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Remembering Your Mentors

Les White

Some 20 years ago, I started focusing on assessing really capable managers and noting the values and skills that make them successful. Two years ago, I formalized these values and skills into a list of 31 “traits,” which are set forth later in this article. I continue to use them as a basis for coaching managers and young professionals, as criteria for formal job performance reviews, and as a foundation for screening new hires. These traits, in effect, are the values I espouse for managing both local governments and nonprofit organizations.

After reading them, you may conclude that they are fairly obvious and simple. This is true, yet I believe that this is their value because sometimes we get lost in the rhetoric of systems management and of overly complex, bureaucratic statements, instead of remembering the fundamental values and skills we need to possess to perform effectively as local government managers.

Underlying Themes

In reviewing the traits, I have noted four underlying themes that Dr. Peter Koestenbaum describes in his book *Leadership: The Inner Side of Greatness*. In his “Leadership Diamond,” Koestenbaum describes four ingredients of greatness. They are: vision (“thinking big and new”), reality (“being in touch with the facts, with the truth”), ethics (“people matter to you . . . integrity and morality are important to you”), and courage (“the willingness to take risks”).

When you observe effective leaders, you will see these four dimensions in their leadership skills. They also will clearly embody most, if not all, of the 31 traits.

So, I want to thank my own mentors for being the inspiration that has allowed me to identify virtually all of the principles, values, and skills it takes to be effective in the management profession. To the extent that any of us has had mentors, we need to thank them and remind ourselves of their contributions to us.

And when I thank my mentors, I need to reach across a broad spectrum of contributors who have ranged from bosses to peers and subordinates, to elected officials, to family and friends, and even to some people who have served me as bad examples. For me, mentors are not one or two “influencers” but many.

Some of My Exemplars

Bosses

I have been blessed with an unusually talented succession of bosses, including John Wentz, former manager of Riverside and Stockton, California; John Taylor, former manager of Fresno, California, and Kansas City, Missouri; and Ralph Hanley, former manager of Fresno, California, and Salem, Oregon, to name a few.

What set these managers apart was their ethical core, intellect, and courage to act in tough, political situations without regard for their careers. They were shining examples as I was starting my career and even much later in life because I never forgot the lessons they taught me.

John Wentz was a master at customer service, through his practice of “wandering around.” John Taylor and Ralph Hanley taught me how to speak and write in what I describe as “straight talk.” Ralph Hanley used to say that you need three things to be a successful manager: guts, intellect, and integrity. Although I used to think this was just another one of those pat, simplistic formulas, after 40 years of working in managerial positions in the public and nonprofit sectors, I found that he was right on the mark because sometimes the simplest statements of principles are those that continue to ring true throughout one’s career.

For me, mentors are not one or two “influencers” but many.

By the way, all three of these managers met Ralph Hanley’s three-pronged test of guts, intellect, and integrity.

Peers and Subordinates

A number of peers have served me as “beacons in the night” by helping guide me in this profession. Three recent examples are George Carvalho, manager, Riverside, California; Kevin Duggan, manager, Mountain View, California; and David Mora, manager, Salinas, California.

These individuals have been consistently superior managers with respect to intellect and integrity, and David Mora and George Carvalho have markedly advanced the local government management profession. Kevin Duggan’s recent handling of a politically sensitive situation with an elected official, as profiled in this magazine last year, was a potent reminder of the integrity and courage it takes to be an effective city manager.

But it has not just been peers who have helped guide my career. Two people I hired in San Jose were the epitome of courage, integrity, and consistent professionalism. These two always were up to doing the difficult assignments: Lou Garcia, currently city manager of Redondo Beach, and Darrell Dearborn, retired deputy city manager of San Jose.

Good managers should remember that their effectiveness is determined by the quality

of the people around them and that there is much to be learned from all employees in their organizations.

Elected Officials

Most of us who have been in this business of local government have had the pleasure at one time or another of serving with elected officials or board members who have been dedicated to doing a first rate job for their constituencies. They have cared about customers, valued professional staff and their opinions, and conducted themselves with the utmost dignity and integrity.

