

## A Critique of Emotional Intelligence

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### Abstract

The main aim of this study was to identify the limitations of the extremely popular emotional intelligence construct as it is applied in leadership. The concept is popular because it argues that emotions and not intelligence quotient may perhaps be the true measure of human intelligence and the best predictor of success. Emotional intelligence has since been dubbed the cure-all for all of our social problems. However, this narrative review will reveal that as much as emotional intelligence is important and a necessity, unbridled and unhinged enthusiasm has obscured its dark side. This study is timely and relevant because blind acceptance and application of the emotional intelligence concept might be counter-productive to the leadership process.

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence; leadership; Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT); Intelligence Quotient (IQ); Cognitive abilities.

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### INTRODUCTION

A father and his three sons attend a meeting to resolve a family dispute. The meeting gets heated, tempers fly and there is a near fight. To everyone's surprise, the father keeps his cool and shows no emotions during throughout the scuffle. As they drive back home the sons castigate their father for not helping them in the fight. The father quietly listened to his sons without uttering a single a word. Soon as they got home, he faces his sons and calmly said, "You must learn that no one can make you angry unless you want to. Maturity is to learn to keep your cool and not let anyone manipulate your emotions." The father's advice struck me like a thunderbolt!

Talking about emotions, this paper is a narrative review of the limitation of emotional intelligence in leadership. Simply put, emotional intelligence is the ability to understand and manage emotions in self and others. Leadership and emotional intelligence rank among the most debated and researched topics in the organizational and social sciences. Research in social and neuropsychology, and organizational behaviour support the theory that emotional intelligence does contribute to the effectiveness of a leadership (Clare & Parrott, 1991). This is expected because emotions are intimately connected and intricately bound up in the ways we think, behave, react and make decisions. Much has been written on how emotional intelligence contributes to the effectiveness of a leader, but hardly any on its limitations.

## **RATIONALE**

The fact that researchers have reached the conclusion that emotional intelligence contributes to the effectiveness of a leader is not disputed (Cherniss, 2010). There is a lot of literature available on emotional intelligence and how it bolsters the leadership endeavour. However, little research has been conducted on the limitation of emotional intelligence when applied in leadership. Literature about the limitations of emotional intelligence is still scant and in the development stage. Despite this challenge, this study therefore, aimed to assess the scant literature on the limitations of emotional intelligence and provide insight in its proper application in leadership.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Narrative literature review is a less formal form of the systematic approach, and is mainly used with research controversial topics investigated by several researchers, such as emotional intelligence (Ferrari, 2015). The purpose of the study was to conduct a narrative review to explore the limitations of the emotional intelligence concept as applied to leadership. This narrative literature review's main aim is to review the available literature on emotional intelligence critique it, and discuss the conclusions. Articles with the term "emotional intelligence," "limitations of emotional intelligence in leadership," and "critique of emotional intelligence" in their title or keywords, which have been indexed in Google Scholar, EBSCO, and JSTOR and other databases were adopted for analysis. Only articles published between 1980 and 2012 were adopted in order to attain a more accurate review. Most of the articles retrieved were in praise of emotional intelligence, revealing the fact that very little research has been conducted on the limitations of the concept and its application.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Exploring limitations of emotional intelligence as it relates to leadership requires an understanding of the evolution of the concept. Historically, *intelligence* has often been defined in terms of its cognitive aspects such as memory, recognition and problem-solving. However, theorists and researchers have earlier on recognized that non-cognitive, affective, personal and social factors are equally important aspects of intelligence. They understood that there is more to the construct of intelligence than the mental abilities represented in traditional intelligence. Edward Thorndike is the first theorist credited with defining social intelligence in 1920 (Riggio et al., 2002). Wechsler in 1958 and McClelland in 1973 referred to intellectual and non-intellectual elements when defining intelligence, and argued that both elements are essential for predicting one's ability to succeed in life. Hunter and Hunter (1984) estimate that at best Intelligence Quotient (IQ) accounts for about 25 percent of the success variance, while Sternberg (1996) argues that 10 percent may be a more realistic estimate.

