

Consciously Competent Leaders

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The topics I address each week usually stem from my experiences with clients. I generalize the concepts and present them for the benefit of new readers. Further, I'm surprised when the topics I just finished presenting seem to be so relevant to the people I'm serving in the weeks that follow.

For example, a recent column dealt with "choosing your role models." I've interacted with many people in the past few days where the concept of a healthy role model or mentor was relevant to enhancing their needs for growth as a leader.

One conversation led me to recall a description used by trainers of the stages of skill development.

When we know little about a particular topic and we're not able to perform the related tasks, we are considered "incompetent". Once we train and have practiced, we become "competent".

Additionally, sometimes we're just oblivious to our capability. We don't concern ourselves with how little or how much we know. In such a condition, we're labeled as "unconscious". The opposite of course, when we know fully how capable or inept we are, is characterized as "conscious".

The two concepts combine as we learn and grow through these four stages of development.

Unconscious incompetent. We are not capable of performing, but we don't even realize our ineffectiveness. Sometimes at this level, we may even be deceived, believing we are capable when we are not. Others who are genuinely skilled, however, know otherwise!

Conscious incompetent. By this stage, we have observed others who are skilled, and we realize that we aren't. We may be embarrassed at just how incapable we are. Often, we are actively seeking to fill the void that we now understand exists.

Conscious competent. After what may seem an extended period, we master the knowledge and physical tasks necessary to contribute. We realize we've made progress, and when we focus, we are not only able to perform, but also to describe to other learners how we execute the skills.

Unconscious competent. Individuals at this stage have been performing so long and so well that the effort seems instinctive, no longer requiring concentration. Others may consider such a contributor an expert or a master at the craft. Ironically, the individual may not be able to explain the why, what, or how of execution, responding to such questions with "I don't know, I just do it!"

Now you have a scale against which to measure your capabilities--and those of your role model. Pretty clearly, you prefer to choose as your role model and mentor someone extremely competent.

But who serves as the better role model or mentor--someone at the conscious competent level or someone who has moved beyond that and executes without thinking?

Leaders who function at the unconsciously competent level sustain the myth that "leaders are born, not made." Their smooth functioning makes them excellent role models, as we observe them make good choices and take appropriate actions. However, if we ask them to explain their rationale or describe the finer points of their execution, they may be unable to provide explicit, helpful responses. Because they may struggle to give reasons for their actions to a protégé, unconsciously competent leaders may not make good mentors.

Conscious competent leaders, on the other hand, make very good mentors. They can both execute and describe what they are doing, why they do it, and how to do it well. Because they sometimes visibly struggle with the options available to them, they usually are also quite transparent role models. There is little doubt, however, that consciously competent leaders make the best mentors and teachers of leadership competencies.