



The Four Stages of Competence

What Stage are You?

By Tim Hayes

According to the dictionary synonyms for competence would be: “ability, skill, fitness and aptitude. The ability to do something well or to a required standard.” Incompetence would be the opposite. Years ago one of my teachers described his horsemanship education in four simple stages: 1. Unconscious Incompetence; 2. Conscious Incompetence; 3. Conscious Competence; 4. Unconscious Competence.

He went on to explain what he meant and gave me an example of how I could tell where I was on my journey. It was fun and quite revealing. It’s also become a good way to learn what I need to work on and a good way to help my students improve their horsemanship.

Unconscious Incompetence: This is the stage at which most people start. It’s a stage that is actually a prerequisite to learning anything new for the first time. It’s much more than just a lack of knowledge. It’s: “you don’t know what you don’t know”. Believe it or not some people can get stuck at this stage for a very long time. Not only does this limit their ability to learn and improve it can also put them and their horse unwittingly in a dangerous situation with the potential for severe injury.

To this day I have worked with both beginners and people who have been riding for years who don’t know there is a right and wrong way to saddle a horse. What makes it wrong has nothing to do with “Proper Horse Etiquette”. It has to do with preventing their horse from potentially killing himself. In order to make it safe for you and your horse, securing your horse with the girth/cinch must always be the first thing you do when you put on the saddle and the last thing you do when you take it off.

Unconscious Incompetence is “not knowing that you don’t know” there is a wrong way. It would be securing the breast collar before the girth/cinch. If for any reason the saddle slips off your horses’ back it will stay hung around his neck and underneath his belly. The instant a horse feels something underneath its belly he will move to get away from it. When he realizes it’s staying with him (It’s attached to him with the breast collar) he panics, take off and continues to run until it leaves him. Since it usually does not come off he may run until he injures himself; sometime fatally.

Conscious Incompetence: This is an extremely popular stage which can last on and off for a very long time. It’s extremely effective at helping people fill in the blank in this well-worn sentence: “My horse is perfect but....”. One of the prime causes for staying in this stage is something I use to continually struggle with: Laziness

Conscious Incompetence is allowing your horse to change gaits without correcting him back to the original gait. I start walking my horse; he slips into a trot; I allow him to continue trotting and think to myself: “Oh just let it be. I was eventually going to trot anyway.”

The big problem with this is I am actually teaching my horse he is allowed to make decisions for both of us. I don’t realize it (more unconscious incompetence) but I’m telling him he is in fact the leader. There are hundreds of other similar situations both on the ground and on their back.

Conscious Competence: This is good horsemanship. There is mutual trust and respect. You and your horse are in a willing partnership with you as the accepted leader for all decisions. If your horse gets lazy (disrespectful) and starts to walk while you’re mounting, you step down, back him up twice the distance he moved and remount. You do this as many times as it takes until he stands rock solid for you. You never get on a horse that’s moving. Cowboys use to tell me: “Tim, never let your horse leave without you.”

You know when you’re in the correct lead or diagonal. You know that a bit is for sophisticated communication and not for stopping your horse. You’ve made mistakes, learned from them, practiced and improved. You and your horse are in constant communication. You now ride in the moment with positive awareness.

Unconscious Competence: The gold standard. What many riders strive for and wish to become. Years ago I was working on Chris Black’s cattle ranch in Bruneau Idaho. I had cowboyled for a few



“Unconscious Competence”: Chris Black (at top) & Tim Chasing Strays (above) in Idaho 1997.

years, ridden hundreds of miles on many different horses and now wanted to learn how to become a horseman. One day while working some cows I just sat and watched Chris ride. It wasn’t a man riding a horse. The two had become one. It was like watching an Eagle floating on a breeze.

“That’s what I want to learn how to do,” I thought. On the way back to camp I rode up next to Chris and said: “Chris, I need some help with my riding. What are you doing when you ride?” Chris thought hard for a moment then looked at me: “Well Tim, I don’t really know. Never thought about it. I just ride.”

In all my years on different horses the times I can remember riding with true Unconscious Competence have all been while I was working cattle. It’s a feeling like no other. You and your horse both know you are doing a specific job. It’s also a job that’s fun. Your horse likes it as much as you do. When you do it right you both feel good.

The reason this always made me ride my best was because I stopped thinking about my riding while I was riding. To do a good job and stay one move ahead of the cow I had to focus 100% on the cow. I had to take all my attention off riding my horse and put it on the cow. I had to totally trust my horse, stay out of his way, let him do his job and also know he would take care of me. I had to truly, “Let Go.”

One of the great advantages of Natural Horsemanship is the knowledge that comes from communicating with horses emotionally and mentally as well as physically. When I know my horse and I are together mentally and emotionally I am truly confident. When I am confident I am in a place of total trust. Then I can let go. I can ride with my heart and not my head. We can ride like the wind. Tom Dorrance called it: *True Unity - Unconscious Competence*.

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