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**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. One way to look at ones progress in the art of riding and horsemanship are with four simple stages I like to call: 1. Unconscious Incompetence. 2. Conscious Incompetence. 3. Conscious Competence. 4. Unconscious Competence.

Discovering what stage we are at with our horse can be quite revealing. It is also a good way to learn what we need to work on to improve and move ahead to the next level.

Unconscious Incompetence: Unless you were born on a horse this is the stage at which most people start. It's a stage that is usually 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 in this stage for a very long time. The problem with being stuck at this stage with horses is not only does it limit their ability to get better and improve, it can put them 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 that 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 your 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 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. One of the prime causes for staying in this stage is simply laziness.

Conscious Incompetence is allowing your horse to change gaits without correcting him back to the original gait. You start walking your horse; he slips into a trot; you allow him to continue trotting and think: “Oh just let it be. I was eventually going to trot anyway.” The big problem with this is you are actually teaching your horse he is allowed to make decisions for both of you. You don't realize it but your telling him he is in fact the leader (this is more unconscious incompetence). When your horse thinks he's the leader he will continually challenge you by resisting your requests.

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. Old timers like to say “Never let your horse leave without you.”

There are many examples of Conscious Competence. It's knowing when you're in the correct lead or diagonal. It's knowing that a bit is for sophisticated communication and not for stopping your horse. It's knowing you've made mistakes, learned from them, practiced and improved. It's knowing you and your horse are in constant communication and you both ride in the moment with positive awareness.



Tim chasing strays.

Unconscious Competence: The gold standard. What most riders strive for and wish to achieve. Years ago I was working on Chris Black's cattle ranch in Bruneau Idaho. I had cowboied for a few 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 watch Chris ride. It was like watching an Eagle floating on a breeze. It wasn't a man and a horse. It was one being gracefully moving across the plains.

I thought: “I want to learn how to ride like that.” 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.” I thought for a moment and realized what Chris was saying was...when he rides, he isn't thinking about riding.

In all my years of riding horses the times I remember riding with true Unconscious Competence have all been working cattle.



Chris Black chasing Strays

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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 about yourselves. The reason this has always made me ride my best was because I wasn't thinking about my riding when I was riding. To do the job and stay one move ahead of the cow I had to focus 100% on the cow. To take all my attention off my horse and put it on the cow I had to totally trust that my horse knew what we were doing and that I didn't have to micromanage him. I had to truly, "Let Go."

One of the great advantages of Natural Horsemanship is the knowledge that comes from learning how to communicate with horses emotionally and mentally as well as physically. When I know my horse and I are in harmony emotionally and mentally 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. I can ride like the wind with true unity...Unconscious Competence.

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