

# MANAGERIAL SKILLS TRAINING FROM A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Since the mid-1980s, management education has experienced a proliferation of courses and texts designed to teach managerial skills to individuals who aspire to be more effective managers. Today, there are at least nine textbooks devoted exclusively to managerial skills, some in their second or third editions. Many MBA programs have made management skills training a central component of their curriculum. Case Western Reserve, for example, organizes its MBA program around the assessment and development of managerial competencies (McMillan, White, & McKee, 1994). Executive skills training modules that are designed to complement the MBA's course curriculum are an integral part of the 1st-year MBA program at the University of Michigan. And there is no shortage of popular press books, articles, and seminars that promise to provide managers with skills that will make them more productive and successful. In this article, we propose that management skills training would benefit from a significant review and revision. More specifically, we demonstrate how integrating critical theory into the managerial skills classroom would enhance management education and practice.

Whetton and Cameron (1995) explain that managerial skills education is "designed specifically to help guide individuals in improving their own personal management competencies" (p. 1). Competencies typically covered

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in the management skills curriculum include interpersonal communication, gaining and using power and influence, negotiation, conflict management, goal setting, problem solving and decision making, managing meetings, oral and written presentations, motivating others, coaching and counseling, disciplining employees, team building, time management, stress management, and career management. These competencies are introduced and reinforced through readings that assert the necessity of these skills, self-assessments designed to promote self-awareness, guides for the enactment of appropriate behaviors, opportunities for behavioral skill practice (typically role-plays and experiential exercises), and feedback designed to enhance personal competence.

We believe that managerial skills training is an important part of the professional manager's education and that the proliferation and standardization of skills training has contributed significantly to the professionalization of management. But we also believe that Whetton and Cameron's (1983) concern that "the management curriculum, as presently constituted, is not doing an adequate job of preparing graduates for the challenges they experience as professional managers" (p. 11) still is valid. We have two concerns about the nature of managerial skills training. One concern is that managers in the United States today face several societal trends that have not been adequately integrated into managerial skills training. These trends include globalization; an increasingly multicultural workforce; environmental constraints, opportunities, and responsibilities; the rapid growth of new information technologies and the associated influx of knowledge workers; and an increase in multiple-career families and alternative family arrangements. Managers also face significant organizational trends such as the emergence of new organizational forms (e.g., virtual organizations, team-based organizations, learning organizations), increased organizational downsizing and the associated "dejobbing" of the workforce, and a redefinition of careers and career management. To this list can be added the many societal concerns (e.g., poverty, violence, the quality and expense of education and health care) that affect everyone in society, albeit some more immediately and visibly than others. Managing in this context requires a radically different approach to managerial skills training. Doing more of the same, only faster and better, will not help managers address these challenges.

Our other concern is that managerial skills training has not yet taken an active role in encouraging managers to consider the ideological foundations of management theory and practice. Rather, managerial skills texts and training typically are presented as if the skills they promote were accultural, ahistorical, and unrelated to the power relations that are inextricable from life in organizations and society. The lack of an ideological perspective in managerial skills training has at least two consequences. First, managers

remain largely uncritical consumers of and contributors to managerial knowledge. Second, managers often lack the inspiration and systematic frameworks that enable them to explore, from a broad perspective, why they do what they do and the consequences of what they do on themselves, others, organizations, and societies. For these reasons, we propose that skills training and the practice of management would gain much from integrating perspectives and insights from the growing body of critical scholarship.

### **The Contributions of Critical Scholarship**

Critical theory can advance the state of management education and practice because its goal is to inspire organizational members toward ways of thinking and acting that liberate individual and collective human potential. Critical theory is based on the premises that (a) reality is socially negotiated and (b) this negotiation takes place in a cultural and ideological context. That is, what managers can and cannot see, as well as what they judge as important and unimportant, just and unjust, and possible and impossible, reflects the particular moral order, economic climate, and power dynamics of their particular place in the world and time in history.

