Managing International Cultural Differences, Or Doing As The Romans (Or Finns Or Indians) Do?

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"We have no chance of managing paradoxes if we are not prepared to give up something, if we are not willing to bet on the future and if we cannot find it in ourselves to take a risk with people. These are our pathways through the paradoxes, if we have the will. The pursuit for our own short-term advantage, and the desire to win everything we can, will only perpetuate animosities, destroy alliances and partnerships, frustrate progress, and breed lawyers and bureaucracies of enforcement." (Charles Handy, 1994:81)

Introduction

International contact manifests in inter-personal and inter-group interactions in which persons manage themselves in roles with regard to differences in how values, norms, beliefs and attitudes are reinforced. Much has been written about management of international cultural differences. Dare we say, even more has been written than is actually known. After the Hofstedian conception was shown up to be theoretically deficient, conceptually defective, and empirically lacking (McSweeney, 2002), there has been renewed interest with which scholars are once again inquiring into issues of managing cultural diversity. Business firms and governments also invest considerable time, energy and money in preparing roleholders for effectiveness in cross-border interactions. Yet, the burgeoning literature remains silent on one salient aspect. 'When in Rome', is it worthwhile to follow the homily 'Do as the Romans do' to be harmonious with a host culture? Is it imprudent to be ourselves, and manage cultural differences through sensitivity and mutual respect for diversity and differences? Are we to accept the former prescription unquestioningly, subscribing to the culture of a host territory that would imply sweeping under the carpet, issues of differences as something so negative as to be left unexamined. In this paper, we question this proposition in the context of Finland-India Economic Relations. We examine the credentials of the homily 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do' which sidesteps the possibility of understanding and

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managing international cultural differences through other means than denial, limitation and replication. We conclude that there is much more to management of cultural differences than synthetic superficial imitations or mimicking.

The design and implementation of international collaborations have three related dimensions: physical movements of things, ideas and people; developing 'pictures in the mind' to hold and express feelings and thoughts; and, the commitment of resources to action by parties involved, individually and collectively. We raise hypotheses about how plurality of meanings get created and impregnated into these interaction processes through tacit hermeneutic endeavours of roleholders engaged in cross-border interactions between groups and organisations in representational roles while formulating and implementing strategy[1]. Cross-border interactions are complex and always introduce new aspects with which organisations may or may not be ready to engage. The capacity to open oneself to new experiences involves risk and needs willingness, ability and understanding to cope with surprises. In this paper, we use the lenses of the open systems framework to understand management of self in roles with respect to boundary conditions in the course of task engagement. We do so because thinking about issues of culture is influenced by images developed over time from within systems and about systems.

Open systems are distinguished from one another on five dimensions: task, time, space or territory, technology, and sentience (feelings). Business enterprises, universities, governments are all examples of open systems because they need to add value and transact with the environment for inputs and outputs. Systems are open to outside influences as opposed to closed systems, such as clockworks. Open systems survive only with sufficient transactions with surroundings in terms of energy and mass. In human systems, we need information (energy) and food (mass) for basic survival. In evolutionary theory, systems are regarded complex and having unpredictable outcomes thus producing uncertainty, learning, race for competitive advantage, and a tendency towards sub optimal results (Barron, 2003:75). Whenever two open systems come into contact with each other for the first time, roleholders populating them may or may not be conscious about

the fact that interactions across organisational boundaries involve differences in how the parties relate to all five of these boundary conditions and how new 'pictures in the mind' get triggered just as old ones occasionally get resurrected from the deep recesses of the unconscious. Recall the sharp reaction from Arcelor in 2006 when Mittals first announced their interest in a merger or acquisition. It needs time and effort for understanding the phenomena on both sides and all levels. International interactions are a fascinating field of how 'pictures-in-the-mind' and their projections (including distortions) carry into the shared and imagined life-spaces and work-spaces. The equine paradox speaks to us eloquently: 'you can take a horse to water but you cannot make him drink'. 'Culture as phenomena' to be experienced and understood needs to be distinguished from 'culture as a thing' to be learnt about as information.

[1] Strategy discussions tend to get lost in detail. For an open systems view of strategy, see Mathur (2006).

