



A Day at the Headquarters Supreme Allied Commander Transformation

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Introduction

During the transfer from the ACT Blog to Connect, my first article disappeared. Now it is back online.

How to explain the feeling of “transformation”? A fair, but tough, question. It is much like trying to explain (good) leadership. Look in a library and you’ll find an aisle filled on that topic. But, after reading a few books, you will realise the different angles to look at it, have an idea of the important elements of it, you may even acquire a mental concept of it, but you’re still not able to really explain it. The same is true with a “transformational feeling”.

In one of my folders with interesting stuff which I keep, I found an old slide – one of the far-gone days when you have to copy your powerpoint slides on a transparency which contained the sentence: ‘Leadership is like beauty. You’ll recognize it when you see it’. I always appreciated this simple truth.

A look at it inspired me not to try defining the transformational feeling, but instead to show it to you. As such, I take you to a not-so-far-into-the future and invite you to join me on my working day as a staff officer at the HQ Supreme Allied Command Transformation.

Hoesy

Just an ordinary day at HQ SACT, somewhere in the near future

Around 0700 L turn on the parking lot. I’m not the first one to arrive. Luckily, my usual parking space is free, so I don’t have to be on the lookout for a nice spot. All humans love a certain degree of routine, and I am no exception. Parking my car at my spot makes, kind of, my day. I always come in early, partly because it’s my routine, but also because, with the “customers and providers” six time zones away, it gives me more than ample opportunity to have phone conversations, or even “near real time” email communications or chat with them via my desktop Link/VTC interface.

That comfortable feeling of routineness partly disappears when I step in the main hall of the HQ. As our vision indicates, we are 'NATO's leading agent for change, driving, facilitating, and advocating continuous improvement [...]' and that comes with continuously questioning routine. The search for improvement is always present, never finished. The moment something is marked as a 'fait accompli', it is ripe to be questioned. 'Is there a better way? Is there a way that is more efficient, effective and affordable?' are the main questions on everybody's mind. There is no way around this if we want to "lead NATO's military transformation" and stay ahead of it.

It seems quite natural today, but a few years ago it was not. This HQ had lost its edge. Instead of leading the change, it had dropped back to the rear of the transformation movement and was almost entirely reactive. Some even thought that transformation was finished – we even removed the slogan from the main hall. Completed. It reminds me of the story when the US commissioner of the patent office made the statement that the Patent Office should be closed because "everything that can be invented has been invented" (Duell, 1899).

The result was that this HQ felt like an HQ without troops on the ground looking for arguments to justify its existence. It had no external focus and internal alignment, so all the competences and motivation of its members were wasted. A three year tour in Norfolk meant a nice collection of memories and adventures, outside work as well as an improved golf score.

Not anymore. Today, this place is buzzing like a beehive in full Summer. Here you learn the true nature and power of transformation; an experience you'll never forget; a competence that will never leave you. Work of a staff officer as you knew it, is history. How? I guess that's why you follow me on this trip.

As I swipe my card, I gain access to my work floor. It's a bit strange to use the word 'my' because, from time to time, I'm working at another desk. I have an assigned cubicle, a word dated from a few years ago when people really were cornered in cubicles. Like all human beings, officers like a familiar place they can call their own – you know, somewhere you can hang some pictures of the family, leave in a state of chaos, etc. – But that is not the place I always work. From time to time we have to work in the area of another division or branch. You still do your assigned work, but you simply sit amongst the 'others'. This creates opportunities to learn to understand the other branches and their issues. On other occasions, your desk sits where your project is. This improves the informal discussions amongst the members of a project in the initial phase. These temporary 'other branch' periods enhance better understanding and increase mutual knowledge. It's about collaboration and understanding.

But today I'm working from 'my' desk. The daily routine, yes there is still a routine, is made up by starting the desktops and connecting to the two networks. There is a project to make a

virtual unique network, but due to security regulations it is not implemented yet. While the systems are starting up, I pour a cup of coffee. On the wall are hanging some of the problems JFT is currently working on. Under the problems people wrote some suggestions to solve them. I cannot resist the urge to write a reply to an interesting idea. Since the Smart Board system automatically saves this work once an hour and captures it onto the JFT shared solutions page, maybe this will lead to something workable?

Back at the desk. My colleague from DCOS SPP just arrived at his temporary one. Yesterday, we were discussing the commonalities and differences between defence planning and training. Some interesting leads came out of that one. My e-mail inbox warns me of some deadlines I have to keep an eye on. After I decide the project I'll work on, I delete the other taskings. They will pop up later, no worry about that. Deleting is not forgetting.

A meeting reminder about a video conference pops up. I log into the Link system and activate my webcam. I am observing a Logistics Committee meeting so I can better understand the requirements. After an hour, the meeting ends and I review my notes about the meeting which I typed while the meeting unfolded. The topic just got a little clearer as I listened to senior logistics officials' concerns.

I check the e-mails. Europe is not calling 'urgent' so I have time to take care of the rest before focusing on my project of the day. While we're in transformation, as always, there is still a lot of ordinary staff work to do. Good ideas still require staff work and lots of 'selling' before they become reality. But, at least we're now pushing the best ones, and not that first good one.

