

THE FOUR LEVELS OF CULTURAL AWARENESS

As you go through the stages of adjustment, your awareness of the host country culture naturally increases. This awareness tends to progress through a series of levels, which are described below, with each level corresponding to a phase or phases in the cycle of adjustment:

I. Unconscious Incompetence

This has also been called the state of blissful ignorance. At this stage, you are unaware of cultural differences. It does not occur to you that you may be making cultural mistakes or that you may be misinterpreting much of the behaviour going on around you. You have no reason not to trust your instincts.

II. Conscious Incompetence

You now realize that differences exist between the way you and the local people behave, though you understand very little about what these differences are, how numerous they might be, or how deep they might go. You know there's a problem here, but you're not sure about the size of it. You're not so sure of your instincts anymore, and you realize that some things you don't understand. You may start to worry about how hard it's going to be to figure these people out.

III. Conscious Competence

You know cultural differences exist, you know what some of these differences are, and you try to adjust your own behaviour accordingly. It doesn't come naturally yet — you have to make a conscious effort to behave in culturally appropriate ways — but you are much more aware of how your behaviour is coming across to the local people. You are in the process of replacing old instincts with new ones. You know now that you will be able to figure these people out if you can remain objective.

IV. Unconscious Competence

You no longer have to think about what you're doing in order to do the right thing. Culturally appropriate behaviour is now second nature to you; you can trust your instincts because they have been reconditioned by the new culture. It takes little effort now for you to be culturally sensitive.