Theorists have therefore lamented how little traditional tests of cognitive intelligence, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) inform us about what it takes to be successful in life. The inadequacies of traditional tests lie in the fact that they emphasize cognitive aspects of intelligence and totally ignore affective, personal and social abilities. Many have considered it sheer ignorance and a gross injustice to label one as "dull" just because that one fails a traditional cognitive test. Consider the great Zambian Kalindula maestro, Peter Kalunga Chishala, who may not have scored high on an SAT scale. However, Chishala's music composition and performing prowess exhibited an inherent and extremely high intelligence, one that the traditional cognitive intelligence measuring instruments failed to capture and reflect. The argument has been that everyone is intelligent, and the intelligence inherent in each one of us is differently gifted and manifested differently. Therefore, a low score on a standard cognitive scale would not necessarily render one unintelligent or "dull." Having failed a traditional cognitive assessment simply means that one's intelligence lies in other areas of human capabilities, and would require a different standard and scale to measure it. Chomsky (2010) argues that it borders on nothing less than absurdity to force a child through the traditional schooling system when he or her intelligence lies in say, music. An education system must therefore be robust enough to identify and then develop each of the variegated and multiple facets of intelligences inherent in each one of us.

However, it would seem that definitions of intelligence continued to gravitate towards cognitive and memory elements because these can easily be measured. Therefore, the work of the likes of Thorndike, Wechsler and McClelland was largely forgotten or overlooked, not until Howard Gardner wrote *Multiple Intelligence* in 1983. Gardner (1983) rejuvenated the earlier idea that we possess interpersonal as well as intrapersonal

intelligences, and that both are as important as the type of intelligence typically measured by IQ, SAT and related tests. Seven years after Gardner wrote on multiple intelligences, Salovey and Mayer published an article that presented a framework for emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). The two coined the term *emotional intelligence* and initially described it as “a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Later, emotional intelligence was thrust into popularity when Goleman (1995) wrote his bestseller, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More Than IQ* and cited the work of Salovey and Mayer (1990). We can therefore say that as early as the 1920s, there has been a long tradition of research on the role of non-cognitive factors in helping people to succeed. The current research and body of knowledge on emotional intelligence was built on this foundation.

Emotional intelligence is therefore not an entirely new concept altogether, but is based on a long history of research and theory in personality, sociology as well as psychology. While the term *emotional intelligence* has been coined relatively recently, it is a rebranding of earlier concepts such as social intelligence (Legree, 1995). However, Mayer, Salovey and Caruso argue that emotional intelligence is theoretically preferable to earlier constructs because it focuses mostly on application and effects (Mayer et al., 2003).

### **DEFINING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

There are different definitions of emotional intelligence as they are theorists, and there exist different conceptual approaches to understanding of emotional intelligence. This lack of a consistent definition and model of emotional intelligence has been one of its limitation and point of criticism (Cherniss, 2010). The main models of emotional intelligence include the ability model, the mixed model, and the trait model. However, the most common model often referred to as the “gold standard” model of emotional intelligence is the ability model (Jordan et al., 2010). The ability model is based upon the four basic capabilities of emotion perception, facilitation, understanding, and regulation (Caruso and Salovey, 2004).

For the sake of simplification, we will adopt in this paper the definition provided by the researchers that coined the term *emotional intelligence*. Mayer & Salovey (1997) essentially defines emotional intelligence as the ability to effectively merge emotions and reasoning, using emotions to facilitate reasoning and reasoning intelligently about emotions. In other words, emotional intelligence taps into the extent to which the leader’s cognitive capabilities are informed by emotions and the extent to which emotions are cognitively managed. The term *emotional* in emotional intelligence is used broadly to refer to feelings, which include moods and emotions. In order to be consistent with the emotional intelligence literature, in this paper *emotions* will be used to refer to feelings, emotions and moods.

