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A Study of Character of Prospective Administrators in Administration Preparation Programs

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Introduction

In the world in which we live character is at the forefront. It's hard to tell what is the truth as the lines have been blurred because of a word called "spin" and a person's own mental justification for their actions. Daily accounts of superintendents and other school administrators are headlined in the media, whether mainstream media or specialized education media, about failures in character. What caused that superintendent or administrator to sacrifice their character? They relied on their reputation and became lax in their moral obligations and judgments.

Character and reputation are meshed together. Abraham Lincoln saw character as the tree and reputation as its shadow. John Wooden saw character as who you are and reputation as what others think you are. Today, it seems, people are more concerned with the moment, the shadow, than with what is lasting.

If we don't have morals then we have nothing to live by and govern our actions. It is our character that counts and keeps us from falling to the temptations of this world. We would call this phenomenon the Esau effect, which is when the temptation is too great, a person will compromise their values and morals (Genesis 25: 32-34). Character takes a back seat to reputation and we read about this daily in the newspaper where several samples of this newspaper reporting are provided: The Tulsa World (March 12, 2010) headline read *Skiatook Board: Reasons Exist to Terminate Superintendent*. A seasoned respected superintendent was terminated after a state audit revealed the district paid for cleaning supplies with markups as high as 892%. Other articles headlining the failure of character are as follows: administrators submitting inappropriate text messages (KTRE.com, 2008), teachers and administrators changing TAKS answers (Texas Digest, May, 2010), teacher aid charged in sexual assault of high schooler (Dallasnews.com, May, 2010), bail declined for assistant principal charged with sex offenses against children (Tulsa Word, May, 2010), state superintendent plagued with incompetence, fiscal negligence, and mindless endorsements (OregonLive.com, May 2010), Milwaukee Public School has failed to meet numerous elements in its state-ordered educational plan and \$175 million in federal funds in jeopardy (Journal Interactive, February, 2010), school district finance report details gross oversight failures (KeysNet.com, September 2009), superintendent fired for faulty accounting and health care costs (macombdaily.com, January, 2010), epidemic of student-teacher sex (Worldnetdaily.com, March, 2006), superintendent under ethics investigation (Macon.com, December, 2009), and an elementary PTA president pocketed \$10,000 (Tulsa World, May, 2010). These examples demonstrate that character failure is "alive and well" in education and what people don't realize is that their reputation will stain their character.

Review of the Literature

Honesty and integrity are expected of administrators at all times. McGown (2009) concluded that honesty and integrity are more important than knowledge and proficiency and some organizations are using this as the major criteria in their hiring decisions. According to Gandossy and Sonnenfeld

(2004), the public demands character and honesty in their bosses. Koehn (2005) states that integrity is a business asset. A survey found that less than half of workers polled felt the senior leaders were people of high integrity. Further, he said, "integrity is lacking, we refuse to hear what others are telling us about the situation (p. 133)." A synonym of integrity is honesty (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Thesaurus). Finally Grover (1993) said that honesty is the key element of ethical behavior in an organization. He further goes on to say that honesty and integrity are the basic principles of leadership. This is the successful leaders professional fabric.

When studying teachers, Lumpkin (2008), found that teachers play a very important role in a child's life and the public expects them to display such moral character traits as fairness, honesty, and adhere to a code of conduct. Students today see dishonesty, corruption, lying, stealing, and cheating as a way to get ahead in life and will adopt these norms if they see their teacher's exhibiting them. Lumpkin goes on to conclude that teachers have to set a good example by teaching about integrity