I am reminded of two women who were the first to serve on the councils in Fresno and Fullerton respectively: Linda Mack and Frances Wood. They had to withstand criticism from their peers because they took the time and had the interest to do their homework on difficult issues before making decisions. I admired the courage they brought to the council chambers each week, and the strength of their convictions in doing a good job under occasionally adverse circumstances.

Family and Friends

People should never underestimate the importance of family members as mentors. Family and friends can help set in place your core values and be effective reminders in your day-to-day work of what it takes to succeed. My father was a self-educated man of integrity and intellect, my mother is a person of great perseverance, and my wife, Marilyn, is blessed with extremely good judgment and has always been an effective barometer in helping guide my decision-making skills in difficult political situations.

Bad Examples

A person can and does learn from “bad examples,” who regularly remind us that the values and qualities needed to be exemplary as a professional in our business often are just the opposite of what they are doing—what we observe as the wrong way to do business will often confirm for us the right way.

What I have noted in particular about these poor role models is their penchant for trying to survive at all costs. This is regardless of the price paid in terms of compromising personal and management values and principles.

I recall, in particular, one city manager who changed policy positions and processes to accommodate individual councilmembers out of concern to not do so would lead to losing his job. Ultimately, he lost the respect of the entire council and his job too.

A Few Reflections

While some of the individual names mentioned above may mean little to the reader, there are qualities that all of these “pros” in life represent. They are smart and courageous, and above all they set high ethical standards. If you have not found that one, lasting adviser, then take heart and remember that you have probably been fortunate, as I have, to have been surrounded by many wonderful human influences throughout your career. Thoughts of these people also are reminders to all of us of the importance of being good mentors ourselves.

Traits of Successful Managers, as Learned From My Own Mentors

In my opinion, successful managers share these characteristics, as demonstrated by those who were for me embodiments of one ideal or another:

Strong sense of personal integrity. Ethical leaders are significant definers of character and conduct in an organization. There is constant scrutiny of their values. The integrity of leaders must be beyond reproach, particularly if they are to set an example for individuals and groups in the organization.

Sense of fairness. Compassionate leaders deal with people fairly and equally. They treat any subordinate employee with the same respect and values as they would afford someone at a higher level.

Good balance. Secure managers are well balanced emotionally and professionally, with a well-developed sense of personal values. They promote the development of “corporate” values, to ensure that the organization is well balanced, too. Because they understand that the worst disease that can afflict a leader is egotism, they know how to manage their own egos and know that leading is about sharing the credit for the organization’s successes.

Sense of humor. Pleasant leaders set a tone for the organization that makes work enjoyable and establish a work environment that encourages happy, relaxed, and productive people.

True concern for people. Supportive managers and department heads understand that nurturing and motivating employees lies at the heart of making an organization effective. They are always thinking about how to make working in the organization a fulfilling experience.

Knowledge of how to cope with difficult people. Good leaders do not shy away from handling troublesome difficult personality types and personnel matters. They understand the necessity of acting in a timely fashion to address people who are not coping well in the organization—for their own good and for the good of those who are performing well.

Encouragement of open communications. High-quality leaders ensure that channels of communication are always open, engaging in dialogue throughout the organization to encourage all managers to practice open communications with their employees. Top managers listen to good and bad news.

Straight talk. Clearly understood managers are straightforward in their communication skills. People do not have to guess what they are talking about. They communicate effectively in writing as well as in speaking and know when to give and ask for feedback. They communicate in a fashion that is simple, direct, and timely.

Good listening ability. Attentive leaders are, first and foremost, good listeners who understand what is on the minds of the people they work with.

Visibility in the organization. Astute managers and department heads are at ease with employees, taking the time to be seen in the organization and to understand what employees do and what they are concerned about. They remember to thank people for a job well done.

Capacity to build trust. Those with leadership skills establish a work environment where people trust each other.

Capacity to build teams. Good managers understand the inherent value of teamwork and that generally the best performance in an organization is the result of individuals working together.

Courage to act. Courageous leaders set the tone by making hard decisions and moving an organization forward; they set a good example by showing the courage of their own convictions.

Mental toughness. Exemplary managers learn from mistakes and are brutally honest about their own performance. They do not practice self-deception and do not do a Houdini act when the going gets tough.