### **THE REASONS FOR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE POPULARITY**

#### **Scepticism of the intelligence quotient**

There are several factors that have led to the construct of emotional intelligence becoming extremely popular. Emotional intelligence is essentially a repackaging of an old idea and a time-honoured interest in interpersonal skills. It positively optimistic and provide great insight in practical leadership. Most importantly, the enthusiasm for emotional intelligence stems from an average person’s scepticism of Intelligence Quotient (Furnham, 2006). The assertion that emotional intelligence is a better measure of intelligence is good news to those who may have scored low on the traditional standard intelligence quotient scale. Those with average or low IQ will naturally reject the notion that IQ is highly correlated with success in life, because it is not. Emotional intelligence on the other hand is viewed as a set of skills that the average person thinks they possess and can improve upon (Murphy, 2006). The common-sense logical appeal of the emotional intelligence construct, its popularity with the average person, and its antithetical scepticism of IQ may have helped to make it a prominent and enduring target for academic criticism.

#### **Emotions and the leader-follower relationship**

Another reason why emotional intelligence has been attractive is the common understanding that emotions are central to our humanity. Research has revealed that emotions do influence the judgments we make, our creativity and memory, as well as our deductive and inductive reasoning processes. Both positive and negative emotions serve numerous functions in our lives, to foster relationships as well as cause dysfunctions in the same relationships. A leader experiencing positive emotions will perceive, evaluate and react to stimuli differently from another having a bad day (Forgas et al., 1990). Positively good emotions will not always result in good decision making; only that the results expected will definitely be different from that of another leader experiencing negatively bad emotions. Moreover, negative and bad emotions might foster deductive reasoning, more critical and comprehensive evaluations, systematic and cautious processing of information. Positive emotions on the other hand might induce a carefree approach to decision making, and bolster creativity and inductive reasoning. We all have experienced the fact that when in a jovial mood, we tend to easily grant other’s

their requests.

Given that emotions are integral to our human experience, it would logically be expected that they would play a critical role in leadership behaviour and performance. George (1995) highlights the fact that a unique combination of a leader's emotions will result in a different leader's influence. It would therefore be relatively easy to construct circumstances in which a leader's effectiveness may be greatly influenced by his or her emotions. For instance, leaders who fail to control their anger bursts will often keep followers at arm's length, fail in building their follower's trust, and have challenges building good relationships that are central to the leadership-follower process. A leader who frequently experiences positive emotions on the job may fail to notice and attend to performance shortfalls that are less than apparent.

The study of the role of emotions in leadership is not focused on determining the *right* or *effective* emotions that facilitate leadership effectiveness. A leader's emotions that proved effective in one scenario might prove to be disastrous in another. A set of emotions can result in either improved or impaired leader's effectiveness depending on the complex multiple human behavioural factors. Effective leadership therefore, requires an understanding of which set of emotions would be appropriate for a given situation. A burst of anger might be required in a certain scenario to highlight the seriousness of a case, but the same might be disastrous if applied consistently. On the other hand, constant "love and affection" may render the leader weak (Bass, 1990).

It is agreed upon by almost every theorist and researcher that emotions and emotional intelligence are worthy of consideration in the leadership domain. That emotional intelligence has the potential to contribute to effective leadership in multiple ways cannot be refuted. This is because leadership is an emotion-laden process, both from a leader and a follower perspective. In this regard, effective leaders are those who have a superior emotions management capability, to influence and develop effective interpersonal relationships with their followers. Interpersonal relationships are critical to the leadership process and since they are laden with emotions, a leader who excels in managing emotions would be expected to be an effective leader. However, what is needed is empirical research that tests these assumptions and how emotional intelligence can be applied in leadership.

### **Emotions influence cognitive abilities**

Therefore another reason why emotional intelligence has become so popular is its promise to inform effective leadership practices. Research on leadership has tended to focus more on what leaders ought to be, what they must do, and how they must make decisions. This relative neglect is expected given that research on leadership has focused more on cognitive factors than on the affective. Feelings and emotions are often perceived immeasurable and standing in the way of rational decision making (Albrow, 1992). Research has however shown that contrary to the stereotype 'rational' decision maker who set aside his or her personal feelings and emotions in making decisions, neurological findings suggest that feelings and emotions are necessary to making good decisions (Goleman, 1995). Rather than being simply an auxiliary factor to consider, emotions influence the way we think and arrive at conclusions.

The promise of emotional intelligence as a predictor of effective leadership has led to its immense popularity. However, when striving to understand the benefits that emotional intelligence promises for effective leadership practice, it is important to explore its limitations, and to this we turn our focus.