A sound warns me of an incoming e-mail. This mail indicates that somebody changed my information page on Global Programming. Yes, everybody has the duty to adapt information in our knowledge base if they believe it necessary. This was just an internal application of Wikipedia, but it helped greatly by facilitating the exchange of knowledge in the HQ. I have a quick look at the introduced changes. It's mainly an update from a meeting on concept development. My contributor picked up some elements on education and added that to my page. Great! But there she's got it a bit mixed up. Time to see her.

Most of our work may be done on the network – I could correct her on my page – but meeting people is still all important aspect in this HQ. I take my smartphone. The HQ App will guide to the right cubicle. The temporary desks made finding people a bit harder, discovering their normal cubicle was a challenge on itself, but with this App, it's a child's play. The face-to-face solves the misunderstanding. I thank her for the contribution, because feedback may not scare people from contributing.

Back on my project of the day. My correspondent refers to a directive that is unknown to me. A quick check confirms that the directive is still valid. Gone are the days were a simple question like 'Is this directive still valid?' meant going on a quest for the answer. The paragraph used as a reference seems outdated. I add a comment in the directive, so that this will be considered in the next revision.

A pop-up warns me of the upcoming open meetings at 10. Everybody is invited at open meetings. What is 'open meetings', you ask? It is a kind a chaotic order. In the centre of the room, there is coffee and water. You take one and meet there, but the main purpose is that you go into one of the little meeting rooms and participate in the discussion. Before you enter you have to read the topic of that meeting. It's only a few sentences long and you don't have to be an SME, on the contrary. Once inside you have to actively participate. If not, you leave the room and go to another discussion room. Of course you may return if you wish to do so, but only to participate. This is the only rule: come in and participate. The whole set-up lasts an hour.

I have one hour left before lunch. I could use some help from an Intel SME. Not necessarily someone from the Intel Branch in the HQ, no, an Intel expert wherever he or she is working. A look in the database – this database with the names and there competences is inspired on the skills app from LinkedIn – gives me 3 names. I think about inviting one of them for a person-to-person video call. Yes, we make video calls with our PC. We use the VTC system only for big group meetings. I decide not to call, a mail will do the job as this info is not urgent.

Lunchtime. I take my lunchbox downstairs to the mess hall. Today there is a learning session on scenario development. 30 minutes on the 'what' and the 'how'. After the theoretical introduction, every table has to discuss possible applications. These sessions are fun because the applications are not directly for the HQ, but for the situation you get from the session leader. It keeps your mind open.

Back to work. It's strange that I reserve the term "work" for all the dull, yet necessary, but nevertheless dull, staff work. All the rest is fun. I upload my product into the Tasker Tracker. Yes, that system still exists, but it now tracks a task from the very beginning, from its genesis. Rather than it being the old "reactive" system it was, it is now a much more "proactive" way of doing collaborative work. We don't see it as a burden anymore because it helps us to keep track of our projects while supporting the decision making. Today, I'm initiating a thought project. I add the contributors that I think I need, they will help me find more linkages.

Bling, an e-mail drops in my box telling me that an idea of mine survived today's Murder Board session. The murder board is group of peers that scrutinizes all ideas and sums up the pros, cons and promising elements. In the end, it advises to kill it, keep it for further improvement or

push it up the command chain. Its verdict is 'most promising', meaning I have work on some cons before introducing it again. This method may look harsh, but the feedback is very useful and it promotes the creativity in the HQ by installing a forum for ideas.

Although we know that good ideas come from quantity (Edison 'invented' the light bulb after 5000 times learning how not to do it) combined with unbiased, honest feedback; it always feels great to get acceptance of one's ideas. Understanding that failure is the natural selection to breed the best of ideas and the base for learning, you're less afraid to introduce an idea or an improvement. It does not have to be 'the one', only 'one of the many'. Taking risks is now OK; frustration is replaced by hard work to make it better. But still, it feels good to come up with something that may be realised.

How to spot problems? Just keep your eyes open and you'll find them, or have a look at on the intranet. On the 'issue page' you'll find topics to think about. You can post issues yourself or you can make suggestions to solve them. If you collect enough likes, eventually after some adjustments, you can introduce your idea to the murder board. It's that simple.

Next, a meeting within JFT. Our proposal for a change in the E&T domain is in its last phase. Before sending it out we play 'MC'. A few, newly arrived officers play 'nations' when the custodian formulates the change. Then the 'nations' react on that. This 'customer' interaction play provides insight and makes it possible to increase the chances of acceptance. It's harsh, but fun.

It is not because we already invested a lot of work in it, that we do not stay critical. 'Look at what we already have done' is no excuse to try better. But, we don't forget that sometimes 80% is just fine as long as we have a way to improve it. Spiral development: a clear vision combined with a flexible and adaptable approach.

The 'nations' didn't buy in, at least not into everything that is. There is some more explaining to do, but it is going well.

A last look at the mailbox. Nothing urgent. I consult my reader and pull up one of the e-books from ACT's professional reading list, "Thinkertoys" - a brainstorming and problem-solving book that helps you to look at problems differently. A new thought is formed about how I might move forward on a 'sticky' issue.

I look at my watch and decide to call it a day. As I walk out the building my brain is still busy searching for ideas. When I hit the HOV lane, the processing descends to a subconscious level. Maybe tomorrow an idea will bubble up out of the blue, but for now I'm thinking on how to improve the mouse trap car of my son's science project. Once submersed in a culture of

continuous improvement and innovation, there is no escaping from it. It makes life more interesting ... Even work.