Superintendents need to make many decisions on a daily basis. Their decisions impact principals and district employees as well as students. Further, these decisions are often related to moral issues that require communication to a diverse internal and external community. A superintendent's character and reputation will be tried when a board member asks you to do something that is *just a little bit illegal or unethical* and because they vote for your contract or you want to fit into their group, you succumb to the request. The strain becomes too great and an unethical decision is made. To combat this pressure you have to understand that you will be making a decision. Making an unethical decision is justified by as Henriques states "humans everywhere construct elaborate linguistic systems of thought that attempt to provide a casual explanatory framework for their behavior.....(2003, p. 171). Chadwick (2005) further states that "justifications often contain implicit value statements that are inexorably tied up with concepts of morality. Judgments of morality often hinge on attribution of intention.....p. 12). According to Kant (1991), if there wasn't any ill-will behind the action then it would be a moral action. Further, if there was immoral behavior it depended on what the negative attribute was. For example, a single deceiving or disloyal behavior produced strong negative attributes and tremendously affects how honest people feel that person is but occasional unfriendly acts do not impact perceived friendliness to the same degree (Chadwick, 2005). Because of the many illegal acts that school administrators are continuing to commit, Rentfro (2007) recommends that a comprehensive code of ethics needs to be developed based on current research. When confronted with ethical dilemmas, superintendents referred to eight constructs of behavior that helped them make the correct decisions. These were concern, fairness, honesty, loyalty, compassion, empowering, respectfulness, and trust.

Two landmark studies have been conducted to explore superintendents' moral decision-making. Fenstemaker (1994) followed Dexheimer's (1969) study after 25 years to examine if there was any consistency in results. Dexheimer explored to see if the ethical decision-making of superintendents matched the American Association of School Administrator's (AASA) Code of Ethics. This code was established in 1962 and patterned after a similar code established for lawyers, (Carlin, J. 1966). Fenstemaker (1994) found similar results to Dexheimer in that the majority of superintendents chose the incorrect response to ethical dilemma situations. Fenstemaker found that 48.1 percent of the superintendents responded correctly as compared to Dexheimer's results of 47.3 percent. Age was not significant in their studies although Dexheimer did find a negative correlation with age and scores indicating that younger superintendents had higher correct scores, while Fenstemaker found that older superintendents scored higher. Both researchers found that superintendents with fewer years of

experience had more correct responses but it was a weak correlation. They also found that as the student enrollment size of the district increased, so did the correct number of scores. Dexheimer found that 68 percent of the superintendents were of 45 years old while Fenstemaker (1994) found the 84 percent of the superintendents were over 45 years old.

More recently, Fitch (2009) examined the variables connected to ethical decision-making and leadership styles for Pennsylvania superintendents. These land mark studies seem to indicate that superintendents do not make ethical decisions and encourages superintendent preparation programs to increase the training for ethical decision-making. Yet, there is a dearth of research on the level of ethical decision-making by graduate students in the superintendent preparation programs. This study attempted to initiate an exploration into the character and level of ethical decision-making of students preparing to be superintendents as compared to Fenstemaker's results of practicing superintendents

These findings were not consistent with the findings of Fitch (2009) who found that superintendents who had experienced the dilemma made better decisions than the superintendents who had not experienced the dilemma. He also found that superintendents only responded ethically correct about 50 percent of the time which is close to Fenstemaker's study results. Herron (2009) examined how superintendents developed trust as part of leadership effectiveness. Her findings showed that honesty was a significant component of trust and building relationships.

Knuth and Banks (2006), developed the Essential Leadership Model (ELM) for principals. They were concerned about the high number of principals that leave the profession for one reason or another. "ELM assert that effective leadership is first and foremost character dependent. Character determines a leader's authenticity and these leaders are strongly committed to core values..(p. 8)." Effective leaders walk the talk.

Academic dishonesty is associated with honor codes (Arnold, et. al. 2007; McCabe, D. & Trevino, 1993; Dichtl, 2003; Turner & Beemsterboer, 2003). Students from universities with honor codes perceived that academic dishonesty was lower. Moreover, Gaberson (1997) concluded that academic dishonesty among nursing students is a concern because it represents future professional practice.

Ethics is a system of moral principles which allows humans to know the difference between right and wrong. It deals with human values. According to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Code of Ethics (www.aasa.org), an educational leader's professional conduct must conform to an ethical code of behavior, and the code must set high standards for all educational leaders." The state of Arkansas was so concerned with educator ethics, as are other states, that in 2008 they adopted an ethics law for educators. All administrators, especially superintendents, have a moral obligation to live and make ethical decisions as they are affecting thousands of children and teachers (McGown, 2009). Hughes (2008) found a significant relationship between pre- and in-service ethics training for elementary principals and gains in student achievement. Ethics training and peer collaboration, together promote student success. Neuman (1996) found a managerial self-identity based on good character and integrity becomes a significant coping mechanism. A link was found between influence, connection, and personal reputation.

