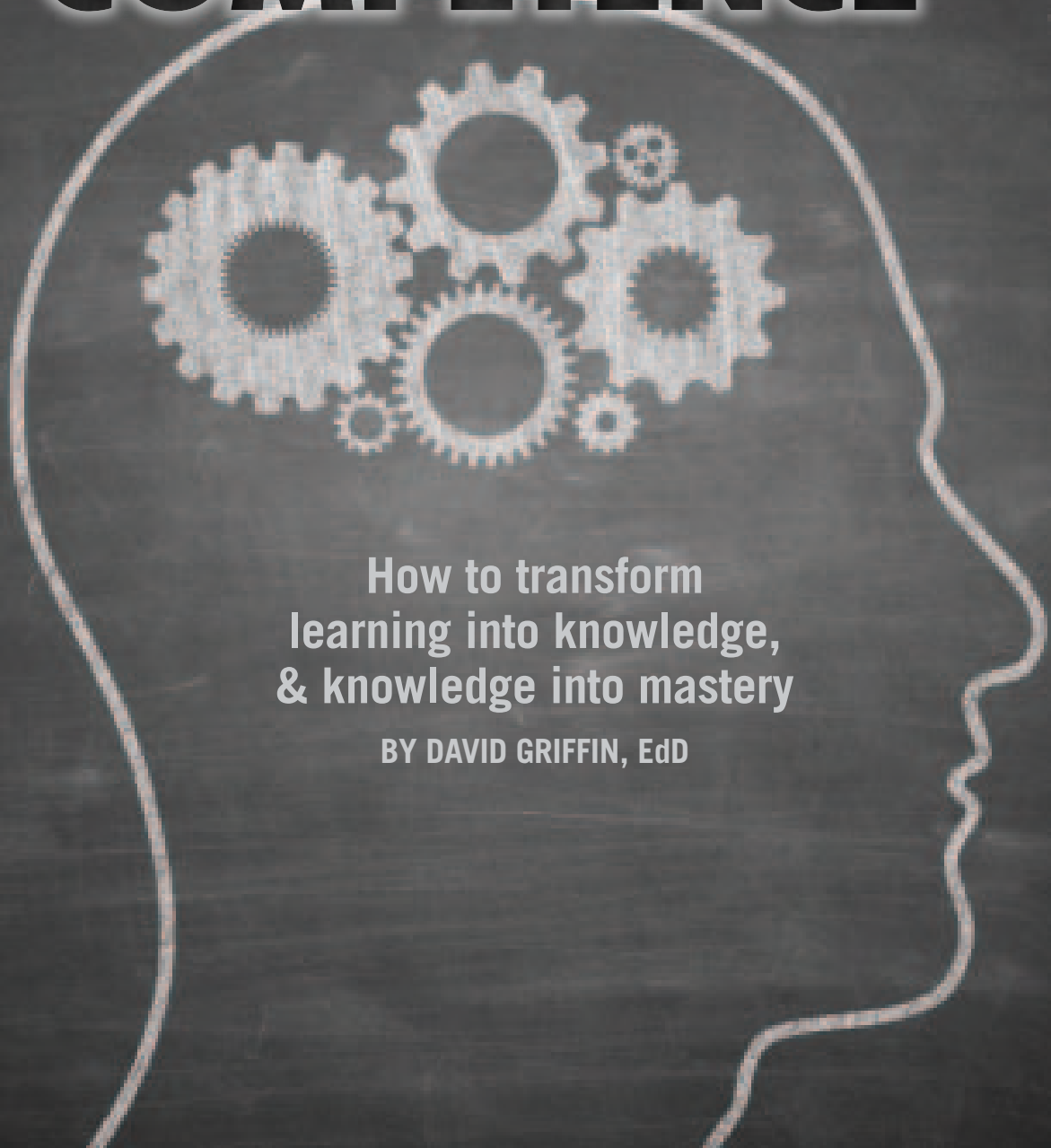


ACHIEVING UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE



How to transform
learning into knowledge,
& knowledge into mastery

BY DAVID GRIFFIN, EdD

Emergency service workers are frequently tasked with learning new information. Not only must they learn new information, but they must be capable of functionally applying it in their operational environment. Unfortunately, just because a new skill or idea has been learned does not necessarily translate into a high level of mastery. This is especially problematic in the dynamic arena of emergency services, where *learning* must be turned into *doing* at the “unconscious competence” level. But what is “unconscious competence” and how do we ensure that learning translates into precise performance?

LEVELS OF KNOWLEDGE & MASTERY

First, let’s build a foundation. According to Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman in his book *On Combat, The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace*, there are four levels of mastery: unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence, and unconscious competence.

First, unconscious incompetence refers to the lowest level of mastery. Some new firefighters will begin their training at this level. They are not necessarily good at the tasks that they are asked to perform because the skills are so new. However, research indicates that they often think their performance is top notch. For them to improve, they must admit that they need to be shown how to perform skills correctly before they can move on to the next level.

