



# How We Design

*by Dr. Mark Frein, Managing Director - The Refinery Leadership Partners Inc.*

We offer *customized* leadership and management development services. But what does that mean? Virtually all providers in the leadership development industry say they "customize" their training solutions.

There is a range of things that could count as customized – let the buyer beware. Sometimes, customized simply means rebranded or repurposed. A provider might take existing materials – often the intellectual property of someone else – and put a new client's logo on them. A provider might re-arrange a set of existing materials into a slightly new configuration ... e.g., take this PowerPoint deck and stick it here.

These are the most common ways to "customize" training and development. It is not even a dirty-little-secret anymore in the leadership development industry that most customized programs go about this far. And, in some ways, even something as simple as re-arranging a slide deck is a form of customization.

We believe, however, there is a substantial difference between the simplest forms of customization and what we do. We are educators and we are learning designers.

*"...our talented people, what they know how to do, and how they "play" together."*



Design is different than customization. A designer is a creator, a customizer is an arranger. You can process-engineer customization – it does not require much in the way of deep expertise.

Design is very different. Individuals on our team, at all levels, have spent considerable time developing their *design* ability. It is a fundamental requirement for work in our firm and we spend a great deal of time and effort getting better at it. We turn to books, films, and other sources on pure design and pure art often for our inspiration.

*“We are educators and we are learning designers.”*

We marry the art of designing learning with the practicality of deeply understanding the business realities of our clients. We are both designers and business people.

Talented business people that are *also* talented learning designers that are *also* talented teachers and facilitators that are *also* great team

players are hard to find ... but this is our model. The secret sauce of The Refinery's customization is not in a specific process, but rather in the most important asset: our talented people, what they know how to do, and how they "play" together.

#### **An example may help:**

We designed a large-scale supervisory development program for our client Goldcorp. The design did not start in a boardroom or with a set of existing PowerPoint slides. It started one-mile underneath the surface of the earth, literally. Our design was informed by spending quite a bit of time seeking to appreciate and understand the day-to-day challenges faced by supervisors at the company, a world-class gold mining operation. We had to – literally, again – get dirty with our client.

Gradually, as we understood more and more about the real challenges faced by supervisors in the field, we began to conceptualize what sorts of learning environments, skill development, and knowledge would help them grow. It all started and ended with real supervisors, first in the field, then ultimately in the "classroom".



Design ability is not quickly learned. A good designer is an expert at seeing forms, patterns, and then creating something that *fits*. The metaphor we often use for the design of learning is that of tailoring. We certainly do take pre-existing materials, most often ones that we have developed ourselves, and piece them together in new ways for our clients.

Our artistry and craft (and value) does not lie in the pieces in the same way that the value of a good tailor is not found in the materials.

Our value, like a good tailor, is found in our ability to create something unique that fits our client, delights our client, and is exactly what the client both needs and wants.

Often, we help our clients see new and different opportunities as well, just as a good tailor recognizes opportunities for new "looks".

