

Learning To Be A Missionary: The Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition applied to the development of cross-cultural ministry practitioners
By Dan Sheffield and Joyce Bellous



Abstract:

The authors apply the skill acquisition model developed by education philosopher Hubert Dreyfus to the development of effective cross-cultural ministry practitioners -- missionaries. This model sets forth five stages in the process by which people acquire skill in particular activities or professions. The authors suggest that the problem of missionary attrition may have direct correspondence to a lack of critical skill acquisition.

Introduction

“We just don’t understand it! They had great church references, a good Bible College education with specific training in missiology. They did well in language study but once they were out there in Wagadonka they seemed to fall apart, they didn’t seem to know what to do to build relationships and develop a solid ministry...”

If that story is all too familiar to you – either because you have sent workers like that out to Wagadonka, or because your colleagues bottomed out like that, or because that’s your painful story – then maybe you are interested enough to look at a couple of pieces of the story that might be relevant.

In his 1997 book, *Too Valuable to Lose*, William Taylor identified eight principles that undergird longevity of missionary service: nurturing spirituality, effective relational skills, tested ministry skills, focused training for cross-cultural ministry, pre-service church involvement, adequate on-field care, regular evaluation and responsible closure from each assignment. These principles were drawn from the analysis of the **Reducing Missionary Attrition Project (REMAP)**. In his report on the consultation which discussed the project data, Jonathon Lewis indicated that:

Participants came to understand that the attrition rate is only the tip of the iceberg which reflects underlying problems, inefficiencies and waste that occur in the selection, training, sending, supervision and pastoral care of the missionary. Reducing missionary attrition requires a wholistic approach which starts with a church-based selection phase and follows on through each step of the training and sending process and onto the field through increased field member care and supervision. Such a solution will also multiply tremendously the effectiveness of cross-cultural ambassadors for Christ.¹

¹ Jonathon Lewis, *Reducing Missionary Attrition Consultation*, 1996, All Nations College, England. www.ywam.no/misjon/artikkel/atritio.htm

There are several questions that arise from this analysis of wasteful factors in missionary development. In both Taylor and Lewis the concern for ministry skill development and training are identified as factors in whether a missionary remains in cross-cultural service. And we would further suggest that such development affects competence and effectiveness in ministry. Is effective cross-cultural ministry a “skill-set” that needs to be acquired? Does the inability to acquire such a skill-set contribute to missionary attrition? If so, how does one acquire such a skill-set? In this article we would like to ask, “does educational theory and practice have something to offer to the mission community in overcoming waste and attrition in missionary development and improving ministry effectiveness?” To respond to these questions we will examine the educational philosophy of Hubert Dreyfus and his colleague Patricia Benner, a professor of clinical nursing practice. For purposes of illustration, we will use two examples to demonstrate how Dreyfus’s “stages of learning” can be applied. One of us is teaching his daughter to drive, which is primarily a bodily or motor skill; alongside of which we will examine the primarily intellectual skill of cross-cultural ministry development.

Dreyfus and Skill Acquisition

Dr. Hubert Dreyfus, professor of philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, has outlined “stages of learning” that address key factors for effective skill acquisition and, we would suggest, aid in the reduction of professional attrition. Dreyfus suggests that a purely rational view of cognition, or understanding, is problematic. He asserts that understanding does not rely entirely on internal mental processes, often understood as the desired method and outcome of formal education. Information which is taken in from the outside world, which is incapable of rational explanation, plays a large part in understanding. Skill acquisition also requires non-rational skills such as risk-taking, vulnerability, physical and emotional involvement, subjective evaluation and intuition.

Many of our skills are acquired at an early age by trial and error or by imitation, but to make the phenomenology of skillful behavior as clear as possible let’s look at how, as adults, we learn new skills. Dreyfus identifies five stages: the novice, the advanced beginner, the competent, the proficient and the expert.²

Cross-Cultural Missionary: skills to be acquired?

Stage One: the novice missionary

Normally, the instruction process for the novice begins with the instructor *decomposing the task environment into context-free features* which the learner can recognize without previous experience in the task domain. The beginner is then given *rules for determining actions on the basis of these features*, like a computer following a program.