Political astuteness. Wise leaders understand the political environment and the needs and positions of special interests and policymakers but are careful not to be too political.

Flexibility, innovation, and adaptiveness. Real leaders are willing to try new ideas, tolerate opinions that are different from theirs, take risks, and embrace change. Creative managers encourage employees to try new ideas and accept the risk of failure; they have a high level of tolerance of uncertainty.

Skill at being movers and catalysts. Change-oriented people in authority move an organization forward. They are movers and catalysts for improving the organization, not blockers and hindrances. Good managers make it easier for employees to change with the times and to develop streamlined ways of doing business.

Ability to learn from the past. Regularly, leaders will make the organization more effective by evaluating services and programs and altering, if necessary, the course upon which the organization is embarked.

Mindfulness of the big picture. Visionary leaders engage stakeholders in the organization to help define its mission and goals. Because they see the big picture, they help the organization understand what it stands for and what it is all about.

Willingness to do the small tasks well. Good managers ensure that organizations have an eye for detail and do the small projects and routine tasks as effectively and efficiently as the major programs.

Skill at evaluating performance. Caring managers and supervisors do timely and thorough performance evaluations. Employees never have to guess how well they are doing. These leaders establish approaches to correct poor performance and reward good performance in a variety of ways.

Effective delegation. High-quality administrators afford employees the opportunity to do meaningful work that is personally rewarding and challenging.

An eye to deadlines. Whenever possible, effective leaders negotiate deadlines among employees and hold them accountable for meeting these deadlines. Of course, they set a good example by meeting their own deadlines and commitments.

Former manager Ralph Hanley used to say that you need three things to be a successful manager: guts, intellect, and integrity.

Thoughts about the customer. Effective managers understand that virtually anyone inside or outside the organization is a customer. Always trying to maximize the performance of the organization for the good of the customer, they regularly seek feedback from users and clients on how the organization is performing.

Skill in promoting a diverse workforce. Knowledgeable leaders understand the value of a diverse workforce that reflects the customers it serves. They know that this diversity helps the local government better understand and serve its clientele by reflecting the values that exist in the community.

Will to improve organizational effectiveness. Well-organized managers are always looking for ways to streamline processes and procedures, to make the organization more user-friendly and productive. They seek means of producing more with less, or with the same resources.

Analytical ability and decisiveness. These administrators know how to analyze problems by getting the facts, assessing the alternatives, then acting in a prudent and timely fashion to select or recommend a course of action.

Competency. Capable managers and department heads are respected for their knowledge and understanding and for how hard, effectively, and efficiently they work.

Commitment to staff development. Leaders of tomorrow set a tone in the organization by promoting staff development programs that enhance an individual's self-worth and that allow employees sufficient time away from the job so that their skills are constantly updated. And these leaders actively participate in their own continuing education programs.

Good negotiation. Skilled administrators know how to effectively and fairly negotiate among groups and individuals to resolve problems and conflicts.

Knowledge of the organization's finances. Competent managers know the overall financial status of their organizations and communicate it in a straightforward, regular way to their policymakers. Reports clearly explain the revenues, expenditures, reserves, and budget status of an organization. These leaders encourage the preparation and routine review of audit reports and other indices that promote a better understanding of the fiscal condition of the organization.

Les White, Aptos, California (whitelm@pacbell.net), is the former city manager of San Jose and Fullerton, California, and has managed several nonprofit organizations. He is currently semiretired and does interim assignments and consulting for local governments.

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Ethics Inquiries

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The Difficult, Mistreated Employee

Scenario: The county manager just read a news story about a department director who had worked for him in another county government. Though the employee had not gotten along well with some of his colleagues, he had been competent. The newspaper story, however, insinuated that the employee now had given some of his new employees unauthorized pay raises. Knowing what a stickler this employee was for following procedures, the county manager immediately suspected that the reporter had gotten the story wrong.

When he called the employee's new boss to ask about the story, the other county manager confirmed that the reporter had erred but said that he was not sorry that this particular employee was facing some embarrassing news coverage. The county manager wanted to know if there would be an ethical problem if he wrote a letter to the editor or called the reporter to set the record straight but thought it would be a good idea to discuss this issue before acting.