## **CRITIQUE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN LEADERSHIP**

### **Introduction**

Goleman's best seller, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*, and a Time Magazine cover story that followed in the same year, are what popularized emotional intelligence. In his book, Goleman argues that emotions and not Intelligence Quotient may perhaps be the true measure of human intelligence and the best predictor of success. Emotional intelligence has since been dubbed the cure-all for all of our social problems. Training in emotional intelligence is now considered prerequisite to more compassionate healthcare, leadership that is more people oriented, and to management of employee's emotions that improve the bottom line. It is argued that if only political leaders possessed a high emotional intelligence, they would be people-oriented as opposed to self-centered and selfish ones that are a common lot. As such, emotional intelligence is now widely taught in high schools, colleges, universities, and most particularly in the business and medical world. However, as much as emotional intelligence is important and a necessity, unbridled and unhinged enthusiasm has obscured its dark side.

Though not a new concept, claiming that emotional intelligence is more significant than intelligence quotient was then and is now still a revolutionary concept. This blunt claim did not only popularise the concept, but sparked great controversy as well. Thus emotional intelligence has become one of the most researched and written about leadership theory. Going by the volume of literature on the subject, Cherniss (2010) is right to claim that perhaps no theory or concept in the social sciences has produced more controversy in recent years than emotional intelligence. Spenser (2005) claims that one reason for the criticism and controversy surrounding emotional intelligence stems mainly from the popularity of the concept itself. However, the criticism of

emotional intelligence in leadership seem to revolve around four main points: its conflicting models and definitions, the need for better measurement, valuation and assessment, determining how emotional intelligence predicts leader's effectiveness, and how it may be applied in practical situations.

### **Conflicting models and definitions**

As with most concepts and theories, emotional intelligence definition, characteristics and assumptions underscore its main limitations that critics are quick to highlight. There exist many conflicting emotional intelligence definitions and models, resulting in the concept suffering from chronic theoretical pluralism (Glynn and Rafelli, 2010). The problem of a multiplicity of emotional intelligence models and definitions has resulted in a theoretical noise and chaos, and there is need for simplification and clarification of the concept. In response to this criticism, proponents of emotional intelligence tend to focus on the *ability* and the *mixed* models. The four-branch ability model and the related instruments and methodologies have become the dominant paradigm in emotional intelligence research. Even EI's critics admit, "If there is a future for EI, we see it in the ability model of Mayer, Salovey, and associates" (Antonakis and Dietz, 2010). Other scholars in the field also support the ability model as the conceptualization of EI with the most promising future for further research and advancement of the field.

However, Cherniss (2010) posit that despite the theoretical confusion, emotional intelligence is founded upon three basic assumptions. Firstly that emotions do play a critical role in daily life; secondly that we vary in our ability to recognise, comprehend, apply and manage emotions; thirdly and lastly that these emotional variations affects how we adopt to a variety of different social settings. These three basic emotional intelligence assumptions are intuitive and difficult to refute, even though there may exist different models and definitions of the same concept.

### **Not a form of intelligence**

Another one of the strongest criticism of emotional intelligence arises from the assumption that it is a form of intelligence. The fact that defining *intelligence* is controversial has not helped in defining and classifying emotional intelligence. The basic traditional definition of *intelligence* includes the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills, to learn and understand, to perform logical functions and abstract thought, and problem solving (Northouse, 2016). The most common approach to understanding traditional *intelligence* is the psychological approach called psychometric, which measure cognitive abilities such as Intelligence Quotient (IQ). While most IQ tests will measure cognitive functions including pattern recognition and natural language skills, emotional intelligence typically measures other abilities such as memory, rapid decision-making, and ability to retrieve general knowledge (Shankman, 2008).

Critics therefore, argue that emotional intelligence is an aspect of general intelligence and not a true form of intelligence. They argue that EI isn't really intelligence in the same way that one with a high IQ might be proficient at critical analysis or solving problems. Critics assert that someone with a high emotional intelligence is perhaps simply a nice, sociable, conscientious person, but isn't necessarily good at reading and managing emotions.