Suppose we take the example of a young woman whose father is teaching her to drive. This can be a harrowing experience as well as an opportunity to recover the basic

² Hubert Dreyfus and Stuart Dreyfus. *Mind Over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer*. New York: The Free Press, 1986, pp.16-51.

principles of the educational task. The father is constantly breaking down the task into its most elemental forms in terms of principles that are free of context. The learner driver must come to recognize such *interpretation-free features* as speed (indicated by the speedometer) and controls (brake, steering wheel). She must be given *basic rules* such as “shift to second when the speedometer needle points to ten miles an hour.” [For the most part, these principles and attributes are learned in a classroom or from a book.]

In the preparation stage, most people considering a career in cross-cultural ministry will have taken introductory courses in such topics as: Biblical Theology of Mission, Contemporary Missiological Issues, Cross-Cultural Communication, Church Planting Models and Methods, Linguistics. These courses essentially *decompose the task* of the missionary and allow for reflection on the *attributes* of various *aspects* of cross-cultural ministry. There is an assumption that potential missionaries will have short-term cross-cultural assignments in which these context-free features and rules will be acted upon and learned or “acquired” in a particular context. This is definitely an assumption because many places where such courses can be acquired do not, in fact, have a practical field placement requirement. In some cases, mission sending bodies do not make such prior learning a requirement for cross-cultural service. There can only be limited skill acquisition when there is no application of these features and rules in specific situations.

Stage Two: the advanced beginner missionary

As the novice gains experience actually coping with real situations, he begins to note, (or an instructor points out), easily grasped *examples of meaningful additional aspects of the situation*. After seeing a sufficient number of examples, the student learns to recognize these new aspects. *Instructional maxims* now can refer to these new situational aspects, as well as to the objectively defined non-situational features recognizable by the inexperienced novice.

The advanced beginner driver, using (situational) engine sounds as well as (non-situational) speed in her gear-shifting rules, learns the maxim: Shift up when the motor sounds like it is racing and down when it sounds like it is straining. She learns to observe the demeanor as well as position and velocity of pedestrians or other drivers. She can, for example, distinguish the behavior of a distracted or drunken driver from that of an impatient but alert one. Engine sounds and behavior styles *cannot be adequately captured by words, so words cannot take the place of a few choice examples in learning such distinctions*. From situation to situation the advanced beginner learns to understand which aspects of the driving task are required. Then the various attributes of that aspect are processed through the mind, informing specific actions. [These are the slow-moving “learner drivers” we all like to avoid when encountered on the road!]

Suppose we take the example of a young man who has begun an extended assignment as a missionary. With some cross-cultural involvement, such as a one or two year short-term assignment, an advanced beginner missionary *learns to recognize situational aspects* that have become valid through his own experience. He learns: “the people in our community respond favourably to me when I am working on learning their language.” Beyond the

necessary step-by-step theory of language acquisition and cultural anthropology the learner experientially recognizes the interrelationship of these various aspects – they are no longer separate, objective categories acquired in a classroom. The advanced beginner missionary *can then make elementary practical observations (maxims)* such as: “understanding language and culture is not merely a tool for ministry, but a means of identifying with the values and behaviours of people within a particular culture.”

The recognition of situational aspects and the development of rudimentary guidelines for action are significant, but advanced beginners will still struggle with the different importance of the various aspects. They encounter “a situation,” make an attempt at identifying which *aspects* are involved, concentrate on remembering the *attributes* required – but, ultimately, may not be able to discern the most important *aspect* to which they should, in fact, be giving their attention at this moment.³ Advanced beginners need practical support in setting priorities and identifying meaningful patterns in various situations.

Stage Three: the competent missionary

The competent learner *seeks new rules and reasoning procedures* to aid in deciding upon *a plan or perspective* for each situation. But these rules are not as easy to come by as are the rules and elementary principles given beginners. There are just too many situations differing from each other in subtle, nuanced ways. More, in fact, than can be named or precisely defined, so no one can give the learner a list of what to do in each possible situation. *Competent learners, therefore, must learn to decide for themselves in each situation what plan to choose and when to choose it* without being sure that it will be appropriate in that particular situation.⁴

Coping with this uncertainty can become frightening as well as exhausting. Prior to this stage, if the acquired rules didn't work out, the learners could rationalize that they were not given adequate rules, rather than feel remorse because of their mistakes. Now, however, learners feel responsible for disasters. Of course, often at this stage, things work out well, and the competent learner experiences a kind of elation unknown to the beginner. Thus, learners at this stage find themselves on an emotional roller coaster.