Management educators who take a critical view encourage students to see and examine the taken-for-granted, largely unchallenged goals and assumptions that guide the production and dissemination of managerial knowledge and practice. Students are motivated to ask questions such as the following. What is the current organizational reality promoted in this culture? Why this reality and not another? What ends are served and not served by this version of reality? What are the processes through which this organizational reality is produced, reinforced, and revised over time? Are there alternative realities that may better serve individuals, organizations, and society? Seeking answers to these questions helps students broaden their worldviews, enables them to consider a wider range of alternative problems and solutions, and motivates them to seriously consider the intended and unintended consequences of their everyday choices and behaviors. In short, critical theory inspires and enables students to be more thoughtful, responsible, and effective contributors to the organizations in which they work and societies in which they live.

Despite critical theory's potential to increase managerial and organizational effectiveness, it remains an untapped resource for students, managers, and management educators. The main goal of this article is to inspire thoughtful reflection and discussion about the current state of skills training and the ways in which critical theory can enrich management education and practice. To

this end, we present a critical model for management skills training and offer suggestions for course design. This design is based on our combined experiences conducting managerial training in Africa, Europe, Latin America, Scandinavia, and the United States. Our intent, however, is not simply to provide a template for a critical managerial skills course but rather to invite management educators to consider how critical theory can enhance their own management classrooms.

## Managerial Skills From a Critical Perspective

A critical perspective frames managerial skills training as *the construction, production, and distribution of culturally specific knowledge about how an "ideal manager" is expected to think, feel, and act—and not think, feel, and act in a given society*. Management educators who take a critical view encourage students to (a) explore the ways in which "desirable" managerial characteristics and skills are contextual, that is, how these characteristics and skills reflect a specific place and time, are useful in particular contexts, and advance certain ends and not others; (b) consider how this ideal enhances and inhibits managers' abilities to address the many challenges they face in today's social and economic environment; (c) investigate alternative managerial images and competencies currently underrepresented that could enhance managerial and organizational effectiveness; and (d) assess their personal role in upholding, challenging, and revising the managerial ideal.

A critical perspective on managerial skills training builds on two broad categories of conceptual skills: self-reflexivity and cultural critique (Prasad & Prasad, 1993). Skills in self-reflexivity are designed to help managers understand how their cultures and their status in those cultures shape their views of themselves, others, and relationships. Skills in cultural critique are designed to enhance managers' abilities to read managerial "texts" (i.e., the means through which managerial knowledge is created and disseminated within and across nations such as through scholarly journal articles, management textbooks, popular press books, magazines, newspapers, MBA programs, and corporate training programs) as cultural and ideological products and practices. In the sections that follow, we discuss self-reflexivity and cultural critique in more depth.

### SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Managerial skills training is based on the assumption that increased self-knowledge enhances one's managerial effectiveness. Management education in the United States currently promotes self-awareness primarily

through the use of personality instruments. Most often, these instruments are based on what Markus and Kitayama (1991) characterize as the "so-called Western view of the individual as an independent, self-contained, autonomous entity who (a) comprises a unique configuration of internal attributes (e.g., traits, abilities, motives, and values) and (b) behaves primarily as a consequence of these internal attributes" (p. 224).

Two types of personality instruments currently are used to increase self-awareness. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Firo-B, and Kolb's learning style inventory represent one type of self-assessment. These are designed to help managers identify their "dominant" styles or preferences, better understand the strengths and limitations of each style, and broaden managers' repertoires of skills so that they are better able to adapt their personal styles to the needs of a particular situation. These assessments do not promote one way of thinking or acting as generally more effective than another. By contrast, the other type of assessment advocates a particular way of thinking or behaving as being generally better (e.g., more mature, more effective) than the alternatives and helps managers measure themselves against a particular standard. Examples of these assessments include locus of control scales (e.g., a high internal locus of control is considered to be a better managerial characteristic than a high external locus of control) and tolerance of ambiguity scales (e.g., a high tolerance of ambiguity is considered to be a better managerial characteristic than a low tolerance of ambiguity).

Self-reflexivity differs from these approaches to self-awareness because it shifts the students' focus from individual personality characteristics and styles to the ways in which the cultures in which people live and work shape what they see, how they feel, and how they act. A cultural perspective on self-awareness is based on the assumptions that "people in different cultures have strikingly different construals of the self, of others, and of the interdependence of the two" (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 224) and that managerial effectiveness depends in large part on the manager's ability to develop a network of relationships that crosses cultural boundaries, both within and across nations. Within-nation cultures include, but are not limited to, age, race, gender, class, religion, ethnicity, and geographical location. Cross-national cultures refer to the country or countries with which one is most identified.

