

# Standards & Training DIRECTOR Magazine



September 2022

## Final Outcomes—Partnerships in Community Policing: Regional Training with a National Impact

Clarifying Misrepresentations About Law Enforcement  
Interrogation Techniques

Competency—Increasing Utility Through Model Expansion

Applying the Adult Learning Model to Academy Training

Every Officer is A Leader



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# Competency – Increasing Utility Through Model Expansion

By Jeff Johnsgaard

There are many models an instructor can use to conceptualize the level of competence their students have for a skill or knowledge. One of them is a four-stage model summarized next (Wikipedia, 2022).

**Unconscious Competence (UC)** – The individual has had so much practice with a skill that it has become "second nature" and can be performed easily.

**Conscious Competence (CC)** – The individual understands or knows how to do something. However, demonstrating the skill or knowledge requires concentration.

**Conscious Incompetence (CI)** – Though the individual does not understand or know how to do something, they recognize the deficit, as well as the value of a new skill in addressing the deficit.

**Unconscious Incompetence (UI)** – The individual does not understand or know how to do something and does not necessarily recognize the deficit.

British statistician George Box stated, "all models are wrong" (Box, 1976) and further in 1978 "all models are wrong, but some are useful." The reason for this article is because we have found it useful to elaborate on the above four stage model. We have found it useful for both instructors and students as it helps us gain insight to what the person's mindset is in reference to the topic or skill being presented.

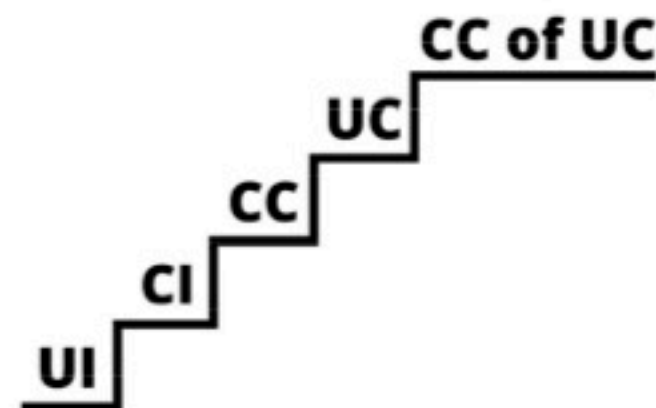
Knowing what the student thinks about their competence makes it far easier for the instructor to link knowledge to knowledge when teaching the student. This helps achieve the goal of increasing learning and most importantly performance, especially after a period passes from the learning event.

For ease of conceptualization, you may find it useful to imagine the four levels of competence presented on a stairway leading from low skill or knowledge to higher skill or knowledge (pictured below). In our train-the-trainer courses, we have added three more levels to the stairway of competence. Our reason is, the additions each describe a place a person could be in regarding their mentality and skill that is not covered by the four stage model. This article will now address two of the levels we have added.

Trainer Kenneth R. Murray, author of *Training at the Speed of Life Vol. 1: The Definitive Textbook for Police and Military Reality-Based Training*, first introduced us to a level that resides above UC (Murray, 2014).

## "Conscious Competence of Unconscious Competence"

First impressions were that the term did not intuitively make sense and it was bringing more complexity to something that did not need it. But, once Murray defined Conscious Competence of Unconscious Competence (CC of UC), we realized the term had a great value and utility.



CC of UC has three parts to its definition. First, it refers to those people who know that they can perform a task for example, with a high degree of accuracy without the need for conscious thought and attention on the skill. These people are aware that they can do it without thinking about it. Second, they understand the principles, the minutia, the slight variations that can take place in the skill itself, the tools for the skill and the individual variations between the people performing the skill that are present. Third, and arguably the most important, they are also skilled communicators and know how to convey these principles to a student so the student can perform it "their way".

As stated, this definition for CC of UC supposes the person has a high degree of communication / teaching skill. We utilize this definition in our instructor training initially to bring awareness to the framework the instructor has to evaluate their abilities as an instructor. It is a way to help them become more UI to instructor development techniques like using specific language and many other principles to optimize their instructional techniques.