Purpose of the Study

Every year a myriad of graduate students complete their program of study in educational administration

and enter the administrative workforce in public or private K-12 education. We assume, most new administrators start out highly ethical and with good moral character. The Council of Chief State School Officers (2008) developed standards to guide administrators which were adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration. These future administrators are trained in the ISLLC (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium) Standards and Standard 5 deals with ethics: *a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.* Through knowledge, dispositions, and performance, the student demonstrates they have mastered the ISLCC Standards.

After the student takes their first administrative position, a situation will arise that challenges their ethical decision making ability. The daily schedule of administrators is filled with ethical dilemmas and moral decisions. There are two approaches to moral decision making; justice or care (Denig & Quinn, 2001). Velasques et.al (1996) concluded the justice approach is also known as the fairness approach. The basic question in this approach is: How fair is an action? The care approach is less guided by rules and the focus is on the needs of others. This ranges from empathy to careful reasoning which is similar to the reasoning style used by attorneys (Penn State School of Nursing).

Some administrators cross the line in making a moral decision and fall from grace which we read about in the next day newspaper. Pritchard (1988) defined character as “a complex set of relatively persistent qualities of the individual person, and generally has a positive connotation when used in discussions of moral education.” For our study we defined character using the variables lying, deceit, and dishonesty (Posner, 2010). Scarnati (1997) concluded that the variables of honesty and integrity are the basic principles of leadership. How do we determine if a future school administrator will have an ethical lapse? To look at this we asked the educational administration students to respond to questions about their honesty.

Method

The research question that guided this study was: Is honesty an important character trait of students in leadership preparation programs? The study used a survey which used both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Research Methods Knowledge Base (2010) identifies the survey as an important measurement in research. The conclusions and recommendation came from the participant responses to three Likert scale questions and three open ended questions. Mean and percentages were used for descriptive statistics.

Sixty students in two university leadership preparation programs in Texas and Arkansas completed the instrument. Twenty-two students were in a superintendent’s preparation program and 38 students were in a principal’s preparation program. The students were at various stages in their program of study and they ranged from “not currently employed” to central office administrators. There was 100 percent participation. The only students that did not fill out an instrument were those who were absent on the day the instrument was filled out. A demographics section which included age, gender, teaching/administrative level, years of experience in education, size of current district, current position, extracurricular duties, and ethnicity was filled out by the participants. The respondents were 99 percent Caucasian. Table 1 gives the demographics of the respondents. The majority of the respondents were female which was 55 percent.

Demographics

Age	n	Percentage
– 29	9	15
30 – 39	22	37
40 – 49	21	35
50+	8	13

24

n=60

Results

The students were asked to respond to questions about truthfulness and honesty in a short answer format or in a Likert scale format. Table 2 lists the responses of the students to the question, “How do you feel when your friend lies to you?”

Table 2

How Do You Feel When Your Friend Lies To You?

Responses	Percentage
Hurt/sad/disappointed/horrible/let down	43
Angry/upset	20
Doesn't value friendship/could care less/depends on situation	14
Deceived/disillusioned/cheated/betrayed	12
Lack of trust/respect	11

Table 2 shows that 43 percent of the students wrote *hurt/sad/disappointed/horrible/let down* in response to the question. The second largest response was *angry/upset*.

Table 3

List Three Reasons People Will Lie

Responses	Percentage
Fear/not get in trouble	28
Personal gain	15
Cover-up/incompetence/deception/manipulation	15
Avoid hurt feelings/not hurt others/protect themselves and friends	15
Impress others/so people will like them	14
Habit/easier to lie/not see any wrong in it	7
No courage/peer pressure	6

According to our findings, the respondents identified *fear* as the number one reason that people will lie. This response was given by 28 percent of the students. *No courage/peer pressure* are closely related *and* could be combined which would raise the percentage to 34 percent. Table 3 shows the categories of *personal gain*, *cover-up/incompetence/deception/manipulation*, and *avoid hurt feeling/not hurt others/to protect* each were selected by 15 percent of the students.

Table 4

When Was The Last Time You Told A Lie?

