



A Letter to SACT

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Sir,

Welcome to your new command and this out-of-the-ordinary headquarter. I hope you'll enjoy the difficult task ahead of you.

This isn't the first time that I write about transformation and the central role this HQ should/could play in it. I know the word 'transformation' may be considered a legacy term by some, making room for 'innovation'; I still like the sound of the old word. This could prove that I'm old-fashioned in my thinking and that my ideas are too much in the box, albeit a big box. Anyhow, since my first appearance at the front door of the HQ SACT building, I've published articles on ACT's blog. Not high-level articles, no, just short texts with the aim to stimulate the reader's thinking process.

On the morning of your first and my second tour, I thought it a good idea to run through some of those articles and try to summarize them as a quick intro for you as our new commander. If you haven't already done it, you will surely find yourself one day sitting at your desk wondering what to do with this out-of-the-ordinary organization. Right? Well, I would like to offer you my thoughts as I did for the COS in 2013 after he asked me "what should transformation feel like?" That article was the first in the series under the name Thinkbox.

How to explain the feeling of 'transformation'? A fair, but tough, question. It is much like trying to explain (good) leadership. Visit a library and you'll find an aisle filled with books on the topic. However, after reading a few of those works, you will realize that there are different angles to look at it. You may even have an idea of the important elements, or you may have acquired a mental concept of it, but you're still not able to really explain leadership. The same is true of 'transformational feeling'. Well, transformation, leadership and beauty are alike: you'll recognize it when you see it.

That doesn't answer the question about what it is, but at least you are aware that it has more than one face. There is no 'the one' out there. Personally, I'm convinced that transformation is not characterized by an end state, but rather by the voyage to the destination you will never reach. It is more about the culture of the organization than about the organization itself.

In short, transformation is change on a continuous basis without a well-defined purpose, a never-ending spiral towards a moving target. It continuously pulls people out of their comfort zone of well-known routine. As change creates temporary stress, continuous change creates continuous stress. Do you as the leader have the right to put your staff, us, into this situation? Yes, of course.

However, stirring up people's routine without yourself knowing where to go is not easy. Add to that the fact that most of your colleague-leaders are in this HQ for only three years and that most of them come here without deep knowledge of, or even the slightest experience with, transformation. Leading transformation is as new for them as for you and as a matter of fact for most of us working here. Think about it: Where did you learn about transformation? Where could they have learned it besides here in Norfolk? So, they have to lead transformation without intimate knowledge and lacking the wished-for experience. They have to learn it too, and they too have only the short three-year tour of learning while doing.

But you don't have to walk that difficult path. There are other options:

1 – Business as usual. Act as if this HQ is just another HQ and do things as they have always been done: the low effort, low risk approach. The fact that there are almost no SMEs in transformation available provides the perfect excuse;

2 – The late move. Use your time in the HQ to learn about transformation and try to implement the elements you've learned. This will help the HQ to move a bit further along the transformational road, but while the leaders are learning, staff will stay in the 'business as usual' mode. After three years of learning and experimenting, the next SACT will come in and wonder too what transformation is all about;

3 – Learn on the go. You accept that you don't know a thing about transformation and decide to learn while doing. This means that you start walking the path while you lead the HQ. We learn all together, and make mistakes.

It is clear that option 3 is the only one likely to result in real transformation. You should put us through a rapid succession of changes because that is the only way to succeed, and we should expect it. People coming to this HQ should clearly understand that they will work in a HQ that is out of the ordinary. If the name HQ Supreme Allied Command Transformation does not give enough information on what to expect, the orientation session in the first weeks should finish the job.

Surely, this option demands moral courage from our leaders. Transformational leadership, whereby the leaders guide people on an uncertain, ever-changing path through uncharted terrain, requires that these leaders decide every day to challenge old habits, to question all they have learned, to put themselves and their people in uncomfortable and unfamiliar situations, and to risk smothering their careers. It is so much easier and safer to just do nothing. Physical courage exposed during brief periods in a military career is nothing compared to the heaviness of moral courage.

Besides taking the lead by example, you should kill habits that continuously drive us towards reactiveness, so that your staff can spend time to work on the less urgent but more important issues. There are many ways to do this. The suggestions below are by no means

revolutionary; that aspect resides in their application. Keep in mind that reactive management is necessary at times. However, it is destructive when it becomes the norm in a team or organization. To move towards a more proactive way of working, we have to:

- Take back control of time;
- Look at processes;
- Understand and manage risk;
- Focus on morale;
- Build in continuous improvement;
- Have a vision;
- Integrate the steps towards the vision, even when firefighting;
- Use the “fires” to heighten the need for change.

Although very useful in an emergency to allocate resources required to deal with an unforeseen problem, firefighting requires more effort and is less efficient. However, this modus operandi is in our military DNA. We love to solve a crisis. Just as in the real world, there's the assumption that ‘fires’ and crises are unpredictable and that they must be dealt with immediately. However, a too-frequent need for emergency actions may reflect poor planning, or a lack of organization, or a lack of understanding the problem, or being the result of self-imposed deadlines, and is likely to tie up resources that are much needed elsewhere. In order to transform, to keep the warrior mode minimal, and to have an active approach to change, altering our culture is paramount.

Next to disturbing our quiet life in the HQ, you have to be disruptive, like technology. Disruptive ideas are like wild fires. They erase old habits and provide space for new ideas to flourish. It is necessary to light the whole thing up, to shock the HQ, to gain access to people’s brainpower. It may be enough to start a small fire locally to ignite the whole HQ.

In case you consider option one or two, please remember that we have to walk the difficult path of transformation to provide our soldiers with the best options in current and, most importantly, in future operations. If we don’t do it, who will? We cannot accept anything less because we dislike to be disturbed in our daily, easy-going routine, or to work outside our comfort zone. What kind of HQ hardship justifies the denial of the best for our men and women in the field? You have to lead us, so that we can take care of the future warfighter.

By now, you will have found out that my intention with this letter was not only to write to SACT, but to all who are truly interested in transformation. Are we many on this tour?