There are several ways in which management educators promote a cultural perspective toward self-awareness. First, students are exposed to a variety of dimensions on which conceptions of the self, others, and relationships differ across cultures. Examples include independence versus interdependence, cooperativeness versus competitiveness, and instrumental versus spiritual orientations.

Second, students explore how what is considered to be normal or a strength in some cultures often are seen as atypical or weaknesses in other cultures. For example, publicly promoting one's abilities may be viewed as appropriate and desirable in cultures that construe and value a self-contained, self-actualizing self and where advancement is attributed primarily to personal motivation and ability. The same behaviors may be viewed as rude and immature in cultures where the self is construed as being connected to and in the service of others, success is attributed to a team effort, and advancement is associated primarily with characteristics such as age or family connections.

Third, students are advised that cultures differ in the degree to which they view qualities such as creativity, intelligence, and motivation as static and idiosyncratic to the individual versus dynamic and influenced by a particular context. In other words, whereas some cultures may view creativity primarily as an individual attribute (e.g., Fran is a creative person), other cultures may view creativity primarily as a process that is influenced by the quality of organizational relationships, processes, and structures (e.g., Fran currently is a member of a creative work group). The managerial implications of both of these perspectives on enhancing managerial creativity are significant. The former implies a focus on improving individual talents, whereas the latter implies a focus on creating organizational contexts that foster creativity.

Similarly, whereas some cultures attribute power and influence primarily to individual bases of power (e.g., one's technical expertise or ability to negotiate), other cultures attribute power and influence primarily to one's sources of cultural capital. Cultural capital represents the taken-for-granted social resources that one has (that others do not have) and that are not earned through individual merit. Examples of cultural capital are access to influential networks, educational opportunities, and career options that are available because one is a member of a particular cultural group (e.g., being of a particular race, gender, social class, or nation). The managerial implications of these two perspectives on sources of power and influence are significant. The former focuses on enhancing an individual's managerial effectiveness by drawing on a set of universal skills for enhancing power and influence (e.g., gain more technical expertise, develop political skills, take courses in negotiation). The latter focuses on (a) understanding how one's place in social and organizational hierarchies influences the kinds of cultural capital to which one has access and (b) managing power and influence given one's particular place in social and organizational hierarchies.

Finally, students are reminded of a fundamental assumption of a cultural perspective: Focusing on cultural patterns should not obscure attention to the diversity that exists within cultures. Individuals belong to many cultures simultaneously, and their ways of seeing and acting in the world are, in large

part, a result of an interaction of these cultures. Although cultural patterns reflect broad trends within a particular culture, every individual within a culture will not represent those patterns. Thus, knowing cultural patterns does not enable one to predict any other individual's attitudes, feelings, or behaviors at any one point in time.

Individuals who develop skills in self-reflexivity are able to see the boundaries of their own perspectives and appreciate the advantages of other worldviews; thus, they are inclined to push their own perceptual boundaries outward. Consequently, they are better able to develop work relationships based on understanding, trust, and respect with a wide variety of people within and across nations.

### **CULTURAL CRITIQUE**

Skills in cultural critique are based on the assumption that the managerial ideal represents a socially constructed "way of ordering" the organizational world (e.g., criteria for effectiveness and the appropriate means for achieving effectiveness) and managers' role within that world. In other words, a critical perspective contends that managerial and organizational "characteristics" that are assumed to be normal, desirable, effective, and worth measuring (indeed measurable) are culturally and ideologically determined. Management educators who take a critical stance motivate students to make taken-for-granted assumptions about what is real, natural, and good problematic, and in so doing they broaden their views of the ideal manager as well as the kinds of competencies that are considered essential to effective management. A central purpose of a critical perspective toward managerial skills training is to make students and managers more discriminating and thus wiser consumers and promoters of managerial knowledge.

