



Pepper Jack

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This is for sure a ThinkBox preceded by a long - the longest? - time tinkering with the title. It started with a simple and straightforward attempt: “Five zero”. Yes, this is the 50th article in the series and the last one. I find 50 a nice number to end a series. Just long enough to stretch my thinking, but not too long as to get boring for you, the reader. Therefore, this article will be my final ThinkBox and 50 is a kind of natural title for this edition.

An easy title deprived of all creativity. I could not do that. It is not a worthy ending of almost 8 years of poking for ideas and challenging questions. I needed to end with a better title covering at least the content of this article, if not the whole series. My search for a good title changed to one for inspiring and thought-provoking ultimate content.

It would be nice to come up with some kind of conclusion from the 49 previous articles. Great authors like J.K. Rowling – I must admit I did not read all the Harry Potter books, only saw the movies – keep you books long on your toes and introduce seemingly unrelated facts in every edition until you see it all coming together in the last and final book of the series. Do these authors have the whole series in their mind - like George Lukas with Star Wars - or do they put it all together in the final sprint? Had I some master plan underlying my ThinkBoxes? That is the question, I should answer.

Reflecting on that, I must admit that I did not have intentionally a grand scheme. Although, unwillingly I might have written suggestions and mental challenges to make the “just an ordinary day at HQ SACT, somewhere in the near future” a reality. I wrote my first ThinkBox as a reply to the COS’s question during an office call, the only one as far as I can remember. He dared me on the nature of transformation. “We are Allied Command Transformation, but what is transformation?” An honest question that even today few can answer outside the ‘definition’. Instead of giving some theoretical exposé on the spot – I was sure he had read all the documents on the topic - I accepted the challenge but asked him some time to reflect on a good answer.

After some reflection, I decided to describe a normal workday in HQ SACT in the future, some three years ahead. Dreaming it to be realized before my first tour ended. I mailed the COS my story and published it on the intranet. The first ThinkBox was born. From then on, all the other editions were attempts to push our organization in the direction of transformational HQ.

Surely, that ambition was just too big, but only those who aim at the moon reach the sky. At the end of my second tour, we are not even near the situation sketched in my first writing. In all honesty, we are closer to the reality the day I wrote it than to the one I dreamed of. My hope, however, is that I have planted some seeds for the continuation of transformation, or continuous innovation if you want to use a more recent buzzword.

If I were a great author, all would have let to that last edition, the “Endgame”. However, I am not of that calibre, not even good enough to write something under the title “Requiem”. The conclusion of a life in ACT. This title would also be too negative like I gave up believing in the possibilities. That was and is not the case. Scratch that title too.

With the end nearing, I still had no title, nor idea what to write. Did I experience a writer's block eye-to-eye with the ground rush? This term comes from skydiving and describes the optical illusion that the ground – the end - is abruptly rushing up to meet you. The resulting sensation may trigger an early deployment of the parachute, at an unsafe altitude. Was I in such a situation as the date of my departure approached? The clock ticking mercilessly. Do I have enough time to finish what I started in 2013? Yes, I felt the urge to deploy whatever came out, but was it wise to begin my swan song with a title referring to a sport characterized by jumping out of a perfectly good aeroplane? Did I start ThinkBox hoping to reach safely my objective? My stress level was rising. Decision time!

Of course, opening your chute too late is an equally dangerous situation. I did not have an altimeter indicating the right moment to pull the handle. So when is the good time? Is perfect the enemy of good? What kind of parachute will deploy when I jerked the safety and uploaded the article now? Freefalling without any thought about deadlines or messages was much more fun.

The weekend before my return flight, I still had no title, no article to publish. Returning to my freediving practises, I took one deep breath and went for the deep to surface again.

During our last road trip to Washington State, we visited Seattle. Walking in the city under a heatwave, we decided to search for a Subway for lunch and followed our guide Google Maps. Aware that a GPS is not infallible in an urban environment, we did not mind the touristic sidetracks it offered involuntarily. Being human, an animal of habits, I ordered what I considered the best foot long. The Sandwich Artist, a woman of seemingly Chinese descendant, asked me what kind of cheese I preferred. Without a doubt, I asked for mozzarella. She points at a bowl with cheese and said: "Pepper jack". OK, the "r" might have more sounded like an "l" but I was sure she did not repeat my favourite dairy product. Aware that my English sounds foreign too, I slowly repeated, but not too slow to offend her: "MOZARELLA". To my surprise, she pointed to the same bowl while – I got the impression – slowly pronouncing "PEPPERJACK". Motivated to get what I want, I repeated my mozzarella message. Only to get the same pepper jack reply. After three times, I gave up and retreated with a sandwich covered with the well-promoted pepper jack.

It took some weeks to understand the moral of this story. It is not about clarity of communication. I think we both knew the message we wanted to get across. No, the takeaway – besides the sandwich I did not plan to order – of this incidence is that even to most motivated person will succumb to any message if repeated often enough. The more focus on the output, the faster it happens. Not surprisingly the three Rs of education are: repetition, repetition, and repetition.

Projecting that insight on my ThinkBox series, I hope that 50 times is a high enough number of repetitions to get through. I aimed to push you enough thought-provoking lecture to kick-start you thinking outside the comfy box hoping that I somehow have planted enough seeds to realize my first article. You and the future will be the judge of that.