Response: When news reports are inaccurate and someone's reputation may be damaged by such a story, the first reaction is to want to set the record straight. In this case, however, the county manager's instinct to react quickly might not help his former employee. The former employee may prefer to set the record straight himself. In any event, the county manager should not take the initiative to write a letter to the editor without getting such a request from his former employee.

Invitation to Participate in a Focus Group

Scenario: A consultant who is developing a new product has asked the city manager to participate in a focus group. The consultant says she'd like to get a better understanding of the needs of city managers and whether or not this

product would be useful to them. The product idea sounds interesting to the city manager, but he wanted to see if there might be ethical issues that he should consider before accepting this invitation.

Response: It is appropriate for local government managers to participate in focus groups, although they should not accept compensation for doing so. If the consultant is offering to reimburse the city manager for his time, the manager has a number of ethical questions to consider:

1. What are the manager's obligations to disclose compensation for such activities?
2. Is there a potential conflict of interest in accepting compensation because of a current or future business relationship the city might have with this consultant?
3. Has the city manager made arrangements to participate in this activity on his own time?
4. Is it clear to the consultant that the manager's name and title may not be used in any advertising?
5. If the city manager accepts compensation, he may need to recuse himself from making any recommendations on purchasing services or products or on issuing contracts that involve the company's business.

Ethics advice is a popular service provided to ICMA members. The inquiries and advice are reviewed by the Committee on Professional Conduct, the ethics committee of the ICMA Executive Board. Some of the inquiries are revised and published as a regular feature in PM, to give guidance to members in the big and little ethical decisions they make daily. If you have a question about your obligations under the ICMA Code of Ethics, call Elizabeth Kellar at 202/962-3611, e-mail, ekellar@icma.org or Martha Perego at 202/962-3668, e-mail, mperego@icma.org.

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Commentary

What If the Customer *Isn't* Right?

The customer is always right. We've heard this all our lives. It's a fundamental axiom of American business. And it makes sense. But in the business of government, the customer is sometimes horrifically wrong.

Consider these examples:

- In 1938, most voters in Great Britain supported Prime Minister Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. We now know that appeasing the dictators was a tragic error, which strengthened Hitler and caused Britain and its allies to miss important opportunities to avoid a cataclysmic war.
- In 1940, had Franklin Roosevelt campaigned forthrightly about his efforts to find a way to bring the United States into the war in Europe, he almost surely would have lost to Wendell Willkie.
- In 1954, if the American people—even just those living in the northern and western states—had been able to vote on the fairness of the “separate but equal” doctrine, a majority would likely have said that, as long as things were equal, separate was acceptable. The South would have maintained “white only” schools, drinking fountains, bathrooms, and other public facilities.

Americans have tremendous faith in the idea that a competitive, free-market economy forces companies to listen to their customers, and by doing so, they become successful because they deliver the highest-quality service at the lowest possible price. No wonder we often hear that government should be run like a business.

What people really mean is that government would do a better job if it incorporated into its management and operations the same sense of urgency found in the business environment. If government, like business, focused more on the “customer” and used performance standards to gauge the quality of services delivered, it would do a better job of serving its customers.

The Difference Between Business and Government

Government can improve as a result of adopting some business practices. But we should not ignore the major differences between business and government, differences that require government sometimes to reject the opinion of its customers, the voters. Government is not a business.

Business has one primary goal: maximize profits. To be sure, businesspeople face difficult decisions. All businesses face ongoing challenges to keep expenditures below revenues, or to

decide how much money to take out of the business now versus how much to reinvest. Publicly traded companies, for example, are under constant pressure by shareholders to meet or exceed quarterly targets. Nevertheless, within these parameters, the goal in business never changes: make as much money as possible.

The goals of government are much more complex. There is not even agreement among people involved in government—elected officials, appointed officials, or voters—about what government's primary role should be. But the idea that government should be run like a business, first, leads members of the public to believe that they are mere customers and, second, fail to recognize government's primary responsibility: to be the democratic expression of the collective will of the governed.

The public as mere customer fosters the idea that the public's sole responsibilities are to pay taxes and vote. The "I pay my taxes, I get my services" idea furthers the public's lack of engagement with government. It turns local government officials from leaders into pollsters—not leading, not setting the tone for debate, but merely reflecting the emotional temperature of the citizens.

