

3.2 Competence – recognise the learning process

Slide 1

We can experience a range of negative emotions if we feel that we are not very skilled at something, or if things feel difficult or harder than they should.

As researchers, we are in the business of learning: pushing the boundaries of our discipline forward but also developing our own career trajectory from unskilled to skilled researcher, from a competent manager of research projects to the leader of research and researchers.

If we are in the business of research, then we must recognise and anticipate that we will constantly be experiencing different phases of the learning process... along with all the positive and negative emotions that come hand in hand with that process.

So, it's useful to recognise and expect what it will feel like to be in the different stages of the learning process.

Slide 2

As we progress in our career as a postdoc and beyond, more and more of our learning tends to relate to our leadership rather than technical skills. With technical skills, there is usually training, guidance and knowledge of what is categorically correct or not.

When we are dealing with leadership of ourselves and others, there is not always a definite answer, and it can feel messy. Although there is training available, often the only way to learn is to jump in, have an experience and learn from that, through a process of trial and error or perseverance, repetition and hard work.

When we try and do something for the first time, we enter into steps of the learning process. This conscious competence model describes the process well and helps us to understand that the feelings we experience during learning are completely normal and are important indicators that we are making progress.

If you have watched the presentation on the ingredients of motivation, you will already be familiar with this model, so this will serve as a reminder to you.

Before you do something new, you are unconscious of your incompetence – in other words, you don't know what you don't know – and you don't know how good or bad you might be at it.

This applies not only to technical skills but also to transferable skills like asking for or giving feedback, having difficult conversations, delegating work rather than doing it, writing a strategy, or marketing yourself at interview or in a research proposal.

Once we do one of these things for the first time, we get to step 2: conscious incompetence. Because these things are not easy, it is unlikely we will be brilliant at them first time. In step 2: we are very aware that we are not very good at what we are learning. This can cause stress and anxiety for anyone but can be more stressful in an academic environment, where we are surrounded by highly experienced and intelligent people. We don't want to look incompetent in front of them!

It can provoke imposter feelings or prompt our inner critic to tell us that we will never be good at the new skill and to stop trying: or to convince us that we really don't want or need to get skilled.

If we listen to our inner critic or if we are put off by the stress caused by feeling incompetent, we will step off the ladder and stop learning. But we can't get to the next step without going through this phase, however quick it is.

If we recognise the stress and discomfort as an indicator that we are learning, rather than a signal to stop, it can give us the determination to keep going so that we can get through it more quickly and move on to step 3: conscious competence. We get to this phase by repeating, practising, creating new habits like a new structure to our day or to our meetings or processes to help us to learn. Or we can ask others for advice on how to improve or for feedback on our performance.

In the conscious competence step, we are able to perform the new skill effectively, but it takes a lot of effort and energy as we are very conscious of what we need to do to be effective...we might spend a lot of time planning or practising, and that could drain our resilience. It could do the opposite: top up our resilience as we start to see we are making progress, and that makes us feel good.

If we keep practising and using the skill, we will then get to the final step 4: unconscious competence: we use the skill naturally and without conscious attention. We might not notice we are doing it as it has become so normal for us. That's great if it is a mechanical process, or if it is an activity that benefits from muscle memory, like playing a musical instrument. But actually, this stage can be dangerous for many activities – if we are not paying attention, we might miss important information. Teaching, supervising and mentoring others can help us to stay conscious of how and why we are using the skill.

So, next time something is draining your resilience because it feels hard, you're not making progress or you think that you are not good at it; recognise the feelings as normal – they are indicating that you are embarking on a learning process – you have to get through this stage to become more skilled.

Keep going, and you will get better – you have to keep practising: repeat, develop new habits around the skill. Involve others to get advice or to give you feedback. You will probably realise that everyone feels this way, that you are better skilled than you think, and you might pick up some good ideas on how to get through the learning steps more quickly.