For example, a competent driver leaving the freeway on an off-ramp curve, after taking into account speed, surface condition, criticality of time, may decide she is going too fast. She then has to decide whether to let up on the accelerator, remove her foot altogether, or step on the brake and precisely when to do so. She is relieved if she gets through the curve without being honked at and shaken if she begins to go into a skid. Either way, some new rules or reasoning processes will likely have been acquired. But this experience may prove frightening, or cause injury, and discourage the driver from ever wanting to go on the freeway again. Reasoned thinking – decomposing the appropriate skill responses – failed. And so the emotions and physical sensations of a failed

³ Patricia Benner. *From Novice to Expert: Excellence and Power in Clinical Nursing Practice*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1984, p.24-25.

⁴ Dreyfus, 1986, p.26.

experience need perspective, they need positive or negative reinforcement to determine what should be retained and what should be set aside. A good driving instructor can give that perspective and help the driver see where this experience fits into the wider world of acquiring driving skill.

In the case of the cross-cultural missionary this stage is crucial. Whether one passes through this stage successfully will largely determine attrition or retention; learning at this point takes time and perseverance. Interestingly, Benner notes that in the case of nursing skill acquisition, this stage usually takes place during the second or third year of a practitioner working in the same job. Even when transferring from one area of specialization to another (such as, neo-natal pediatric care to acute coronary care), a new skill-set is required and this same period of skill dissonance results after several years.⁵ This stage of uncertainty, fear and exhaustion over choices, for the cross-cultural missionary is, in fact, one aspect of what we commonly refer to as *culture shock*. It may be more accurate to see this as a combination of both ministry, or skill, dissonance *and* culture shock.

Dr. Carmen Guanipa of the Counseling and School Psychology Dept at San Diego State University believes the term *culture shock* “expresses the lack of direction, the feeling of not knowing what to do or how to do things in a new environment, and not knowing what is appropriate or inappropriate.”⁶ He says, further, that:

We can describe culture shock as the physical and emotional discomfort one suffers when coming to live in another country or a place different from the place of origin. Often, the way that we lived before is not accepted as or considered as normal in the new place. Everything is different, for example, not speaking the language, not knowing how to use banking machines, not knowing how to use the telephone and so forth.

The symptoms of cultural shock can appear at different times. Although, one can experience real pain from culture shock; it is also an opportunity for redefining one's life objectives. It is a great opportunity for learning and acquiring new perspectives. Culture shock can make one develop a better understanding of oneself and stimulate personal creativity.⁷

This description of the challenges and opportunities presented by culture shock corresponds with Dreyfus's movement from advanced beginner to competent learner. As the competent learner becomes more and more emotionally involved in the tasks of the situation, it becomes increasingly difficult to draw back and adopt the detached rule-following stance of the beginner. While it might seem that this involvement would interfere with detached rule-testing and so would inhibit further skill development, in fact just the opposite seems to be the case. If the detached rule-following stance of the novice and advanced beginner is replaced by *managed involvement*, one is set for further

⁵ Benner, 1984, p.25.

⁶ Carmen Guanipa (<http://edweb.sdsu.edu/people/CGuanipa/cultshok.htm>), 1998, p.1.

⁷ Guanipa, 1998, p.2.

advancement, while resistance to the acceptance of risk and responsibility can lead to stagnation and ultimately to boredom and regression. In fact the movement through the experience of culture and ministry disorientation with physical, social and emotional engagement, *according to an adopted plan or perspective* ultimately brings the cross-cultural worker through the confusion of this stage of learning to the other side and to proficiency.

Again, as an example, one advanced beginner missionary, working with a national church leader in a Middle Eastern country, came to this point of crisis. The missionary felt that a reasonable personal relationship had been developed with the national leader. The missionary was learning the language and culture of the region and feeling relatively competent in his ministry. Then the missionary was informed by the national leader that the national church was requesting his dismissal from the ministry assignment, because they felt that a national could do the job better. The missionary, however, discovered that the national leader was informing the affiliated churches that the mission agency was not financially supporting the ministries of the national church. He came to see his dismissal as a bargaining ploy with the mission. This level of deception was an enormous emotional and social “slap in the face” to the missionary. He thought his relationship with the national leader was at a much deeper level than this kind of manipulation would have suggested. He thought he understood the cultural cues and social mores – but he began to realize he had been deceiving himself.

