

Common Misconceptions About Public Speaking

Brief: Everyone can become a better public speaker through study and practice.

Learning Objective: Understand that public speaking is a learned skill that can be developed through conscious competence.

Key Terms:

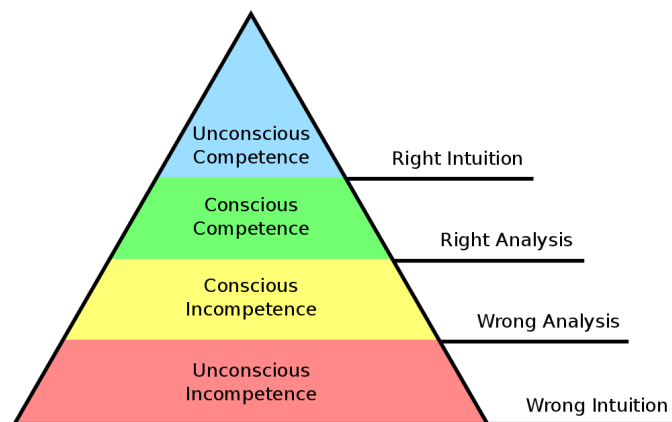
- **Conscious competence:** A learning model that relates to the psychological states involved in the process of progressing from incompetence to competence in a skill.

Common Misconception #1: You're either born a naturally good public speaker or not.

Everyone can become a better public speaker through study and practice. You weren't born knowing how to speak. You were born with the ability to make sounds, but learning how to turn those sounds into recognizable words is a skill you learned by listening to and interacting with caregivers. Later, you learned what those words looked like on print—in visual language. You learned how to read and you learned how to write. Your language skills were acquired through conscious and repeated attempts to learn over time. Learning how to become a good public speaker requires a similar skill-building process.

Developing Conscious Competence

According to the conscious competence learning model, there are four stages you need to move through to develop competence in a new skill. The four stages are unconscious competence (wrong intuition), conscious competence (right analysis), conscious incompetence (right analysis), and unconscious incompetence (wrong intuition).



Hierarchy of Competence

Unconscious Incompetence

In this stage, you don't yet know how to do something and you don't necessarily know that you don't know how to do it. You may not even think the skill is important. To begin learning, you need to acknowledge what you don't know and recognize the value of a new skill.

Conscious Incompetence

In this stage, though you still don't understand or know how to do something, you recognize your deficit and the value of a new skill. During the stage of conscious incompetence, you're expected to make mistakes because learning from your mistakes is a crucial part of the learning process.

Conscious Competence

At this stage, you know how to do something. However, demonstrating the skill or knowledge requires a lot of concentration. It helps when you break what needs to be done into small steps and keep practicing.

Unconscious Competence

At this point, you've had so much practice with a skill that it has become second nature and can be performed easily. When you reach this stage, the skill feels natural and it can be easy to forget that you had to learn it in the first place.

Common Misconception #2: Public speaking is all about delivery. Speech content doesn't matter.

This is like saying that a good essay is simply one that has good grammar or punctuation. Of course a good essay has good grammar and punctuation, but it also has good content. A good speech also relies on good content. When we listen to a speech we judge the speaker according to what they say in addition to how well they say it.

Common Misconception #3: Reading a speech is the best way to ensure a good speech.

A speech is an act of in-the-moment communication with a specific audience. Reading a speech undermines the spontaneous quality of your communication. When you read, your voice is apt to become monotone. To your audience, you no longer appear to be engaged in an active conversation with them. And if you lose your place, as so often happens when you're reading out loud, you face the embarrassing experience of fumbling when you try to find it again. For all of these reasons, reading your speech is generally considered a very bad idea.

From Concept to Action

Think about a skill you had to learn by going through the stages of competency, such as learning to ride a bike, ski, play the piano, drive a car, or make a 3-point basketball shot. Can you remember moving through the stages? What was it like to be a total beginner, not even knowing what you didn't know? Do you remember the awkwardness of your first attempts to demonstrate the skill? Were you able to reach conscious competency? What was that like? If you're still there, what kind of effort would you need to apply to become a true master of this skill?

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"Four stages of competence." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_competence. Accessed 9 March 2019. [CC BY-SA 3.0]

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