Distribution of power and question of legitimacy

Curiously, the word 'management' originates from the Latin *Manus*, meaning 'hand' and *maneggiare* (Latin) originated from handling horses. Thus responsibility for a task, e.g. handling a horse, is about being able to create trust, common understanding and shared objectives. The rider initiates and engages in a process together with the horse. In addition to this being a process, it is also a relationship of two beings. Follett (1941) observed that we not only react to the other, but to the entire relationship that exists between us (reported in Graham, 1995:ix). To Follett, management was working "with" rather than "over" and the manager needed to see the situation holistically, share power and create reciprocal relationships. The difference between authority (legitimate power, in a sense) and power (capabilities to affect an outcome, in a sense) is profound. Formal power does not equate with operative power (Rosabeth Moss Kantor in Graham, 1995:xiv). The acquisition, enhancement, retention, distribution and exercise of power may or may not flow from consensual or mutual understanding of authority and its delegation and yet economic, social, political and psychological motives would not manifest without powerbases to support and contest them. Indeed, all groups, organisations, nations are organised primarily

to enable the mobilisation and exercise of power within themselves and in interactions across their boundaries.

Systemic Approach to Groups

One way of making sense of an organisation is to look at it as an integral whole of inter-related parts. The most popularized management related version of systemic thinking come from general systems theory, open systems theory, chaos theory and group relations. We build on the notion that by taking a closer look into all possible aspects of a whole system, and also beyond its immediate boundaries of just the organisation itself, one may perceive the most probable connections that affect the system as a whole. A change in any part of the system, affects the whole system, as a "butterfly effect" (sensitive dependence and chaos theory). An offshoot of the general systems theory of Bertalanffy (1968) was the 'living systems' theory in which one of the subsystems is boundary (Miller, 1978). Maturana and Varela (1988) introduced the idea of autopoiesis into systems theory acknowledging quantum mechanics analogies in management theories and praxis that replaced deterministic models with probabilistic ones in the 1980s. Argyris and Schön (1978) and Senge (1990) developed ideas on learning organisations and introduced double-loop learning to capture the process of dealing with organisational dynamics.

During World War II and after, wartime experiments on both sides of the Atlantic, by Lewin in U.S.A. and in England by Bion, embraced systemic approaches to understand how groups function and change. However, the focus then was more on the intra-group level than across boundaries. This was due to the newness of this approach and its value in resolving the immediate intra-group problems of the time. This approach changed some of the existing paradigms of thinking but it was only later in the 1970s that inter-group and institutional events came under the lens of group relations practice. Lewin (1947) found out in his experiential groups that we live in a "life space". In order to explore identities and group relations, boundaries are needed. Without boundaries there would be no cross-border activities, since there is nothing to cross and without bounded rationality hermeneutic endeavours are also inconceivable. If we think we are Leibnizian monads without windows or Turquets 'singletons' reaching to each other, in the reaching itself there is a boundary created. The other is always outside us. With different boundaries, notions arise of boundaries of understanding: what and how something is understood. Following the Kantian idea of *phenomena* and *noumena*, Bion distinguishes between understanding explanations and understanding the thing itself. In cross-border interactions, explanations can be grounded only if there is something common in them. Mere explanations are like water on duck's back, if they do not resonate with anything familiar.

Crossing boundaries

In an organisation, gatekeepers are the ones who control what is done and what is not done (Lewin, 1947). Lewin explains that management and discrimination are linked through the actions of gatekeepers. So who are these gatekeepers and how do they function? While any organisation has roleholders with formal powers, people entrusted with delegated or assumed authority, there co-exist 'gatekeepers-in-the-mind' in the form of beliefs, social habits and norms. In addition, a group invariably influences its members, through reinforcement of norms, beliefs, values and attitudes which is the very essence of culture. Gatekeeping can also be informal, in the form of 'sentient group' (such as family, workgroup, friends).

Crossing a boundary (either by oneself or by organisation) to unfamiliar and uncharted territories in terms of experience, is challenging. If we think of what kinds of misunderstandings and problems can arise between people in the same country, imagine the possibilities with persons, organisations and states that do not originally share the same space. While spaces, due to historical reasons build on feelings, norms, values, attitudes and beliefs, and come up with their own responses of what consists of "good life" in their times, they differ in their approaches, and identifying similarities and differences in larger contexts than just personal habits assumes importance.