### **Locke's criticism**

Locke combines the theoretical pluralism criticism with the not-an-intelligence argument, making him perhaps the staunchest critic of emotional intelligence. Locke (2005) argues that in addition to suffering multiple definitions with each definition constantly changing, most definitions of emotional are often all-inclusive, making the concept unintelligible. He posits that the very definition of *intelligence* involves dispassionate rational thought and as such, emotional intelligence is not a new form of intelligence but rather intelligence applied to emotions. He further argues that the application of intelligence to the domain such as that of emotions constitutes a skill, and not necessarily an intelligence. According to Locke, emotional intelligence is a skill that has been mislabeled as an intelligence; it must be appropriately defined as a personality trait or an extrovert skill.

### **Lack of standards of measure**

Edward Deming is quoted to have said that, "If you can't measure it, then you can't manage it" (Deming, 1994). Some have transliterated this saying to mean; if you can't measure it, then you don't know it. Radicals take it further and assert that; if you can't measure it, then it doesn't exist! These sayings highlight another of emotional intelligence limitation; it is fundamentally difficult to measure because it involves characteristics that are subjective by nature and definition. Thus it has attracted enormous criticism regarding its standard of measure. Traditional intelligence has the intelligence quotient (IQ) as its standard of measure; what standard of measure does emotional intelligence have? How are we to compare a leader's ability to say, motivate a team with another leader on an objective qualitative scale? How can one possibly measure another person's self-determination? It may be possible to devise rules for assigning numeric value to elements of emotional intelligence; however,



these will relatively be arbitrary and subjective.

Arising from the fact that it is difficult if not impossible to measure, emotional intelligence has further been criticized for being inconsistent and not been able to be scientifically proven. It doesn't have the ability to generate any accurate predictions regarding a leader's success or failure (Mayer, Caruso & Salovey, 1999).

There appears to be consensus on both sides of the debate for the need for better assessments of emotional intelligence and more tests assessing its application. Many decades have passed since emotional intelligence was discovered and numerous research and statistical analysis have been conducted on the subject, and yet standardization is a far-fetched dream. Either "Emotional intelligence researchers are using the wrong measures or the wrong methodology, or emotional intelligence does not matter for leadership" (Antonakis et al., 2009).

### **The measurement methodology**

When measuring emotional intelligence, the most common mode of assessment is the use of self-evaluation reports. Self-reports are typically looked down upon for a number of reasons. Firstly, when an individual is performing a self-assessment, they may easily misinterpret a question resulting in false data been produced. Secondly, since emotional intelligence is a subjective quality, this means it is susceptible to faking. People often want to present themselves as successful or capable as possible, especially when the assessment may determine their status and position at their working place. Lastly, abilities cannot be accurately measured through self-reports (Mayer, Caruso & Salovey, 2000). Asking employees to rate their own emotional abilities is like assessing mathematical skills by asking respondents, "How good are you at solving algebra?" An objective assessment would be to ask the person to actually solve an algebraic question.

Another limitation of emotional intelligence is that it is often measured using objective standards within the context of acceptable social norms and patterns of behaviour. Comparisons are made between a leader and others who have taken the assessment on a global scale, using common patterns of social skills. Thus the models fall under criticism for measuring conformity to social norms rather than distinct abilities (Davies, Stankov & Roberts, 1998). An aggressive person might pass or fail an emotional intelligence test depending on the evaluator's definition of *aggressiveness*. It is therefore argued that different social contexts would produce different emotional intelligence results.

### **A tool for manipulation**

Another one of the greatest criticisms levied against emotional intelligence has to do with ethics. When people hone their emotional skills, emotional intelligence easily becomes a weapon for manipulating others (Locke, 2005). The disguise and tactical expression of one's emotions and the manipulation of others' emotions for strategic ends are behaviours prevalent in working places and corridors of power. Like any skill, being able to read and manage other's emotions can be used for good or evil. Some of the greatest moments in our human history have been defined by emotional intelligence. When Martin Luther King Junior talked about his dream, he used language that stirred the hearts of his listeners. Through his ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions, he delivered a speech that culminated in the then President of the United States signing the Civil Rights Bill. Delivering his electrifying message required great emotional intelligence. King demonstrated remarkable skill in managing his emotions and sparking emotions that moved his listeners towards what one might say was action for good.