Responses	Percentage
Don't remember	27
Today	23
One week ago	18
One month ago or more	13
One day ago	9
Within the week but more than one day ago	5
One year or more ago	5

Table 4 shows the responses to the to the *last time they told a lie* response revealed the truthfulness or honesty of the students. At least 27 percent said they didn't remember the last time they told a lie. Twenty-three percent selected *today*. Some of these lies were told to get out of a non-significant yet tough situation in that student's mind. For example, one student wrote, "I told my wife she looked good in the dress when in fact she did not." We did not ask them the severity of their lie so these responses could range from blatant lies to little *white lies*. The astounding figure was that at least 55 percent told a lie at least one week ago or less.

To compliment this question in Table 4, the students were asked, *what percent of the time do you tell the truth*. Ninety-four percent reported they told the truth 85-100 percent of the time. All respondents reported they told the truth 61-100 percent of the time.

Table 5

Are There Times When It Is OK To Lie?

Responses	Percentage
Yes	73
No	27

Table 5 shows that the majority of the students felt that there were times when it was ok to lie. This ties into the high response in Table 6 in which 16 percent of the students felt it was ok for their administrator to lie to them. The students were also asked to rate *how important honesty* is to them using a Likert scale of 1 -5, with 1-not important, 2- some importance, 3-average importance, 4-very important, and 5 highly important, the student's rating had a mean score of 4.73.

Table 6

How Are You Perceived As Being Honest?

Response	Percentage
Always	63
Mostly	33
Average	4

To answer this question, a Likert scale of 1-5 with 1-never, 2-some, 3-average, 4-mostly, 5-always was used. The mean was 4.9. Sixty-three percent felt others perceived them as being honest.

To compliment Table 6 question, the students were asked *if we should live by polls instead of our consciences*. To answer this a Likert scale of 1-5 with 1-never, 2-sparingly, 3-depends, 4-usually, 5-all the time. The mean was 1.92. Thirty-eight percent of the students selected you should never live by polls.

Table 7

How Do You Feel When Your Administrator Is Not Honest With You?

Responses	Percentage
Cheated/betrayed/distrust	32
Mad/angry/upset/annoyed/lose credibility/stabbed in the back	30
Belittled/hurt/ terrible/poorly/confused/don't like it/think I'm dumb/not good/disappointed	22
OK/it's the norm/think what they're doing is the best/can't be in the know	16

Table 7 shows that the majority of the students (32%) felt *cheated/betrayed/distrust* while 30 percent These feelings followed by 30 percent felt *mad/angry/upset/annoyed/lose-credibility/stabbed in the back*. Surprisingly, 16 percent felt it was ok for the administrator to lie to them. This is could be called "blind allegiance."

Findings and Conclusions

Is honesty an important character trait of students in leadership preparation programs?

To answer this question we examined nine questions. These questions were:

- 1) How do you feel when your friend lies to you?
- 2) List three reasons people will lie.
- 3) When was the last time you told a lie?

- 4) What percent of the time do you tell the truth
- 5) Are there times when it is ok to lie?
- 6) How important is honesty to you?
- 7) How are you perceived as being honest?
- 8) Should we live by polls or by our conscious?
- 9) How do you feel when your administrator is not honest with you?

The first sub-question was asked to get their personal perception of lying and their feelings when they have been deceived. Table 2 lists the responses which range from hurt/sad to lack of trust/respect. The top two responses were feelings of hurt/sad/disappointed and anger. When your own friend is not honest with you your feelings mirror the statement from King David when he said, "For it was not an enemy that reproached me; then I could have borne it: neither was it he that hated me that did magnify himself against me; then I would have hid myself from him: but it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance." (Psalms 55: 12-13). When a friend lies to you or is not honest, it strikes you to the core of your being. Fallowfield (1997) concluded from her study that deceit hurts more when a person finds out the truth. Another example is when doctors make this mistake when they aren't honest with a patient about their condition using the rationale that they don't want to hurt them.

