Why Action Appeals More than Transformation

and What to Do about It!

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In all my naivety, I have these strange ideas about the work in headquarters.

A vibrant ambiance at tactical level. Life and death decisions are made every moment. With the speed of decisions comes also the short time before consequences. The slim OODA-loops[1] turn at high speed.

Go to a level higher and step into the operational world. A bit more relaxed, but nevertheless busy. People normally don't run around making sure important information is injected into the decision-making cycles. Although from time to time snap judgements are necessary, they are rather rare. Possible consequences can be analysed and there is time to determine the best course of action. Effects of decisions take a little while before being felt. Life depends more on the quality than on the speed of the decision-making cycle.

The ultimate, strategic level is Zen-like. Time is not of the essence, quality is! Consequences are slow to manifest themselves, but if they do, they hit like a tsunami – however, by then, the decision makers are long gone. Their effect can be devastating, earth-shaking. Decision cycles are very slow. The staff fully embraces the power of the extended OODA-loop by sucking up and analysing huge quantities of information to come up with the almost ideal and most robust plan for the future. The life and death realities at tactical and operational level lay already in the past. The only guy running is the bearer of very special news – for some odd reason I always envision this guy running in an empty hallway – but this is very seldom, if ever, the case. The 1/3 and 2/3 rule for allocating time seems to be reversed as to give higher level decision makers more time than the actual planners.

But, these are my ideas.

So empathize with me entering our strategic headquarter for transformation. The only time the building breathes the calmness of my vivid imagination is early in the morning when the sun is hardly awake. As people pour in, tension rises. E-mail boxes are bombarded with messages launched like dumb bombs screaming for attention without any consideration for collateral damage. Meeting requests pop up demanding their acceptance, pushing people out of their

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[1] OODA-loop = Observe – Orient – Decide – Act loop developed by USAF Colonel John Boyd.

cubicles. Taskers with self-imposed deadlines tumble in. You have almost to beg for a few minutes of your colleague's time, because everybody is very busy. There is confusion between urgent and important when prioritizing or re-prioritising tasks. No, no confusion: urgent equals important. "Oh, that can wait. Put it on my desk, I'll deal with it later." "We don't have time to think about it, we must do something… Now!" The re-prioritisation is an hourly task.

Every day, we face situations where we are more like firefighters, more like our colleagues in the warrior mode at tactical level. We find ourselves in a permanent situation of quick fixes in a reactive mode, unable to control our destiny because it's controlled by external elements. Pressure to meet deadlines, reinforced by our military culture to be on-time, makes us shoot for 'a' timely fix, regardless of the consequences.

Firefighting may be essential during a rush, or as part of a short period of change. However, it can have serious implications when it becomes the norm at the strategic level. The energy and resources drawn by firefighting make us lose our capability to plan for high-return activities where our real added value is situated. Why?

1) Reactive people, and teams, are likely to deliver lower quality work. They may be able to fight crises successfully most of the time, but they will ultimately fail in a way that they would not if they were proactive.
2) In the near future, the flaws of the quick patches demand additional resources to be fixed, diminishing more of the needed reserves to manoeuvre.
3) It is likely that people will need to shift from one task to another, or be asked to deal with constantly changing information. Those people need time, usually not available at that moment, to get to grips with their new tasks while specialists are too busy – hopefully on topics in their specialities – to help them out. This is inefficient. It can leave HQ SACT personnel frustrated. They may start to let down their desire to strive for quality or to confuse the notion of quality with 'just being on time'.
4) 'Firefighters' content themselves with putting out the fire. It's hard to consider the root causes of problems when you have to focus urgently on eradicating the symptoms. Plus, you're less likely to spot the strategic opportunities because you don't have the time nor the mindset to see them.
5) Being in a 'fight' is also stressful. When you deal with one crisis after another, you don't have time to unwind. You may personally be able to cope with this pressure, but some colleagues may be less resilient. They may find acceptable ways to escape the work stress increasing the load of others, and, in time, this will lead to serious under-performance of a whole organisation.

6) You're always a step behind because you wait – or rather you're busy with another crisis – for a fire. You don't have time to look ahead to pre-empt problems, so they seem to happen 'out of the blue.'

There is, surely, also a '7)', an '8)', etc., but I think you get the point. The focus on the here and the now leaves us no time for laying the foundations for a different future for transformation. We must take a few steps back and figure out why problems occur in the first place. We should spend time on preventing future problems, on giving more peace to the operational and tactical level. Paraphrasing Einstein, we should come up with another level of thinking than the level on which the problem was created. Sounds more like something we should do? Then why do we engage more in firefighting?

As a military professional, you are raised to solve problems on the spot and under high stress. The firefighting mode is well known, well drilled in, and very well appreciated. We admire people in firefighting mode as the very busy heroes tackling urgent, high-visibility problems with a great sense of purpose. Wearing the military uniform may remind us of our ultimate goal of supporting the warrior, but it also reinforces our tactical mode. When you solve a crisis, you have a great, immediate sense of accomplishment. You do what you are trained to do and you experience somewhat of a kind of high, which can be addictive. The fact that successful organisational 'firefighters' are rewarded and praised for their great skills, enhances this tendency. Also, it's easier to address an issue right in front of you than to anticipate and plan for the issue and prevent it – let alone the frustration when by successfully preventing it, the problem, surprise-surprise, does not occur.

You would expect commanders, embracing transformational leadership, to leave the 'warrior' mode to lower staff. Unfortunately, where and when do they learn how to do this? Who can teach them? Can we honestly expect someone raised in a warrior culture to integrate transformational behaviour while being surrounded by fires, and happy firefighters? Of course, these people exist, but they are for sure not standard issue. Thus, change by leadership alone is not the solution. We all have to pick up the effort to change, and learn – and teach – while doing.

How can we reduce the habit-forming problems that continuously drive us to be reactive? What can we do to grab some time to work on the less urgent but more important issues? There are many ways to do this, but here are some suggestions. These ideas are by no means revolutionary, that aspect lays 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

Firefighting is an emergency allocation of resources, required to deal with an unforeseen problem. 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 action may reflect poor planning, or a lack or 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 needed elsewhere. To keep the warrior mode to a minimum, in order to transform an active approach to change, our culture is paramount.