Cultural critique complicates the meanings of the competencies currently promoted as essential managerial skills. Consider, for example, competencies such as time management and effective communication. Time management typically is framed as an exercise in individual efficiency. A critical perspective asks students to explore different conceptions of time across cultures and to consider the consequences of these different conceptions on managerial and organizational behavior. For example, whereas some cultures experience time primarily as a limited resource to be saved, other cultures view time primarily as a series of moments to be savored. Each of these perspectives on time has significantly different implications for how managers develop priorities, how meetings are conducted, and how working relationships are developed over time (e.g., the amount of time "spent" on instrumental activities vs. social activities, how long it takes for people to develop an

effective working relationship). Communication skills typically are taught as techniques for effective listening, speaking, and writing. A critical perspective asks students to consider how a culture's written and spoken language serves to shape organizational and social reality. For example, students might consider how the metaphors a culture uses to describe everyday work life influence societal members' ways of perceiving and acting out their work lives.

In addition to broadening the meaning of commonly used managerial skill categories (e.g., time management and communication), management educators who take a critical perspective draw students' attention to competencies that would enhance managerial effectiveness but have not yet achieved legitimacy as essential managerial competencies. For example, managing in a multicultural environment requires new kinds of managerial competencies such as understanding social power dynamics, identifying and eliminating different forms of discrimination in organizations (e.g., sexual harassment), and managing bicultural stress (Bell, 1990; Brannen, 1995).

Managing in an era of boundaryless organizations, downsizing, and dejobbing requires that managers transcend conventional notions of career development. The recognition of the widespread existence of multiple-career families suggests that managers need skills in helping themselves and others manage their work/life balance. Students, for example, could be introduced to the concept of "downshifting," which refers to "a little known social trend in which 'successful' managers and executives sometimes choose to relinquish promotions and pay hikes in return for more time to spend on personal concerns" (Prasad & Prasad, 1993, p. 178). Attention to work/life issues also suggests that managers need to be able to promote attitudes and organizational systems that enable individuals, regardless of their family situations, to be effective contributors to their organizations, families, and communities. Thus, managers need skills in developing, managing, and legitimating a variety of work arrangements including flextime, part-time employment, job sharing, and telecommuting as well as parental leaves and flexible benefit packages.

In summary, skills in cultural critique enable students to develop more complex understandings of "typical" managerial skills and to develop competencies currently not reflected in the managerial ideal. Managers who develop skills in cultural critique are better able to identify the strengths and limitations of a particular managerial ideal and associated competencies, gain greater insight into why they and others are more or less willing and able to enact a particular culture's managerial ideal, and ultimately broaden the managerial ideal. In so doing, they bring the untapped perspectives and



talents that they and others have to the managerial role and the organizations in which they work.

## **A Course Framework**

How would one develop a course that helps students develop managerial skills in self-reflexivity and cultural critique? Although there are a variety of ways in which to do this, we propose that one useful way is to design a skills course that (a) provides students with their culture's managerial ideal and associated competencies and (b) gives them a framework they can use to analyze this ideal and skills from a cultural and ideological perspective. We advocate this approach because the skills currently promoted in management education are indeed useful in certain contexts and toward certain ends. For example, we use a variety of personality instruments in our classes and find concepts such as style differences and individual bases of power helpful to our students, particularly those from the United States or those who want to learn a U.S. perspective. But we also believe that these instruments and concepts are limited and can be seriously problematic and misleading if they are used without considering their cultural, historical, and ideological origins and functions. Indeed, they become more powerful tools for learning when students are given the opportunity and skills to question the assumptions that underlie these instruments and concepts (e.g., To what degree do these instruments reflect a U.S. perspective and with what consequences both in the United States and in other nations?), to identify the strengths and limitations of these instruments and concepts, and to seek out alternative ways of understanding and creating managerial effectiveness.

Therefore, we complement existing managerial skills texts with readings, discussions, and exercises that help students develop a critical perspective. To this end, we draw on insights from critical theory (Benson, 1977; Prasad & Prasad, 1993) as well as from intergroup theory (Alderfer, 1983; Smith, 1982), feminist inquiry (Calas & Smircich, 1993; Ferguson, 1984; Hearn & Parkin, 1987), neoinstitutional perspectives on organizations (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Zucker, 1977), and scholarship that focuses on within- and cross-national diversity (Cox, 1994). Appendix A presents several guiding questions that can help students develop this perspective. Appendix B provides a sample course sequence that includes a list of readings and other resources we have used to systematically add a critical perspective to our own skills classrooms. We use some of these readings as student handouts and others as background material for class design, lectures, and discussions. We note that Appendix B reflects only a small portion of the wealth of resources

management educators can use to bring a critical perspective to their classrooms, and we encourage management educators to seek out and share additional resources. We also note that many of these readings are conceptual but have significant behavioral implications for managers. Part of the challenge of management educators is to help students explore the behavioral implications of a critical perspective and provide students with creative opportunities to develop and practice new managerial skills based on this perspective.