Our desired end state for Law Enforcement instructors is typically for their student to learn a skill and after time passes from the learning event be able to perform it to a high degree of accuracy. To sharpen that point further, the skill needs to be applied to a novel environment when time and information are limited.

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Looking at the other side of the coin for CC of UC, I know I have run into many people with a high skillset but who were poor at best at conveying the “how” and the “why” to others in order to get them to understand and be able to practice optimally. These people could shoot a pistol fast and accurately for example, but their level of understanding for exactly why they were able to do that did not transfer to others who have different bodies, hand sizes and experiential backgrounds.

**“The first step is understanding variations exist between UC and CC of UC.”**

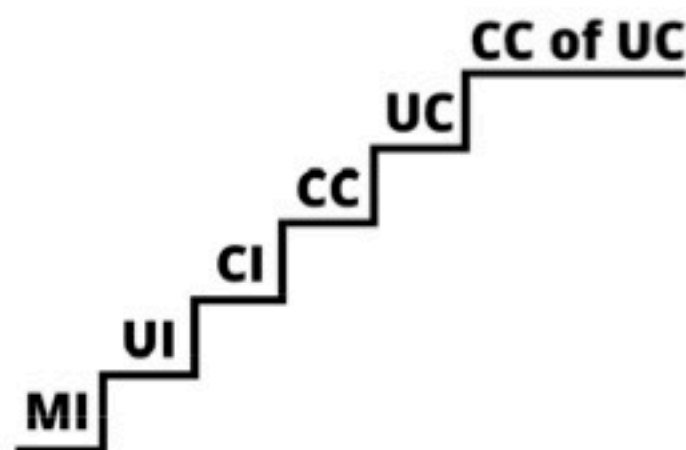
This example becomes more relevant for decision-making as the skill itself is not necessarily physical one but a cognitive one. This domain is where we see many instructors having the least amount of skills for teaching. Expanding on mental models, feedback loop creation, optimizing practice sessions for neuroplasticity are all areas we look to optimize on purpose. Again, the first step is understanding variations exist between UC and CC of UC and is the reason for this introductory article.

CC of UC can be looked at as the top stair of the levels of competency. We have heard it described as being a “Master Instructor”. Since words have meaning, we do not like the term master as people tend to view it as an end state. Thinking you have reached the apex of competency could leave you closed to further optimization and thus with a blind spot.

The best instructors we have ever seen have the mental framework for being a student first and always, then an instructor second. Even though they are world class they are continually evaluating themselves. CC of UC can be thought of as having a high degree of ability as an instructor for the subject matter / skill.

Note: In later discussions about CC of UC, Murray was quick to point out he initially learned the concept from Richard Bandler, cocreator of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP).

A second level we have added to our levels of competence is at the very bottom, below UI. That level is one we call, “Misconception Incompetence (MI)”. We define MI differently from UI. In UI, the person is completely unaware that they lack the knowledge, skills and/or ability. In MI, the person knows of the skill or concept and feels that they are addressing it optimally. MI can be closely related to hubris but is different. The Oxford Dictionary defines hubris as excessive pride or self-confidence, which may or may not be present in the individual.



Like the possible blind spot created if someone becomes complacent as a master instructor, there can be a blind spot too if a person does not understand their solution to a problem or level of competency in a skill is actually not the optimal response.

To make MI more concrete, I offer you an example from my own life. During police recruit training in 2003, I was taught to “threshold brake” my Crown Victoria patrol vehicle. This was a technique especially useful in Canada as our roads were often covered in ice and when applying the brakes, the wheels would slide. I was taught that even on dry pavement, a skidding tire was less stable; and when skidding, I was able to stop my vehicle in much less distance when utilizing the threshold braking technique. I was able to perform it myself and saw firsthand the results.