The responses from the students on why people will lie are listed in Table 3. The majority said "fear" and "not get in trouble". The next most common reasons were "personal gain", "cover-up/deception", "avoid hurt feelings", and "impress others". Each of the reasons were named equally from the students. Buzzle.com (<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/why-do-people-lie.html>) listed on their web-site three reasons a person will lie:

1. Personal reasons – To escape punishment and to get out of trouble
2. Social reasons – People lie in society to look agreeable, to maintain good relations, and to avoid disagreement with others. These are known as "white lies." There is also lying by omission. This is when a salesman purposely leaves out information which creates a misconception. Then there is lying for deceptive gain.
3. Compulsive lying – These people are known as chronic liars and tend to lie in every situation. Lying comes naturally for them and it's almost difficult for them to tell the truth.

There are many other websites about "why people lie." A google of that statements will list 12 websites on the first page alone. Clements and Meier (<http://www.clementsclinic.com>) state the reasons people lie are to impress others, by gossiping, and to get their own way. They conclude, "Our society often downplays the act of lying. Some cultures even embrace it. But the person who routinely lies will find heartache. Every one of us is prone to lie. Sometimes we do it so regularly that we don't even realize

what we are doing. Lying creates harmful tensions because the liar has a difficult time remembering what he last said and to whom. Life is much easier and your self-worth so much better when you become a person of honesty and integrity.” So why do people lie? Jespersen (2009) wrote: “The simple answer it’s easy. Virtually everyone lies and most people are pretty good at it...evidence suggests that most people learn to lie at a very early age. Starting at about three, children will lie to avoid getting into trouble. By age five, when it comes to dodging punishment, most kids are expert liars.”

The third sub-question asked the student to respond to the prompt of “when they last told a lie”. The data from Table 4 shows that honesty tends to be a character trait that is important and all of us might lie sometime as at least 55 percent told a lie at least one week ago or less. Some of these were lies of deception and some were what a person would label as a “white lie.” An example of a “white lie” is; one student said he lied today when his wife asked him if she looked good in the dress she had on and he said yes because he knew she liked the dress. An interesting finding was that 27% don’t remember when they last told a lie. Either they don’t want to remember or it’s been a long time ago. McGuire (2009) found that people are less averse to telling a small lie than a big lie. She goes on to conclude that the potential for the big lie had little effect on men because they lied more often than women when the big lie was not an option. Finally she found that men were more willing to lie for gain. She found that context play a major role on a person’s honesty. The response to this question could be because there was not a differentiation made between a “white lie” and the “big lie.” To compliment this question, we asked the student “what percent of the time do you tell the truth” which is sub-question four. The students reported as being very honest as 94 percent of them reported as telling the truth 85-100 percent of the time.

The fifth sub-question asked if it was ok to lie. The majority answered yes. From this response it seems that honesty is situational and it depends how the student look at the situation and the circumstances. *Understanding* and *tolerance* might be virtues that have been placed ahead of honesty. There must be a rationalization in their mind that there is a difference between a *lie* and *subtlety* or *cleverness*. To differentiate between what needs to be told and what doesn’t, justifies the reason to tell a lie. When the administrator lies or is not honest with the staff, distrust abounds. Sometimes the administrator thinks that is best for the district that they don’t tell the truth in a certain situation and therefore they use this rationale to justify their lie (Mahoney, 1995).

The sixth sub-question asked how important honesty is to them. The students felt it was very important as the mean was 4.73. The students are living their actions which accounts for the fact that the majority of the people think they are honest. An anomaly was when 73% of the students felt there were times when it was ok to lie. According to Bartridge (2005), “What is the one defining factor that people look for in a leader that can’t be learned? No amount of training, executive development programs or experience can teach a person to be honest and it’s a trait that is at the heart of every successful leader.” Jones (2007) reported this coincides with the Gallup Poll response in which people responded that they are looking for honesty in a president. Trevino, Hartman, and Brown (2006) wrote, “an executive’ reputation for ethical leadership may be more important now...(p. 46).”

