**Moving from a "Work in Progress" to a "Work in Refinement"**

People often say they are a "work in progress." This is an admirable, humble sentiment. It does, however, miss the point that some improvements are more valuable than others. I encourage people to reframe and strive to be a "work in refinement." This is the level at which real value is created.
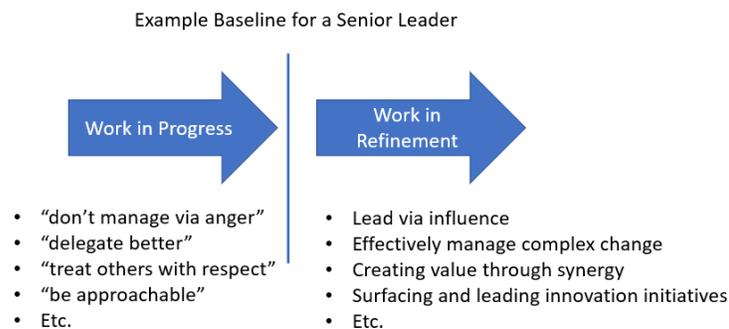
For example, at 18 years old, we can expect a young adult to have a graduated with a high-school degree. If a 20 year old is still working toward a GED (while very admirable), they are still getting back to a baseline level. For our fuzzy friends, the baseline post-puppyhood is not having accidents in the house.

Substantial value can be built upon a baseline. For young adults, the next step might be working on a foreign language. In young dogs, the next step might be obeying simple commands. In both cases, growth after a baseline can be considered a work in refinement. The graphic below illustrates the distinction. As a person addresses areas that are to the left of the baseline, they reclaim value. As a person addresses areas to the right of the baseline, they create new value.

Baseline

Work in Progress → Work in Refinement →

Value reclaimed   Value created
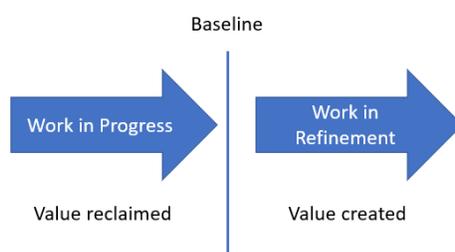
Too much work with senior leaders focuses on "improvements" that are, frankly, too basic to be considered real additions in value. The improvements could be classified as to the left of the baseline. Is it really any great leap of development for a senior leader to "be less harsh" or "be a better listener"? Give me a break. Goals like that may be appropriate at some level in one's career (we have all been there), but improvements at that level just bring us back to a baseline level of performance. At a senior leader level, we should be there already. Improvements in the area of "refinement" are a much higher order and higher value activity.

The baseline for a senior leader might look like the chart below. If they are still working on issues to the left of baseline, they are reclaiming potential value. If they are making progress on items to the right, then they are creating new value. Everyone will be different. I don't judge *where* people are in their development, but I don't tolerate people working below their potential.

Example Baseline for a Senior Leader

Work in Progress →   Work in Refinement →

- "don't manage via anger"
- "delegate better"
- "treat others with respect"
- "be approachable"
- Etc.

- Lead via influence
- Effectively manage complex change
- Creating value through synergy
- Surfacing and leading innovation initiatives
- Etc.

Below are a few things to keep in mind to jumpstart your growth:

- Realize there is a difference between being a work in progress and a work in refinement. Are there areas that have languished or have not been attended to correctly? Are there some basics that need to be addressed?
- Take stock and clean house. Evaluate where you are compared to a baseline. Leaders can get some indication through performance reviews, 360-degree reviews (interview style optimal) and discussion with peers and supervisors. Pick the top, chronic areas and take some definitive action. Get outside help if this has been a persistent, career-spanning issue.
- Clean fast. If the issues are in the category of work in progress, address them quickly. Most issues that fall into the "behavioral coaching" realm should not take six months or a year to address. Things such as boosting the use of language in business may take longer, but significant improvements should be evident quickly.
- Consider other areas of development besides behavioral. There are four main areas of development for leaders: better execution in the role/function, development of people, innovation (raising standards of performance) and strategy. There are lots of topics within these areas that go beyond the basics.

While all growth is laudable and worthy, all growth is not created equal. The standards we set for ourselves should continually expand. As they expand, what was once a stretch for us should

become an integrated skill. Address any remedial areas you have and quickly focus on the higher value areas. Your organization and career will thank you for it.

For more information on how to get the best out of yourself and others, please feel free to contact me directly.

Gary Covert

Gary Covert Consulting

gary@garycovertconsulting.com | 480-720-9551

PO Box 51732

Phoenix, Arizona 85283