Next, conscious incompetence refers to an individual who has limited knowledge of a subject. There is a reason why training instructors will comment on how much easier it is to train a recruit who has no experience. They are a blank cast waiting to be molded into a great firefighter. The recruit is already aware that they need to learn.

The next level, conscious competence, refers to an individual who can do the right thing, but they have to think about it. As Grossman states, “that is fine for many tasks, but for life-and-death skills to be performed under stress, it is not good enough.” That’s a powerful message.

The final and most important level of mastery is unconscious competence. This level indicates that an individual can perform a task without even thinking. Professional athletes have high levels of unconscious competence—and they don’t even deal with life-and-death situations like we do. So why would anyone in this profession want to learn a skill and not master it to the highest level? There is an answer.

FROM KNOWING TO DOING

According to author and leadership guru Ken Blanchard in his book *Know Can Do!*, there are three reasons why people don’t turn *knowing* into *doing* and hence, do not perform at the unconscious competence level. First, he states that a global “information overload” crisis is spreading throughout organizations and their employees.

In the emergency services, we constantly learn the latest and greatest technique, operation or leadership practice. But what happens to the previous information we learned? Do we have it stored in our internal file cabinet, or do

we have to constantly make room for new information? Research indicates that we subconsciously make room.

According to Blanchard and his colleagues, just three hours after a class or seminar, individuals who only listened to the information will retain half of what they have learned. A mere 24 hours later, they will have already forgotten an additional 50% of that. Thirty days later, they will be able to remember less than 5% of the information to which they were introduced. So unless an individual is part of 0.0001% of the population gifted with a photographic memory, they need to do more than just listen. They have to take notes, practice the skill daily, revisit the notes, practice the skill daily, revisit the notes, practice the skill daily. You get the point.

The second reason people don’t turn their *knowing* into *doing*, according to Blanchard and his colleagues, is a concept called “negative filtering.” Research shows that individuals have a processing system that does not function in a positive manner, but rather allows for negative thinking to dominate. Therefore, when someone learns something new, they focus on the negative aspects, rather the positive.

Recall a meeting that you have been involved in where someone brings up a new idea or concept. Do you focus on the positives instantly and think how great the idea is? Unfortunately, research indicates that a large percentage of the population jump to the negatives before even considering the benefits. This decreases an individual’s buy-in and job performance. So before jumping on the negative band wagon, find at least three positives with the idea and share it with the person. This will go a long way.

The third and final reason people don’t *do* what they *know* and operate at the unconscious competence level relates to a “lack of follow-up.” When new information or a new skill is learned, it must be ingrained into an individual’s daily life. Doing this, and making a positive change in behavior, takes effort. Research shows that a large percentage of people *want* to follow up on what they have learned, but they just don’t know how to do so. They have the best of intentions but often give up because of a lack of planning or direction.

GOOD OL’ REPETITION

All the aforementioned issues can be fixed using the oldest trick in the book: repetition. This is nothing new, but how many people actually use this age-old technique? Repetition does not mean doing something two or three times. Repetition means daily, until one is unconsciously competent. Even when someone begins to perform a skill at this level, it does not mean that they have reached the end of the learning chain. They still have to perform maintenance to ensure the highest level of mastery will continue.

This takes a great deal of work, but it also takes discipline. Everyone has their specialization of skills where their unconscious competence is soaring. However, riding a rig on shift day requires us to have unconscious competence in *everything* we do—not just some of it. Whether you realize it or not, we are viewed as professional industrial athletes

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who must be ready to display our skills at a high level of mastery in a matter of seconds. This is not a choice. This is a responsibility that we have been given!

TRUE COMPETENCE

The first link in the chain is to learn the information. Once we have learned the information, we can then go out and perform the skill. Often, once we perform the skill a handful of times, we believe that we have mastered it and then move on to something else. At this point, we are only *doing* the skill. This is the first mistake in the learning chain. We must master the skill at hand. Unfortunately, we do not have the luxury of only focusing on one skill until it is perfect. We have to functionally perform hundreds of skills until they are all part of our mastered repertoire. This means working every shift to not only become competent, but become an expert in everything that we do.

Of course, this will take more than your “routine” drill. It requires hours and hours of daily practice, while still responding to emergencies, going to classes and participating in public events. The days of TV-watching and showing up to the firehouse to do nothing are over. To be a master of your domain, you must repeat, repeat, repeat and repeat skills until they are effortless. This is the only training methodology that will ensure the knowledge you have learned will be turned into *doing* at the unconscious competence level.

No one said that this profession would be easy. We are responsible for people’s lives every day we put our gear on the rig. The last thing we want is for the day to come when someone is calling for our help and we can’t do anything to save them due to a lack of unconscious competence. You will never forgive yourself for not training that much harder and perfecting that skill.

FINAL THOUGHTS

No matter how hard we try, we cannot save everyone, but we CAN prepare ourselves to be masters of this profession. There is no in between. Either go all in and become a master or find a new career. Unconscious competency is calling. Answer the call and change your training techniques to reach this high level of mastery. Anything less is mediocre—and mediocrity does not save lives. 🌀

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To read more by David Griffin, visit www.firefighternation.com/author/david-griffin.

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