Collectivities, such as businesses or any organisations form systems with perceived or imagined boundaries. These boundaries exist on different levels: physical (plant, building, land, rooms, physiological sustenance etc.); existential (belonging, reference groups, safety, flows that enable continuity); emotional (feelings,

attachments, values, beliefs) and as pictures-in-the mind influenced by above and by experiences in contexts opened for us; sensational (new sensations of touch, speech, visual scope, auditory signals and smells); and identity crystallisations about self and the other (s). Our thinking is in many ways influenced by images developed over the years. This we know, but often forget in the midst of daily chores. Only when faced with different pictures and different contexts, we often realize that our picture is not the only one and no picture has a monopoly of the truth. We turn to the five boundary conditions to offer examples.

Time

A simple matter such as how time is calculated introduces interesting varieties. In Finland, people view time in spans of weeks, where each week is assigned a chronological number[1], and the calendar spans from January to December. This period is also the accounting year, and also the 'mental set' year. In India, numbered weeks are not used, the periods of the year are counted from the waxing and the waning of the moon in seasons, and the accounting year is from the beginning of April to the end of March. Another important aspect of difference arises from how firms from Finland and India would choose the time of the year in which to approach the other territory.

Space

People who have grown up in a sparsely populated habitat like Finland have an expansive notion of personal space where social relations based on exclusion are the norm. In India, the density of networks is a source of wonder, and also of irritation to Finns because it entails loss of privacy where inclusion is the norm and employers hold information that would only be held by government authorities in Finland. Entrepreneurs have dependency needs at both ends but these are satisfied through government agencies and parastatals in Finland and by social associative structures and extended families in India. In India, the boundaries between the personal, private, social and collegiate spaces are blurred (Mathur, 1998) and Indians find it odd that these are separate spheres of life in Finland when working through "contacts" in the same way as in India is found not feasible.

Technology

Technology, capital intensity and skill-mix are closely associated. Where labour is scarce, the value of labour is allocated to high yield occupations and the distribution of work and the way automation supports it is very different from a developing country situation where machines are costly and semi-skilled and unskilled labour is relatively cheap and abundant. In India, humans have to be positioned, for example, for distributing application forms in computerised railway reservation offices because forms would otherwise be collected and sold as paperscrap by the kilo[2]. It is a great challenge for IT solutions to add to productivity in such situations even where they improve efficiency and reliability.

Task

The design of tasks and tools is heavily influenced by culture. We only need to examine how differently task systems such as banks, insurance companies, airline check-in are organised country to country to know that similar needs can be served by a diversity of systems. Even resource use of such a basic essential item like water (on a per capita consumption basis) varies with culture and does not follow any linearity discernible from stages of economic or technological development.

Sentience

'Related-ness' and pictures of related-ness that we hold determine how persons relating to one another view the entire system in which the relationships dwell. Cultural distance may be imagined when the 'other' is different on some dimension and as the number of dimensions of difference increase, the cultural distance also increases. In India, entrepreneurs take high risks to get ahead and cut corners in relating to the business environment. In Finland, entrepreneurs syndicate risks through government support and subsidies. Thus the nature of business sentience varies for entrepreneurs. This is also true of workers. Losing a job in India is like an economic catastrophe whereas in Finland the welfare state provides safety nets.

The more stable our environment, or the more unchanged and unchallenged our habits become and

held in our minds may be distorted? The need for this becomes evident in cross-border interactions, even with close neighbors, but more so, when two 'cultures' assume on beliefs, structures and systems different from each other. In business life the anxiety this introduces is often sought to be dealt with by arranging etiquette training to teach how to deal with the other culture. But here the culture itself is seen as a black box or one large elephant, where diversity and its origins are often forgotten with 'tools' being given without anyone knowing the problem. Such courses do have some utility but the infinity of diversity is difficult to convey from a finite set of pre-recommended transaction modalities.

