

Trainer Essentials: Stages of Learning

The Chinese philosopher Confucius once said: “Real knowledge is to know the extent of one’s ignorance.” In other words, the more we know, the more we discover that we need to learn. Confucius’ idea was explored further by modern psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger. In their observations, poor performers *overestimate* their ability in a particular skill; those with true ability *underestimate* the difficulty required for others to complete the task. On both ends of the spectrum we have blind spots. The unskilled do not always recognize their lack of ability, and the competent do not recognize the difficulty for others to do the things they can do easily (Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

How do we create conditions so that the unskilled can recognize their need for improvement and move toward competence? Similarly, how do we encourage the very skilled to recognize their own competence and the difficulty for those still learning? The “stages of learning” helps us to understand what is between the two ends of this spectrum.

The Four Stages of Learning

The four stages of learning is a model which suggests that learners:

1. Begin unaware of how little they know;
2. Become aware of their inability;
3. Consciously acquire a skill and begin practicing with it; and
4. Take on the skill as a “natural” part of how they do things.

(Gordon Training International, 2001)

See if you can identify each of the stages of learning in the story below. The stages are described in greater detail on the following page.

Sana always rinsed her hands with water after using the toilet. When people asked her if she practiced effective handwashing she said yes. It wasn't until she was in a WASH awareness workshop that she discovered that she was not practicing correct handwashing. Sana realized that she should wash her hands with soap, not just water. She also discovered that she should be washing her hands after changing her baby's diaper, and before handling food. Sana was afraid that she would forget to wash her hands at these critical times.

At the workshop they gave Sana a poster to remind her of when to wash her hands. She looked at it multiple times a day as a reminder. Over time Sana realized that she no longer needed the poster. She automatically washed her hands with soap at the critical times.

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Stage 1: Unconsciously Unskilled

In the unconsciously unskilled stage we “don’t know what we don’t know”. We are not aware of a skill or our own deficit with it. We may overestimate our ability, and may not recognize the value in learning something new.

Sana was in the unconsciously unskilled stage when she washed her hands only after using the toilet, and did not use soap. She was unconsciously unskilled because she didn’t realize that there was a problem with how she washed her hands.

Stage 2: Consciously Unskilled

In the consciously unskilled stage we recognize what we do not know. We understand the value of learning something new and improving, but we may be scared by what appears to be a difficult or impossible task.

Sana was at the consciously unskilled stage when she attended the WASH Awareness training. She discovered that in addition to washing her hands after using the toilet, she needed to wash her hands after changing her baby and before handling food. Sana also learned that she needs to use soap. She was concerned that she would forget to wash her hands at the necessary times.

Stage 3: Consciously Skilled

In the consciously skilled stage we are competent enough to do something reasonably well. We are able to complete an activity or use a skill we didn’t previously have, however we are still working on it. We need to concentrate on the activity to do it and we find it difficult to focus on multiple things at once.

Sana moved into the consciously skilled phase as she practiced handwashing with the help of the poster. She had to think consciously about when to wash her hands, and needed the poster for reference.

Stage 4: Unconsciously Skilled

In the unconsciously skilled stage we are so skilled that it has become “second nature” for us. We do not need to think about what we are doing to do it. We can complete the activity while mentally focused on something else, and our ability seems natural and easy.



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Sana reached the unconsciously skilled stage when she no longer needed to think about when to wash her hands; she automatically washed her hands with soap at the critical times without referring to the poster.

Examining these four stages, we can see the first and last stages are where we have blind spots or are ignorant about our own ability. As trainers, we will likely find ourselves in the fourth stage more than any other. We must be careful as this is the stage where we can fall into complacency. We need to remain aware of our abilities and to understand what we are doing and how we are doing it so we can teach others effectively.

Supporting Participants through All Stages

Understanding the stages of learning reminds us that learning is an ongoing and sometimes difficult process. Trainers should be aware of the stages of learning so they can support participants appropriately in each stage. Similarly, it is useful to inform participants about these stages so they can understand the emotions they may experience as they learn something new. This understanding also removes the pressure participants may feel to be perfect in their first attempts (Russell, 1996).

The following table identifies trends in how participants may feel at each stage, and how we can support them.

How Participants Feel	How Trainers Can Support Them
<p>Stage 1: Unconsciously Unskilled Participants may feel overconfident and may be uninterested in learning more about the topic. They are not aware of what they do not know.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help participants discover what they do not know and how much they have to learn • Explain why they should acquire the new knowledge, skills and attitudes • Acknowledge participants' progress and provide positive feedback
<p>Stage 2: Consciously Unskilled Participants may feel overwhelmed or unsure of where to begin or how to progress. They understand what they need to learn, but do not possess the skills.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain to participants that making mistakes is an important part of the process • Create a safe learning environment • Acknowledge frustration and assure participants that the situation will improve • Provide opportunities for participants to practice their new knowledge and skills • Target activities at an appropriate level for participants to experience success and develop self-confidence • Organize group work to provide peer support and encouragement
<p>Stage 3: Consciously Skilled Participants are beginning to feel more confident. They still need to concentrate when performing a skill and distractions may increase their anxiety or frustration. They are satisfied with progress and their level of achievement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a lot of opportunities for participants to practice • Encourage participants to continue developing their ability, as they may stop at this stage and there is risk of regression • Increase complexity of activities to ensure participants are challenged to continue moving forward

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<p>Stage 4: Unconsciously Skilled Participants feel confident in their abilities. They are able to use their skills effortlessly and with minimal conscious effort. They may be impatient with others who cannot do the same tasks with equal ease.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind participants that they need to avoid becoming complacent in their abilities since this can result in a loop back to stage one • Acknowledge the participants' competency and the value of their input • Provide opportunities for the participants to coach or teach others
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(Adapted from Mind Tools 2014)

When we educate people about WASH, we ask them to change behaviours, to learn new skills and to internalize new knowledge. It is important for us to support them through all stages of this learning process. By being aware of the stages of learning and what is required to support participants at different stages, we can improve participants' confidence and motivation to learn. By remaining conscious of what is required for us to perform specific skills, we can also do a better job of training others.

References

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Additional Resources

- Ehrlinger, J., Johnson, K., Banner, M., Dunning, D., & Kruger, J. (2008). Why the Unskilled Are Unaware: Further Explorations of (Absent) Self-Insight Among the Incompetent. *Organizational Behavior and Human Processes*, 98-121. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2702783/>

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Kruger, J., & Dunning, D. (1999). Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1121-1134. Retrieved from http://psych.colorado.edu/~vanboven/teaching/p7536_heurbias/p7536_readings/kruger_dunning.pdf

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Calgary, Alberta, Canada
Website: www.cawst.org Email: resources@cawst.org
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