Many years later, as a Det/Sgt., I traded my suit for my patrol uniform and went back out on the street for several late-night special duty assignments. During these, I was paired up with a young officer. We immediately agreed he would be the passenger and operate the laptop as it had completely changed and I had almost no clue how to do it, while I would drive.

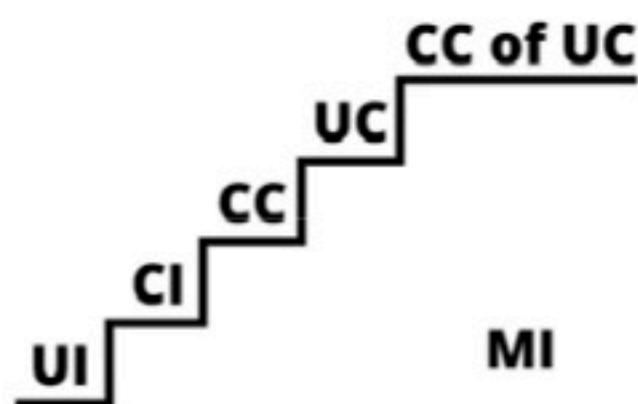
To cut to the point about MI, at the end of the night my partner asked me why I was “pumping the brakes” when we were coming into a corner quickly? I told him about how I had firsthand experience from back in 2003 with seeing how much less distance was needed to slow the vehicle with the threshold braking technique and was shocked it was not still taught.

He then told me that all the new SUVs had Antilock Braking Systems (ABS) and in fact there were no Crown Victoria’s left in our whole fleet! I was aware of the issue, skidding wheels are not as efficient at stopping a vehicle. I was aware of the technique, threshold braking stops the vehicle in less distance and less time. I believed I had addressed the problem optimally but, there was a change in the tool in this case, the vehicle’s braking, and I was at Misconception Incompetence.



In reference to our stairway graphic, MI is a stage of competence but on another stairway entirely.

The graphic below shows MI outside and off the staircase. In my example, that graphic was me and my understanding for emergency braking for all police vehicles. I believed I was at UC with the optimal technique but I was on the wrong stairway entirely. I needed to be on the stairway for SUV's with ABS and I did not understand that. In fact, I believed incorrectly that I had actually solved the problem for how best to apply brakes in an emergency and created jeopardy.



Understanding MI has been useful to our staff in all aspects of their teaching and in life. They are able to identify multiple examples of it in the world. In 2005, Nobel Prize winners Doctor's Barry Marshall and Robin Warren felt they needed to go so far as to give themselves peptic ulcers and then cure themselves by treating the bacterium *Helicobacter pylori* (H-pylori). Up to that point, the medical community believed that high stomach acid (Ph) was the cause of these ulcers and lowering the acid was the cure. The medical community was at the level of MI with their mental framework and treatment. Marshall and Warren proved otherwise and took the medical community from MI to UI then to CI with one bold experiment (Abbott, 2005; The Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine 2005).

As an instructor looking to teach information and skills, we hope you can see the value of understanding your students could be at the level of MI or UI. We have great success in bringing people to the level of CI and to refine that point further to a place where they understand "why" the information is of value to them. This helps engage them to want to learn it and promotes them to be active in their learning process. That then helps to increase their attention, focus and mental models for the information and skills.

The specific language and the process for how information is organized, pre-framed, taught, reinforced and tested is crucial. We use this

"enhanced levels of competence" model to help instructors understand and relate to each student more one-on-one no matter the lesson plan. It allows them to give each student 5 more pounds on their learning bar each session. But those 5 pounds are slightly different for each student, based on their unique knowledge, background understanding and ability.

Hopefully you find the additional levels of Conscious Competence of Unconscious Competence and Misconception Incompetence to be as useful as we do. They are an initial point to raise awareness by diving deeper into a person's mental framework for their knowledge, skills and ability in the hope it leads to deeper understandings and higher degrees of performance.

**Note:** If you would like more information about the information presented in this article, Jeff presented the information during IADLEST's August 22, 2022, Instructor Webinar. [Click here to view the webinar.](#)

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