Hypersensitivity to Public Opinion

Many people complain that once some public officials have been elected, they stop listening to the public when, sadly, many elected officials listen too closely. They react to every issue in the press and find the safe water of the mainstream. They become followers when we need leaders, thermometers when we need thermostats.

What does hypersensitivity to public opinion mean for those of us in public service? Too often, it means that those in elected office are shackled to short-term thinking. They act out of fear, not duty: expecting to stand before voters every few years for reelection, far too many mayors and councilmembers cravenly pander to short-term goals.

And yet long-term vision is indispensable for any government that hopes to leave to its sons and daughters a better place, a better life. Our oaths of office and our appointments to management positions demand that we consider first how our actions will affect the future. Our communities, our children, and our society will live with the results of our decisions or our indecision. If we work only for immediate results to satisfy today's news story, we will sacrifice the future for an easy, short-term, feel-good benefit that makes us look good to today's constituents but lowers the bar and short-changes tomorrow.

Representative democracy requires more leaders and fewer reactionaries. It requires political valor. As elected representatives and appointed administrators, we have a responsibility to use our privileged information, knowledge, and positions of public trust to reach decisions by weighing what we judge to be the highest good.

Doing the Right Thing

The English political philosopher Edmund Burke believed that the public's representatives should not mimic public opinion. Rather, they should do what the public might do with the same time and opportunity to investigate the subject to an equivalent degree. What would the average voter do, were that voter granted the honor of the public trust?

In short, this means "doing the right thing." It means taking the path—often more difficult—that will result in the greatest good over the long term, beyond our tenure.

Government should not always be run like a business. And in the business of government, the customer is often but not always right. May each of us be granted the wisdom to know the difference and the courage to discharge our duty, no matter the consequences to our own careers.

John Russo, City Attorney, Oakland, California

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Corporate Profile: AIG Environmental®

Environmental Insurance for Brownfields Redevelopment

With over two decades of experience in environmental insurance and brownfields redevelopment, AIG Environmental® creates programs designed to reduce the financial risk and uncertainty associated with brownfields redevelopment. AIG Environmental® provides coverage backed by the member companies of American International Group, Inc. 

Brownfields remain a high priority issue for communities. Given the potential economic, social, and environmental gains, a successful brownfields program can significantly improve the quality of life for citizens in the community.

Addressing the Risks

One important strategy includes ways to gain developers' and lenders' confidence that liability and contamination issues can be addressed. Environmental insurance offers assurance to public and private stakeholders alike, that the costs of cleaning up contaminated properties, necessary to improve public health and the environment, can be contained.

In parallel with the promise of preserving human health, brownfields can provide an important boost to local communities and their economies. The benefits of enhanced tax revenue, job creation and new investment capital extend to community members, local governments and developers alike.

Tools for Local Governments

Federal brownfields legislation and various emerging state brownfields programs offer a number of new tools for redevelopment. Among them is the ability to use federal funding to purchase environmental insurance. AIG Environmental®'s BUILDsm can help assure that communities maximize the incentives that are available to them.

Providing Risk Management Options

In an effort to support brownfields redevelopment, AIG Environmental® developed BUILDsm - Brownfields: Utilizing Insurance for Land Development. This unique risk management program eases financial uncertainty for both public and private entities by using environmental insurance as a tool to cover unforeseen environmental costs and liabilities. Moreover, AIG Environmental® addresses potential liabilities up front. Remediation costs are quantified, legal responsibilities are determined, and protection

is provided from unexpected cleanup costs and lawsuits.

AIG Environmental®'s BUILDsm program for local governments helps speed project negotiations and property redevelopment among all interested parties-from municipalities to real estate developers.

The program also helps local governments implement a workable plan with confidence in the projected final cost. Whether conditions arise during development or contaminants are found in the future, AIG Environmental® can provide a policy that gives your city or county greater certainty of your total financial commitment.

Ensuring for Success

It's time to let AIG Environmental® and our BUILDsm program help you gain the maximum financial benefits of redeveloping a Brownfield-with the minimum financial risks.

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What's New at the ICMA Center for Performance Measurement?