In cross-border interactions, if the hermeneutic process is really engaged with, our beliefs and values get challenged by others having their own beliefs and values, which may also get challenged. So who has the right values and beliefs? Should we just trade them as often seems to be done or is feared to be the case (such as in "westernization")? Here the process can be initiated by recognizing the contextual validity of other beliefs outside one's own and not be threatened by them, but engaging with them to understand as far as understanding is possible. This is not always possible because individual feelings and group passions are strongly influenced by residues. Chattopadhyay developed the notion of 'invader-in-the-mind' to highlight how deep insecurities that reside in national metacultures may get triggered in situations of cross-cultural interaction from inside oneself and not necessarily from the 'other' or the interaction with the 'other' (Chattopadhyay, 1981).

According to Weick (1995), we tackle uncertainty at two levels: one level can be treated by information, if the problem is of lack of enough data and possibly knowledge through understanding processes helps with understanding. This can be done through books and other sources of self-study and interaction. When it comes to ambiguity, we need to voice and address these together. Hence, the importance of groupwork or counselling practices[1]. This serves as an introduction to what kinds of management and organisation development initiatives can be taken and where is it appropriate. Not all problems can be tackled through group work, so knowing the method itself helps in discerning where it helps and where it does not.

Differences in Management Culture

The task of finding out where the cross-cultural barriers and gateways within us needs functioning hermeneutics. The word itself comes from Greek *hermeneuin*, to interpret. This interpretation process, as it were, has been well captured by a German Philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002). He built his philosophical thinking on the tradition of hermeneutics and introduced the idea of the *hermeneutic circle*. His idea was that we always have pre-understanding (what he actually termed as prejudice, pre-judgement), but this should be put in the process of being shared and judged by oneself with others in dialogue. However, in the less than ideal case, by being open and letting the other to speak to us, our own prejudgements develop and deepen. So the process goes on and on.

To be abroad, to cross the boundaries of the 'normal life' as it were, is a challenge we put on ourselves when we want to develop as persons or in our respective jobs. Every challenge faced invites us step outside our comfort zones. This introduces anxieties, since we cannot be sure where the path will lead us, for the simple reason that it has not been trodden yet. Persons as individuals and in groups are uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The 'Father' of group relations movement in England, Wilfred Bion, famously stated in his book that adults hate experiential learning. Yet, paradoxically that is how adults learn best.

What can be a better way to look into experiential learning issues than be abroad for a length of time? In some countries such as Australia, New Zealand and in Scandinavia, a year is commonly taken off to be spent abroad to gain what is termed 'the overseas experience'. Unfortunately not all expatriate experiences are beneficial nor have they proved good for organisations. So there must be something that has not been addressed deeply enough. Instead of concentrating on traits or attributes at personal level, coping mechanisms, defenses and harmony producing factors make us either love or hate our stay in another country[5].

Language is an avenue across borders. "Being that can be understood, is language" (Gadamer, 2000). While not all being can be captured though and by

language, we use it a lot to understand the other, and it is "the medium where we meet" (Gadamer, 2000:474). With this understanding, what we actually say, is not the issue, but whether we open to the other by way of listening, or do we stay closed to the other and instead push our own conceptions to the front. What Gadamer and other proponents of dialogue look for, is to be fundamentally open, where transformation, not change is the objective. Dialogue (dia=through, logos=word, idea, logos) as a concept points to that direction, not just as conversation or talk, but as fundamental understanding of the otherness we live in, and how we try to reach beyond ourself to others. Understanding, however, does not arise from spoken or shared on its own. Without reviewing one's attitudes, values and beliefs and looking into feelings related to them, no learning whatsoever can occur in context of understanding. This is because the form of transformation Gadamer seeks after is of a fundamental nature.

Can genuine human bonds exist in the business context? The old ideas of business as war are challenged by the more evident structures of co-operation and networks. The unspoken question that still lurks is whether these are genuine? To some extent they are, to some not. Business seeks benefits in form of rents and profits, and thus does not see itself being answerable to others and society. Hence the dilemma, when talking about social responsibility. The problem arises when a business needs its environment, for example, in form of municipal support though road building and other infrastructure or in form of clients, to participate in and enable profit seeking or quite simply, the supply of industrially relevant skills at subsidised cost through a public policy on education. In such situations, one needs to have a bond.

The reason we elaborated to explain and highlight these matters, is that without recognizing the conscious and unconscious processes in us and others, we miss important clues of what we are and how we are, especially when dealing with matters that go beyond the immediate sphere of our experience. Since we are dependent on others in many ways from early childhood onwards, one cannot just dismiss others as non-significant. Good leaders and managers have always understood that the manager and leader listens to the group and voices the group, not the other way around.