Without adequate mentoring at this particular crisis point the missionary adopted a perspective and made some decisions – unfortunately these were not in a helpful direction. He determined that “truth and honest communication” were biblical values that needed to be acted upon in this situation. The young missionary wrote an open letter to the pastors of the affiliated churches contradicting the report of the national leader; from his perspective he was simply presenting “the reality” of the situation. This move only served to escalate the problem. In a shame-based culture which highly values relationships, perhaps even more than “truth,” the young missionary had just “shamed” the national church leader in front of his pastors. The pastors, while appreciating this new information, could not support the young missionary.

The young missionary found himself struggling with ministry competence, with emotional and cultural dissonance – a sense that everything he had done up to this point was meaningless. He began to look for people to blame. As time went by it became apparent that the national leader had not originally intended to dismiss the missionary, but only to use the situation as a lobbying device with the mission for more financial resources. There was no real interpersonal problem between the national leader and the missionary – it was merely a misunderstanding over culturally-determined methods of negotiation. However, because the missionary had “shamed” the national leader before his colleagues, the leader had likewise to denounce the missionary in a public manner to recover his status. Within a month the missionary and his family had left that ministry assignment under a cloud of suspicion and disappointment.

Providentially for this young missionary, he soon came under the mentorship of a seasoned cross-cultural worker who thoroughly analyzed the incident with him. This processing of the experience ultimately led to a new understanding of the factors involved and allowed the young missionary to adopt a different perspective. This “examined” experience and new framework encouraged the missionary to “get back on the bike” and try again.

Guanipa indicates that recognizing the dynamics of culture shock at this stage is characterized by

gaining some understanding of the new culture. A new feeling of pleasure and sense of humor may be experienced. One may start to feel a certain psychological balance... (one) may not feel as lost and starts to have a feeling of direction. The individual is more familiar with the environment and wants to belong. This initiates an evaluation of the old ways versus those of the new. (Further) the person realizes that the new culture has good and bad things to offer. This stage can be one of double integration or triple integration depending on the number of cultures that the person has to process. This integration is accompanied by a more solid feeling of belonging. The person starts to define him/herself and establish goals for living.⁸

The *adoption of a perspective* which integrates known aspects, guidelines and situational experience will enable the competent learner to have a feeling of mastery, the ability to cope with and manage the complexities of ministry in a cross-cultural environment. The conscious, deliberate planning that is characteristic of this skill level helps achieve efficiency and organization.⁹ Missionaries at this stage can benefit from exercises which give them practice in planning and coordinating multiple, complex, ministry demands.

Stage 4: the proficient missionary

If events are experienced with involvement as learners practice their skills, both positive and negative experiences will strengthen successful responses and inhibit unsuccessful ones. The learner's theory of the skill, as represented by rules and principles or maxims, will thus gradually be replaced by *identifying larger goals, assessing situational discriminations* and suggesting *associated responses*. Proficiency seems to develop if and only if, experience is assimilated in this atheoretical way and intuitive behavior replaces reasoned responses.

As the brain of the worker *acquires the ability to discriminate among a variety of situations*, each entered into with concern and involvement, *appropriate plans* spring to mind and certain *aspects* of the situation stand out as important without the learner standing back and choosing those plans or deciding to adopt that perspective. Action becomes easier and less stressful as the learner simply sees what needs to be achieved rather than deciding, by a calculative procedure, which of several possible alternatives

⁸ Guanipa, 1998, p.2.

⁹ Benner, 1984, p.27.

should be selected. There is less doubt that what one is trying to accomplish is appropriate when the goal is simply obvious rather than the winner of a complex competition. In fact, at the moment of involved intuitive response, there can be no doubt, since doubt comes only with detached evaluation.

The proficient driver has acquired knowledge that is not just cognitive – not just “in the head.” Approaching a curve on a rainy day, she may feel in her body (e.g., “the seat of her pants” as we say) that she is going dangerously fast. She must then decide whether to apply the brakes or merely to reduce pressure on the accelerator by some selected amount. Valuable time may be lost while she is working out a decision, but the proficient driver is certainly more likely to negotiate the curve safely than the competent driver who spends additional time considering the speed, angle of bank, and felt gravitational forces, in order to decide whether the car's speed is excessive.

