boy and said, “Son, I have good and bad news for you.” He was devastated; certainly not prepared for any further bad news. Encouragingly, I told him that he was in a better position as he knew how far he was from what he needed to accomplish and there was still time till the exams. Heartlessly, I continued, “But son, you are in an equally bad state compared to your classmates. You are still as incompetent as them.” Instantaneously, I pulled out one of the OD frameworks I so dearly enjoy and began to put things into perspective for him. As expected, he left no opportunity for me to lecture but scampered off to mug up.

The “Conscious Competence Learning Model” at Figure 1 speaks volume about whether an organization is a learning one. The framework, coined and used by several authors including Gordon Training International, W Lewis Robinson and David Reay, explained that individuals will not be motivated to learn unless they have entered the second quadrant of Conscious Incompetence, where they see a case for change, a need to fill the gap and learn.

So why do organizations or individuals remain at a state of Unconscious Incompetence? Many factors can be attributed to this – contented with the status quo; ignorant about external changing landscape and rising demands of customers; and they do not see the benefits or relevance of the learning. Therein lies the chasm between where they are and staying relevant or ahead of the pack.

Even if individuals have reached a state of Conscious Incompetence, they need motivation to learn and know that they can improve or make changes. Recently, I witnessed an opening speech given by a member of the senior management of a certain company. He declared that smart thinking could not be taught. I was astounded. What will the participants’ attitude towards learning be if they had already been “branded” as “un-teachable”? It is imperative for leaders to believe and have faith that people can learn if they have the will.



Awaken the Potential

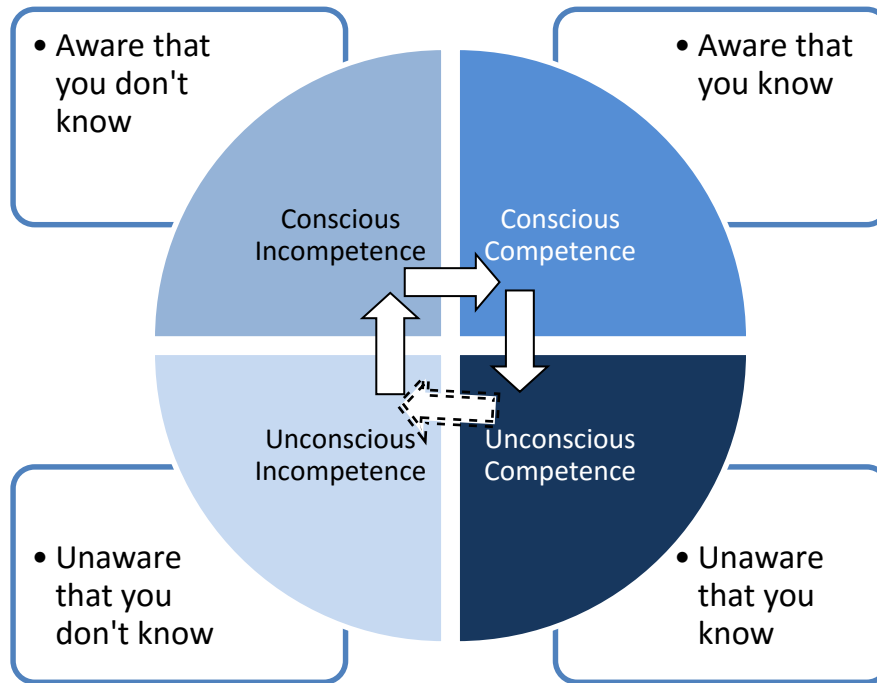


Figure 1: Conscious Competence Learning Model

To reach Unconscious Competence, individuals not only need to know and be equipped, they need loads of practice to make them the masters, moving from the 3rd to the 4th stage. I often hear drivers who reach their destination without thinking about how they got there. That is because the skills have been wired in them such that they could function in parallel to other tasks without being conscious about it.

Other writers have attempted to give the model a fifth stage. If you are a fellow facilitator, you may be interested in this. Linda Gilbert (2004), coined it the Re-Conscious Competence where good trainers or coaches are those who can bring their mastery to others while operating at their higher level. That explains why some soccer players are star players but bad coaches. Similarly, managers who are newly promoted may not be able to coach their staff on their technical expertise. John Addy (2004), used the term Complacency to describe the 5th stage where new bad habits formed or no up-skilling were put in. Hence, that jeopardises and corrodes their own gold standard. There are many others, but we will leave that to another day.

So, the long and short of it is, learning starts with awakening our consciousness. Be awoken!



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