Cross-border interactions: the challenges

In his seminal article, Granovetter (1973) discusses the importance of 'weak ties' versus 'strong ties'. Strong ties are those that we usually have access to: family, friends, work groups etc.; weak ties are those we see randomly and which do not form a well established network. His point is that from the information point of view, weak ties may prove more beneficial than strong ties. The argument is that with strong ties, matters discussed become saturated quickly and remain in familiar tracks. Instead, when meeting a person outside the normal sphere, one may net new horizons of understanding. The same phenomenon seems to be repeating in cross-cultural interactions. We get certain 'data' from our living surroundings, and that will be updated if and when we shift from familiar to unfamiliar. Anyone, who has moved great distances at least once, has experienced this. For example, the difference in what is reported as news about Russia in the Finnish media and what appears about the same Russia in the Indian media can be as different as chalk from cheese.

Stigmas

Goffman (1963) speaks about "virtual social identities" and "actual social identities". Virtual social identity would be something that is imposed or put on person by the dominating group in form of unconscious demands to be fulfilled. The actual social identity would be that which can actually be authenticated. The old saying of "When in Rome, Do as the Romans do" resonates in virtual and synthetic make-belief social identities.

For us, when we move or stay abroad for some time, time 'changes'. For those staying where they are, one easily becomes "frozen in time" (Bain, 1999). This means the self, one's reference group or organisation or any whole is seen as having the same identity as it had before. The fantasy is that the other as a person get moulded by your experiences, while the others – having their own experiences as well – stay unchanged. However, since the same space is not shared, the changes may remain unnoticed.

Identities are illusions (Chattopadhyay, 1999), and questioning formulations and raising new questions may be more valuable than finding answers to known

questions (Mathur, 2000;2003). As attachment or detachments of experiences, one may identify with them, although what happens is a current of events. This point has been emphasized by modern philosophers of the mind, such as Susan Blackmore, but also by many so called western[1] thinkers such as Heracleitos ('you never step into the same river twice').

Managers, as all human beings are subjected to same follies as others and are subject to bounded rationality (Simon, 1957). Bounded rationality, as understood in the literature at large, means that we can rationalize only that we know, not what we do not know. The problems is that if there is a large unknown area, how can the decision be rational at all? What we don't know, we cannot identify with. Hence the famous paradox of Meno (Plato).

Crossing a boundary, be it border or some other marker, is challenging because it means stepping beyond a space where hermeneutic reflection has been practised in line with the advantages of bounded rationality that enable hermeneutic primary task (Mathur, 2006) to be engaged with. Yet, if one wants to learn, one needs to open oneself to the phenomena which can be anxiety-evoking, uncomfortable, unpleasant. Thinking of Meno and the paradox, in learning one is supposed to reach to something which is not there but is anticipated to be there in the future, but in what form, that is not sure. There is a risk involved, since we cannot read the future[2], and risks make us uncomfortable. Openness and vulnerability are joint products.

If one thinks of the management practices: for example one might ask which are the most important features of 'management' in an organisation? What makes them important and why should these features be of importance? Are they valid representations? Management practice has gone though tremendous changes through introduction of technology with its benefits and problems. Technology as a mediator creates problems in interaction levels, especially in one-to-one or group situations, where the target is not information, but interaction. Consider how discussing a disagreement on email is well nigh impossible. Flame mail results from e-mail in such instances. Invisible barriers create problems that surface easily in cross-border interactions, since the change of context also changes the dialogue[1] (Latin

dia=through, *logos*=reason, mind, idea). The force of *sensus communis* becomes blurred, since translation faculties try to take local phenomena into global sphere. What in Finnish is called '*talonpoikaisjarki*' (practical knowledge or 'knowledge of the peasants'), cannot function where the community link is not established. In India too, people frequently identify with primate identities to disown the present. "I am a simple villager-explain to me what you are saying as you would to a dehati (villager)" is a frequent refrain to defend against ideas in language and expression that actually would be uncomfortably close to complex urban realities. Recently, the Indian Railway Minister, compared the increased loading of wagons in Indian Railways to how buffaloes need to be milked fully to prevent their falling sick. Community links are based on practices, which tell us how things work, at least on some level. This increases one's ability to work on the problems faced.