The recently reinvigorated steering committee has committed itself to refreshing the mission of the ICMA Center for Performance Measurement (CPM) and providing advice to staff on a number of matters, including approaches for further expanding the number of participating jurisdictions. Here are the 2002–2003 CPM Steering Committee members.

Del Borgsdorf, City Manager, San Jose, California

Terry Brechtel, City Manager, San Antonio, Texas



Michael Brown, County Administrator, Santa Barbara County, California (chair)

Frank Fairbanks, City Manager, Phoenix, Arizona

Bonnie Ridley Kraft, City Manager, Spartanburg, South Carolina

James Keene, Jr., City Manager, Tucson, Arizona

Charles McNeely, City Manager, Reno, Nevada

Charlie Meyer, City Manager, St. Louis Park, Minnesota

Mary K. Moore, City Manager, Bryan, Texas

Ray Patchett, City Manager, Carlsbad, California

Melissa Peacor, Assistant County Executive, Prince William County, Virginia

Steve Sarkozy, City Manager, Bellevue, Washington

Onsite training by ICMA staff. CPM's newly revised on-site, two-day training for newly enrolled jurisdictions includes an introduction to performance measurement concepts and terminology, small group meetings with service area staff, and a facilitated discussion with the jurisdiction's management team about how the data and best practices information from CPM are being used by current participants.

Data collection templates. Each year, participants receive 15 surveys that have been continuously refined during the past eight years by their peers in the program.

Online data collection and cleaning system. CPM's new Web-based system, unveiled in

March 2003, integrates data collection and cleaning and offers participants greater flexibility, continuous access, and a more timely release of the full data sets.

Rigorously cleaned comparative data. CPM grants participants full access to the completed data sets in Access and Excel once they have been thoroughly cleaned.

Annual data reports. Each year in the fall, participants receive three copies of CPM's comparative performance measurement report that includes 200+ tables and charts showing participants' performance in 15 service areas. Individual service-specific chapters now are available in pdf format and are downloadable from CPM's private Web site at icma.org/cpm.

Electronic versions of graphs and whisker plots. In addition to receiving the 600+ page printed report, participants can download and customize Excel versions of all 200+ graphs, as well as 34 full-color customized whisker plots.

What Works: Management Applications of Performance Measurement in Local Government. CPM's annual collection of mini case studies showcases the proven management techniques used by high-performing local governments. Participants featured find that sharing their What Works case studies with elected officials and the public helps communicate the real-world applications of performance measurement.

icma.org/cpm. CPM's private Web site includes data sets, downloadable pdf versions of CPM publications, electronic graphs, and sample performance reports from participants. Contact information for managers, primary coordinators, and other service area specialists also is available to facilitate the exchange of effective practices and to foster continuous service improvements in all participating jurisdictions.

CPM Forum. CPM's annual meeting focuses on the uses of performance measurement and features presentations by CPM participants' staff and elected officials, as well as roundtable discussions and interactive how-to workshops.

Certificate program. CPM rewards jurisdictions that actively use performance measurement in the management of their organizations. Seventeen jurisdictions were recognized at the ICMA annual conference in the program's inaugural year. Local governments recognized by CPM in the fall of 2002 are listed below.

To learn more about the ICMA Center for Performance Measurement, visit Web site www.icma.org/performance; call 202/962-3562; or e-mail cpmail@icma.org.



Seventeen jurisdictions were awarded certificates of achievement and distinction by the ICMA Center for Performance Measurement in the autumn of 2002. Accepting certificates on behalf of their communities were (back row, left to right) Del Borgsdorf, San Jose, California; Terry Brechtel, San Antonio, Texas; Steve Duchane, Sterling Heights, Michigan; Sheryl Sculley, Phoenix, Arizona; and Tony Griffin, Fairfax County, Virginia. (Front row, left to right) Mary K. Moore, Bryan, Texas; Ed Everett, Redwood City, California; Michael Brown, Santa Barbara County, California; Craig Gerhart, Prince William County, Virginia; Toby Futrell, Austin Texas; and Charles McNeely, Reno, Nevada (not pictured). These communities also received certificates: Merced, California; San Mateo, California; Las Vegas, Nevada; Bellevue, Washington; Kent, Washington; and Lynnwood, Washington.

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