On the other hand, Hitler realized the power of emotions and spent years studying the emotional effects of his body language. Practicing his hand gestures and analysing images of his movements allowed him to become an absolutely spellbinding public speaker. Hitler too had great emotional intelligence, howbeit for evil.

### **It limits critical thinking**

Following on from the criticism that emotional intelligence can be used to manipulate is the criticism that it can also be used to hold others spellbound. Social scientists have begun to document this dark side of emotional intelligence. When a leader gives an inspiring speech that mesmerises other's emotions, listeners are less likely to scrutinize the message and will remember less of the content. When uncontrolled emotions increase, the amount of logical and critical thinking decreases and followers simply emote. This is often referred to as the awestruck effect, but it might just as well be described as the dumbstruck effect (Roberts, Zeidner & Matthews, 2002). Leaders who master emotions can rob followers of their capacities to reason, and if their values are out of step with that of their followers, the results can be devastating. Many followers have been lead not by the logic of the leader, but through the leader's ability to play on follower's emotions.

### **Not an all-cure**

Critics have further argued that emotional intelligence is not an all-cure phenomenon that is required in all social contexts. In some situations being in touch with emotions is essential, while in others this might be detrimental. In situations where emotions aren't running high, emotional intelligence is not required and may have hidden

costs. Teachers, sales-personnel, counsellors and pastors will be expected to excel when they have high emotional intelligence. However, for accountants, mechanics and scientists, emotional intelligence is a liability rather than an asset. If you are into repairing vehicles, analysing data, and farming, you would not need to read the body languages, facial expressions and vocal tones of those people around as this would be distractive and might prove fatal.

### **Silencing the critics**

The fact that emotional intelligence lies in the affective domain that cannot be objectively measured, it is then likely that the debate will continue for some time, if not indefinitely. Cherniss (2010) is right when he asserts that the empirical evidence required to satisfy the debate depends on the researcher's standard and disposition to the question. However, proponents of emotional intelligence have sought to silence critics by making five recommendations (Mayer et al., 2008). Firstly that theorists and researchers must adhere to the established research definitions and desist from adding new ones to the construct. Secondly, the term *emotional intelligence* must be defined within the context of the ability model. Thirdly, theorists and researchers should limit their studies to emotional knowledge, emotional facial recognition ability, levels of emotional awareness, and emerging research on emotional self-regulation. Fourthly, theorists and researchers should leave personality traits and skills where they are and avoid grouping them into emotional intelligence. Fifthly and finally, theorists and researchers should follow concise terminology and conduct good theory building and research in emotional intelligence. As much as these recommendations have been welcome, critics have responded by asserting that they are nothing but emotional intelligence proponent's attempt to advise the research community to do it their way.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Emotional intelligence has the potential to contribute to effective leadership in multiple ways because leadership is an emotion laden process. This discussion however reveals that emotional intelligence has its limitations when applied within the leadership process context, some of which have been discussed in this paper. It is evident that what is needed now is empirical research to test the ideas proposed in this paper. Given the nature of emotional intelligence, this will require qualitative and quantitative methodologies to further explore how emotional intelligence can be applied to leadership despite its limitations.

### **CONCLUSION**

In light of its criticism, we need to always think more carefully about the context within which emotional intelligence may be applied, when it matters and how it is applied. Advocating the use of emotional intelligence must also consider the values that go along with it. Leaders must be mindful of the fact that like any skill or intelligence, emotional intelligence can be used for good or evil. Therefore, success in the application of emotional intelligence lies in knowing how to walk the middle way. The leader's use of emotional intelligence must be for the purpose of fostering greater understanding and relationships with followers for mutual benefits. The application of emotional intelligence for the sole benefit of the leader would be unethical; this kind of leadership may be successful, but only for a short while. The self-managing of emotions calls for great self-restraint and sacrifice, and not reacting to outside influences. Like the father's advice to his three sons, maturity demands that a leader controls his or her emotions and avoid been manipulated by followers.

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