How does this phenomena translate into Finnishness or Indianness?

In several cases, organisations opting for cross-border interaction are not really ready to engage in the process, and would rather leave it to a superficial one time level or refrain from the process, convincing themselves that it is too difficult. To curb risks and to lower anxiety levels, organisations go for representatives, who themselves bear the risk, not the company itself. Since representatives are few, and their resources are meagre, they are often unable to attract large markets. Financially, in the short term, this arrangement is relatively cheap and can be terminated whenever (within the contract). This has been the first approach of many Finnish companies towards India. Very few Indian companies (except IT and telecom companies) explored Finland as a business area to collaborate with Finnish companies until year 2000. The traders preferred to route their trade through Germany and Russia, despite loss of margins on such mediation.

In case of Finland and India, many of the insights above data were gathered through direct contact with different individuals, groups and organisations aspiring to cross-borders. However much of this crossing has been done on "one-stop-shop" basis where due to problems arisen, no further business or interaction has happened. These brief 109-

interactions have not been sustainable for various reasons, but neither do they provide continuity and sustainability modern organisations seek, especially in cross-border situations where transaction costs may shoot up unexpectedly, unless there is understanding, data and awareness of the other system and adequate awareness of one's own. Only on the basis of someone else organizing a bridge to cross, that crossing may prove costly in terms of money, time and experiences that could have been avoided had there been enough resilience to stay with ones feelings and task to find out the uncomfortable parts as well. (some experiences need not to be repeated, but more emphasis should be put on getting new ones).

Just as India experienced the colonial rule of England for a long period, Finland, first as part of Sweden, and then as a Russian Grand Duchy was also not an independent country. The painful partition of India in 1947 echoes in two ways in Finland: first the civil war after independence between "whites" and "reds" and the second in losing Karelia and other important territories to Russia after World War II. Just as West Bengal had to absorb and resettle one million refugees after the partition, and again in 1971, Finland had to do that to 200,000 people from lands lost to Russia.[1] These events in India and in Finland have left similar scars in the common psyche.

Whereas India as a society is very inclusive, it also is more bound by norms and social pressure. Finland on the other hand is more exclusive, and persons have great freedom – to the point of loneliness – to decide their place in the society. The most interesting and difficult interaction processes come from this, when the other cannot follow easily those norms that society imposes. In many cases this may lead to seeking out one's own nationals to get 'understanding' that does not arise from whence one currently is. Since these interactions demand great deals of psychic energy (in form of interpretation and being alert), they also are taxing. Abroad the picture of one's own country easily becomes rosy, or tainted, depending on experiences incurred during the stay. There the 'freezing of time' works: everything stays as it is, but only in the mind of the person abroad.

Conclusions

Understanding a country outside one's own introduces new horizons and challenges. Rouse and Daellenbach (2002) point out that there is advantage when an outsider does research, since an outsider can see in cultures what insiders may not (p. 964). While an outsider lacks microinformation of habits and beliefs in a context outside his/her own, this very fact enables new and fresh insights. While qualitative research has been around a long time, much of it was related to colonialism, doing something on others, rather than with. Today, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argue, colonialism comes in the form of multinationals and commerce. Research, especially qualitative and more so action research is supposed to bring out uncomfortable questions, values, beliefs and ideas, not just 'objective' valid truths', the 'episteme-research' as 'non-threatening (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).[1] The 'plight of logical method' according to Lawrence is that logic is useless in exploration (Lawrence, 1992:323). It is a plight, because there is no map to follow, but one moves on unchartered ground. Therefore more and more research in the field of management and international business has shifted from research of, to research with participants, and not on them. Yet it is through action research that we can be enabled to relate the five boundary conditions of open systems to the managing of cultural differences in specific forms in which international business is carried out and to organisation design and its manifestations in organisation structures, management processes and control systems. This would be a departure from the simplicity with which people develop and trade stereotypes about 'Finns' or 'Indians' but a small welcome step forward towards not doing as the 'Romans' do; rather to figure out why 'Romans' (or Finns or Indians) do things one way and others differently and what differences would be useful to understand for better management practice.

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