The seventh sub-question asked: *How are you perceived as being honest?* From Table 6 we can see 63 percent of the students saw themselves as being honest. Perceptions come from feedback from other people and can be true or not true but in the person’s mind they are true. Therefore, most of the

students feel they are perceived as being honest. Rummel (1975) states that “perception is a confrontation between an inward directed vector of external reality compelling awareness and an outward-directed vector of physiological, cultural, and psychological transformation.” He goes on to say that theorists such as Hobbs, Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, and Locke saw our percepts or concepts related to our sensations. Carter (retrieved 2010) stated that we develop our own map of reality through the subconscious processes. Because we are meaning-makers and information processors, we are obliged to make sense of our world. Rubles (retrieved 2010) states that the phrase “perception is reality” is wrong on a factual basis. He goes on to say that as we grow older we can only be true to ourselves and that way control how others perceive us. We have to be careful that if we rely too much on how others perceive us it can lead to psychological problems. Too much reliance on positive feedback from others puts us in a vulnerable position. Albert Einstein (from lifehack.org) said that “reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.” Hernandez (2007) concluded that perception is not reality but is projection and is unique to each person. It is more accurate to say that perception is reality to the perceiver. The students are getting positive feedback on their honesty from the people around them. In summary, you can control how others feel and think about you if you are true to yourself. To compliment this sub-question, we asked the students to respond to sub-question eight in regards to if they should live by the polls or by their conscious. Thirty-eight percent of the students felt you should never live by the polls with a mean of 1.92 which tells us that you should be very cautious before trusting in a poll. A person that is perceived as honest will live a trustworthy life and do what is “right” no matter what the poll says.

The ninth sub-question asked: *How do you feel when your administrator is not honest with you?* The future school leaders didn't think it was terribly wrong if their administrator lied to them. They rationalized this by saying there are some things that the staff should not know. Seventy-three percent said it was ok though they don't like it when they have been lied to. Lying to your subordinates is a recipe for low morale and poor job satisfaction. Table 7 lists the negative feelings a person experiences when their administrator is not honest with them or lies to them. The feelings are: feelings of anger, loss of credibility, hurt, cheated, betrayed, and a host of other negative feelings the employee experiences. Mahoney (1995) concluded that lies bear negative consequences on teachers, students, and organizations. Dye and Garman (2006) listed several leadership competencies that contribute to low morale and one of these was distrust of management yet we also found those who believed it was ok for their administrator to lie to them.

Discussion

We set out to answer the question if honesty is an important character trait of students in leadership preparation programs. To find this we asked the students to respond to nine questions which were either short answer or Likert based. The students experienced a host of feeling from hurt to anger when their friend or administrator lies to them. This is consistent with the research Mahoney (1995) findings.

One response that did surprise the researchers was they felt it was ok for their administrator to lie to them. This question could have asked to differentiate between a “big lie” and a “white lie.” Future research, could examine scenarios that are field tested for validity and reliability. The students became confused in their mind with the concept of “need to know.” This does tell us that there would be a strong probability that the administrators would lie to their staff if they felt it was warranted. Justification of

ethical situations should be examined in further studies.

The data shows that honesty is a character trait of prospective administrators and is very important to them. Their perception that most people perceive them as being honest comes from feedback. Therefore the fact that honesty is very important to them is reflected to their students, coworkers, staff, and parents which coincides with Hernandez's (2007) conclusions.

This study was warranted as ethical decisions have to be made in school administration. Grover (1993) found that people may behave according to one demand and then create the impression of having behaved according to another role demand. This is deception, lying, and deceit. Mahoney (1995) agrees with Grover (1993) when he concluded that types of behavior that are "less-than-honest that administrators display are lying to staff, lying about funds, hiding back news, compromising laws, rules, and supervision of students and teachers, and ignoring the democratic process. (p 294)." He goes on to say they will compromise their own values and use deceptive behavior to improve the school's image. Bucy et.al (2008) in his study on white collar criminals concluded that they did not start out to go bad. The high cost of low morale is not worth the dishonesty or lie (Fink, 2010).

In summary, honesty is an important character trait of students in leadership preparation programs. They value honesty, are perceived as being honest, dislike being lied to by either their friend or administrator, lie infrequently, and feel it's situational if their administrator lies to them. Mahoney (1995) found that principals lie to protect, avoid conflict, and carry out the greater good. Honesty is the character trait that dictates effective leadership. Benton (2007) said that honesty is truth and integrity and if you are honest you avoid becoming mired in fraud, deceit, deception, and seen as the best alternative. The failure to be honest will help the prospective administrator justify their actions for an act that is not ethical and sell their "birthright."

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