

# The Four Stages of Hotelier Competence

## An Inspirational Guide to Continue Your Learning

By [Larry Mogelonsky](#), President & Founder, LMA Communications

Many months ago, I wrote an article discussing the great social psychologist Abraham Maslow and how his popular motivation theory of the 'Hierarchy of Needs' applies to hotels, guest expectations and everything in between. This pyramidal model of human behavior from the 1940s is widely recognized that it is still in use today – and rightfully so!



However, Maslow wasn't a one hit wonder, and he is often credited as one of the progenitors of another paradigm

of behavioral psychology. Rising to prominence in the 1970s, the 'Four Stages of Competence' describes the pathology by which one acquires a new skill from the drudgeries of persistent failure to intact, reflexive action. Needless to say, this time-tested theory is rife with applications for hoteliers, primarily insofar as how we approach contemporary problems that face our properties and our industry.

The four stages, which we'll delve into in a minute, are unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence and, lastly, unconscious competence. Don't let the word 'incompetence' alienate you. What's remarkable about this learning model is that it is not designed to presuppose certain people as 'smarter' or 'better' than any other. As professionals, we are all a spectrum of learned skills with various character traits falling into each of the four labels. In short, nobody's perfect.

Hence, we can all still learn, master or perfect some aspect of our daily routines. The key is to accept the fact that you're not perfect then be open to both personal criticism and new experiences which might widen your perspective. The hospitality industry is so diverse and panoptic that there's always something new the world can teach you. With this in mind, let us begin our hotel-focused adaptation of this magnificent psychology theory.

**1. Unconscious Incompetence** - "Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the universe"

I'd be remiss if I didn't insert at least one of my favorite Albert Einstein quotations to help get the ball rolling. However witty this great 20th century scientist was, he was also right about a lot of things, too – for one, blind ignorance abounds.

The first part of learning is, at its core, the stage where you aren't learning at all – nor do you already have the appropriate skill (incompetence). In fact, you don't even know there's a problem (unconscious). And not knowing there's a problem can be the biggest problem of all!

So, how does someone crack out the proverbial defibrillator and shock himself or herself into an existential frame of mind where every thought and action is open for conjecture? The answer to this differs for each person as everyone discovers their own eureka moment at one point or another in their lives.

But allow me to offer this criticism. When I was first running the gauntlet of a rookie marketer at P&G in the late 1970s, one phrase constantly bouncing off the drywall was, 'Smart people listen'. Simple, elegant and true. The only difference between someone who learns and someone who remains obstinate and 'set in their ways' is the ability to wholeheartedly listen and approach situations from multiple points of view.

The essential qualities are curiosity and keeping an open mind, both of which are two sides of the coin more or less. Furthermore, both are internal beliefs, and, although they aren't entirely immutable, your efforts as a manager to coax, cajole, charm or coerce an employee into your slipstream of leadership pathology will ultimately fail if you aren't promoting change from the inside out.

My recommendation to you and all those who work for you is to focus on inspiration. Lead by example and give your colleagues an aspiration they can see with their own eyes, not one hidden behind the jazz of well-edited television, photography or the written word.

In terms of keeping an open mind, the easiest morsel of advice I can give you is to always be reading. Novels, magazines, newspapers, essays, trade journals, poems or comics – whatever goes well with your morning brew, gulp it down. You'll never know what inspirational factoids you might stumble upon or how a piece of prose might jumpstart a fugue of introspection, so don't close yourself off.

It's ironic that the very people who are most likely to fall into the unconscious incompetent state for one skill or another are also the least likely to be reading this article. Give yourself a pat on the back for making it this far through my own brand of inked didacticism. You're here because you want to learn, you want to be inspired.

**2. Conscious Incompetence** - "The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing."

Now that you've crossed the chasm and perks a brow at what lies beyond the red velvet curtain, it's not to nourish that seed of motivation into an actionable plan. By its very namesake, conscious incompetence describes the stage at which you know there's a problem (conscious) but you don't know how to fix it (incompetence).

As you well know, one of the greatest causes for trepidation is the fear of the unknown; in this case, not knowing the answer or path to take to get the answer. Much like my suggestion for the previous unconscious phase, one of the keys is reading, or, as it might otherwise be called at this stage, research.

Whatever your problem may be, there is an answer out there, or at least enough nuggets of disparate information for you to mull and coalesce into your own solution. Getting back to the whole concept of

an 'open mind', don't just stay within the hospitality field. Instead, think of hospitality as an amalgamation and application of many different but related fields of study including psychology, business, human resources, cuisine, sports, economics, and so on. Trust in the fact that there is answer somewhere out there, you need only be persistent in your pursuit.

And building on the idea of inspirational leadership, when you do come across a worthwhile book, article or instructional website, share it with your colleagues. Even if they are mired in the flat-footed obstinacy of unconscious incompetence, they may just open one of your hyperlink bombardments in the near future. Sometimes leadership really does require a defibrillator.