We realize that we have only begun to explore the potential critical theory has to offer managerial skills education, and we encourage other management educators to consider additional ways in which critical theory can be integrated into the managerial skills classroom. What skills should be taught? How would they be taught? What kinds of texts and pedagogues would be most useful? How would this learning be assessed?

### **Notes of Caution and Optimism**

Despite critical theory's potential to help managers and organizations understand and address many of the complex individual, organizational, and societal challenges noted in the beginning of this article, we are well aware that integrating critical theory into the management classroom will be a challenge for a variety of reasons. Management educators have invested more than a decade developing a cohesive curriculum and a systematic pedagogy for teaching managerial skills. This curriculum and pedagogy have contributed substantially to the relevance and legitimacy of management education as well as to the professionalization of management. Students tend to respond very favorably to existing methods of management skills training, and it is understandably difficult and risky to tamper with student expectations and a history of classroom success. However, existing methods of teaching managerial skills may become less effective as managers and management students become more culturally diverse. We also note that students have responded very favorably to our own skills courses that are based on a critical perspective.

Furthermore, critical theory is an intentionally complex and controversial perspective, and skills in self-reflexivity and cultural critique are designed to complicate rather than simplify the manager's life. A critical perspective requires a willingness and ability to ask difficult questions that sometimes have no clear answers, to look at both the moral and economic imperatives of managerial practice, and to live with ambiguity and anxiety. We also suspect that another obstacle to integrating critical theory into the management skills classroom is that ideological perspectives tend to be marginalized

in management and organizational studies in the United States, although such perspectives play a significantly more prominent role in other scholarly disciplines and in management studies in other cultures.

Despite these hurdles, we are optimistic about the future of critical theory in the management skills classroom. Management educators, students, and practitioners are actively seeking new ways in which to address the many challenges currently faced by managers and organizations. Furthermore, educators, practitioners, and students of management represent a broader variety of cultures today than they did when the managerial skills curriculum was first introduced. Together, they are challenging the taken-for-granted management curriculum, making it problematic, and offering a wealth of new knowledge and perspectives. In so doing, they are opening new possibilities for management education and practice. Finally, as Bigelow (1993) noted in a recent article,

Because skill learning is an emerging area, these [management skills] texts do more than simply collect what we know about skills. Rather, they represent attempts by authors to define the scope, content, and pedagogy of managerial skills. . . . As our knowledge of skills and skill learning increases, we can eventually expect rather different kinds of skills texts to emerge to reflect our improved understanding. (pp. 399-409)

As management educators, we regularly are challenged to consider whether we are adequately preparing students to address the individual, organizational, and societal challenges they face; what individual, organizational, and societal ends are served through our teaching; and whether our teaching reflects the current state of knowledge in our field. We hope this article inspires a lively and fruitful discussion about the role of critical theory in managerial skills training.

## Appendix A Guiding Questions for Self-Reflexivity and Cultural Critique

### *Questions for Self-Reflexivity*

What cultures (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality) influence who I am today?

What perspectives, values, and behaviors do I bring to the workplace that reflect my culture but that may not be universally shared?

What perspectives, values, and behaviors do others bring to the workplace that I have not considered or that I might not value as significant and effective in a managerial context?

How do my beliefs about the self, others, and the interaction of the two influence the quality of my relationships—and thus the effectiveness of my relationships—within and across cultures?

To what degree is the managerial ideal congruent with my goals, cultural ideals, and realities? How much do I have to change my “self” to adapt to this ideal, and at what gains and costs to myself, others, and the organization? How much do others have to change their “selves” to adapt to this ideal, and at what gains and costs?

### *Questions for Cultural Critique*

What is the managerial ideal that is assumed and promoted in cultural texts such as management textbooks, the popular press, and the media?