### **3. Conscious Competence** - "Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new"

This is the meat of the learning process. You know you have a flaw (conscious) and now you have a plan to execute which will, hopefully, remedy the situation (competence). Again, one of the keys here lies with your beliefs. Are you certain that persistence will pay off? How do you know that trial and error will refine your methodology, prudence and speed of action to the point where it actually works?

In order to succeed in the long run, 99 times out of 100 you must fail first. But with this failure comes introspection, "Why did I fail?" and the courage to try and try again. This is the phase for Malcolm Gladwell's proposed '10,000 Hours' where we put in the grunt work in order to make processes effortless further down the road.

Take employee training for instance. When you first attained the rank of manager and were thrust into a leadership role, you might have been a tad nervous about ordering, instructing and reprimanding those below you. You might have even clung to whichever training manual or college textbook said it best. But gradually, the books were referenced less, the dog-eared pages unfolded, and a more internally-driven skill emerged.

This third stage is not just about deriving then following a solution from one source or an array of sources, but working through the drudgery of repetition in order to make it an automatic, yet also adaptive, response for a necessary situation. And by drudgery, I mean grueling, sweating, aching, shivering, agonizing drudgery, because that's what it will take to log your 10,000 hours in order to reach mastery of any given skill.

For some, simply knowing that the next stage is possible can be enough motivation to drive you there. Indeed, modern science has afforded us with a bevy of conclusive research which proves that consciously working on improving a skill can realign your brain circuitry to better execute said skill in the future (read: neuroplasticity).

### **4. Unconscious Competence** - "The only real valuable thing is intuition"

Rounding out this selection of four Albert Einstein quotes is perhaps his simplest – perfect for this late stage in the game where all your previous toils and hard work come together into fast, precise and decisive actions. This is the point where, in the blink of an eye and without any formal internal logistical monologue (unconscious), you can intuit the answer (competence).

Intuition is the mark of a true professional. Like how certain managers instantly discerns what a troubled guest needs to quell his or her concerns or a marketer who instinctually knows which taglines and promotional materials will generate positive returns. Like how certain wait staff interrupt your conversation at just the right moments to confidently guide you towards the next step of the meal or a chef who can improvise with any ingredients to produce excellent cuisine.

This isn't an echelon reserved for the upper tiers of managerial skill sets, but permeates all manner of careers, jobs and tasks. My advice: surround yourself with people who have reached this stage in an area of expertise that can help your business then ensure that this tacit knowledge rubs off on the rest of the team.

**Regression** - There is a debatable fifth step to this stratosphere of hotelier competence that is often described under the banner of complacency or the motto, 'If you don't use it, you lose it'. Suppose you used to be a literal accounting machine, number crunching and balancing spreadsheets until your fingertips bled. Then you got off the wagon and segued career paths into the sister field of marketing. Over time, the ability to effortlessly juggle digits in your head slips away due to inactivity until the point where you catch yourself saying, "I used to be able to do that."

**Complacency** - or the gradual disenfranchisement of a learned skill, is a natural part of life. Each stage of your journey necessitates slightly different proficiencies. This isn't something you should fight, but rather, you should 'roll with the punches'.

To describe this phase, I prefer the term regression. Whether due to the stress, fear or the self-fulfilling fallacy of old age, we go soft. The thinking goes that in these ever-changing times, the set of skills required to be a successful hotelier is also overtly mercurial to the point where unconscious competence is either unattainable due to the rate of technological progress or invalid due to forced obsolescence. Even worth is the cognitive bias paradigm of illusory superiority where you think you're a master, even in reality the world is passing you by.

Complacency, regression or whatever other term you employ to denote this deterioration of learning, the antidotes are the same as someone in either of the first two incompetent stages: curiosity, an open mind and persistence. To put it in more lucrative terms, the more you learn, the more you earn, so keep on learning!

---

Larry Mogelonsky is the founder and chief executive officer of LMA Communications Inc., a marketing agency based out of Toronto, Canada. The early years of his marketing career were spent with Procter & Gamble, PepsiCo and as the management supervisor for Four Season Hotels & Resorts at a leading advertising agency. In 1991, he formed LMA as a specialty consultancy for hospitality and tourism. Upon its founding, LMA was promptly charged with the role of strategic director for Preferred Hotels & Resorts Worldwide. Mr. Mogelonsky conducted worldwide surveys and helped write the strategic plan that is still in place today. Mr. Mogelonsky can be contacted at 415-440-2500 or [larry@lma.net](mailto:larry@lma.net) *Extended Bio...*  
*HotelExecutive.com retains the copyright to the articles published in the Hotel Business Review. Articles cannot be republished without prior written consent by HotelExecutive.com.*