Why this ideal and why now? What are the economic, moral, political, and historical bases of this ideal? Were there different ideals in the past, and might we expect different ideals in the future?

What personal, organizational, and societal ends are served by this ideal? How does this ideal affirm a particular organizational and social order, and what processes are used to uphold and change this ideal? To what extent is this managerial ideal generalizable across cultures, both within and across nations?

What are the advantages and limitations of promoting a particular managerial ideal across cultures?

Are there alternative images of the managerial ideal that might better serve individuals, organizations, and society?

## Appendix B An Outline for a Managerial Skills Course From a Critical Perspective: A Sampling of Topics and Resources

### Topic

### Selected Readings and Resources

Introduction: Managers and management in context—  
Social, cultural, and ideological perspectives

Berger and Luckmann (1966): *The Social Construction of Reality*  
 Davis (1971): *Comparative Management*  
 Geertz (1973): *The Interpretation of Cultures*  
 Guest (1990): "Human Resource Management and the American Dream"  
 Hamilton and Biggart (1988): "Market, Culture and Authority"  
 Lincoln (1989): "Employee Work Attitudes and Management Practice in the U.S. and Japan"  
 Lomnitz and Perez-Lizaur (1987): "A Mexican Elite Family, 1820-1980"  
 Redding (1990): *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*  
 Salaman and Thompson (1980): *Control and Ideology in Organizations*  
 Haire, Ghiselli, and Porter (1966): *Managerial Thinking*  
 Townley (1993): "Foucault, Power/Knowledge and Its Relevance for Human Resources Management"

The ideal manager

Self-reflexivity: The social and cultural  
construction of the self

Brown (1980): "The Individual in the Organization"  
 Gergen and Davis (1985): *The Social Construction of the Person*  
 Markus and Kitayama (1991): "Culture and the Self"  
 Argyris (1994): "Good Communication That Blocks Learning"  
 Clancy (1989): *The Invisible Powers*

Communication: The power of language to shape reality

Hall (1959): *The Silent Language*  
 Jick (1986): *Michael Jones* (Harvard Business School case)  
 Lakoff (1990): *Talking Power*  
 Martyna (1980): "Beyond the He/Man Approach"  
 Mumby (1988): *Communication and Power in Organizations*  
 Friere (1993): *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*  
 McIntosh (1988): *White Privilege and Male Privilege*

Power: Social bases of power—Intergroup dynamics  
and cultural capital

- Nord (1977): "Dreams of Humanization and the Realities of Power"
- Smith (1982): *Groups in Conflict*
- Grenier (1988): *Inhuman Relations*
- Hamper (1991): *Rivthead*
- Prasad and Prasad (1993): "Reconceptualizing Alienation in Management Inquiry"
- Alderfer (1983): "Intergroup Relations in Organizations"
- Berg (1984): "Objectivity and Prejudice"
- Calas and Smircich (1993): "Dangerous Liaisons"
- Cox (1994): *Cultural Diversity in Organizations*
- Hearn and Parkin (1987): "Sex" at "Work"
- Kanter (1977): *Men and Women of the Corporation*
- Zuboff (1988): *In the Age of the Smart Machine*
- Bridges (1991): *Managing Transitions*
- Savage and Lombard (1986): *Sons of the Machine*
- Vaill (1987-1988): "A Note on the Idea of Courage"
- Gilligan (1982): *In a Different Voice*
- Gioia (1992): "Pinto Fires and Personal Ethics"
- Jackall (1988): *Moral Mazes*
- Bluedorn, Kaufman, and Lane (1992): "How Many Things Do You Like to Do at Once?"
- Feldman and Weitz (1991): "From the Invisible Hand to the Gladhand"
- Hill (1995a): *Beyond the Myth of the Perfect Mentor*
- Hill (1995b): *Managing Your Career*
- Jackall (1988): *Moral Mazes*
- Kiechel (1994): "A Manager's Career in the New Economy"
- Kofodimos (1990): "Why Executives Lose Their Balance"

Motivation and empowerment: A look at worker alienation, resistance, and empowerment

Managing the multicultural workforce

Technology management  
Change management

Moral management

Time management  
Career management

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