The proficient missionary is able to grasp a whole ministry context – to understand the necessity of moving from Situation A to Situation Z. In a number of ministry situations the proficient missionary has been able to discern the salient aspects of the particular assignment, to successfully develop an operational plan and to recognize the relationships between Situation A and Situation D, for instance. He knows “from experience what typical events to expect in a given situation and how plans need to be modified in response to these events.”¹⁰

For example, a proficient woman missionary, serving as a ministry consultant was asked to work with a church-planting team in an urban, Eastern European ministry context. The team was in their second year of working together and struggling with understanding their ministry responsibilities and priorities. It was a group of advanced beginners. They were identifying the various aspects of their ministry context but were not yet able to gain perspective and form a manageable plan that would take them forward. For the proficient facilitator, *the situation was immediately obvious*. From previous ministry experience and diverse situational responses she had learned to understand the stages of ministry and cultural development. Yet she had to develop enough understanding of this particular context, of the long-term goals of the mission group for this region, and the team's strengths and weaknesses before suggesting some appropriate responses. Her work eventually allowed competence to emerge within this ministry team.

The competent missionary does not have enough experience to recognize a situation in terms of an overall picture or in terms of which aspects are most important. The proficient missionary, because of broader experience, “considers fewer options and hones in on an accurate region of the problem.”¹¹ Missionaries at this stage can benefit from case studies where their ability to grasp the situation is both respected and challenged. This is best done inductively in a collaborative learning environment where scenarios are discussed and responses cross-referenced among participants.

¹⁰ Benner, 1984, p.28.

¹¹ Benner, 1984, p.29.

Stage 5: the expert missionary

The proficient learner, immersed in the world of his skillful activity, sees what needs to be done, but must decide how to do it. The expert *not only sees what needs to be achieved*, but thanks to a vast repertoire of situational discriminations, he *sees how to achieve his goal*. The ability to make *more subtle and refined discriminations* is what distinguishes the expert from the proficient learner. The expert has learned to distinguish among many situations, all seen as similar by the proficient learner, those situations requiring one action from those demanding another. That is, with enough experience in a variety of situations, all seen from the same perspective but requiring different tactical decisions, the brain of the expert gradually decomposes this class of situations into subclasses, each of which shares the same action. This allows the *immediate intuitive situational response* that is characteristic of expertise.

The expert driver becomes one with her car, and she experiences herself simply as driving, rather than as driving a car, just as, at other times, she certainly experiences herself as walking and not, as a small child might, as consciously and deliberately propelling her body forward.

Benner describes a situation in which an expert nurse knows that a patient was being misdiagnosed as psychotic;

She was convinced that the patient was only angry; and the physician was equally convinced that the patient was psychotic and said, "We'll do an MMPI to see who's right." The nurse responded, "I am sure that I am right regardless of what the MMPI says." Fortunately for the nurse, the MMPI results backed up her assessment, because she had already begun a very successful intervention with the patient on the basis of her assessment.¹²

The intuitive sense of "knowing" the right course of action, characteristic of the expert, might be called *arational*. Rational deliberation carries with it the connotation of "combining parts to obtain a whole"; arational behaviour, then, refers to action without conscious analytic decomposition and recombination. Einstein claimed that his discovery of the elementary laws of physics did not follow from logical analysis: "To these elementary laws there leads no logical path, but only intuition, supported by being sympathetically in touch with experience."¹³

The experience component does not refer to the mere passage of time or longevity. Rather, it is the refinement of preconceived notions and theory through encounters with many actual practical situations that add nuances or shades of differences to theory. It is this interaction with both theory and practice that makes refinements accessible or possible for the expert.

¹² Benner, 1984, p.33.

¹³ in Dreyfus, 1986, p.41.

Dreyfus and Benner suggest that there is a disjunction between the competent level and the proficient and expert levels. They indicate that “if experts are made to attend to the particulars or to a formal model or rule, their performance actually deteriorates.”¹⁴ The traditional assumption is that with experience and mastery of a skill, beginning rules just become unconscious. But this seems to fly in the face of all evidence of masterful performance and ignores the role of perception or intuition in skilled performance. An important assumption of the Dreyfus model is that with experience and mastery the skill is transformed.¹⁵ The sum total of experience, theoretical reflection and intuitional capacity is more than those individual components.

The expert missionary is characterized by intuitional capacity and wide experience. This ability is affirmed by colleagues who have profited from the expert’s input into their ministry context.

As one example, an expert missionary visited a fledgling church plant in urban Africa. This missionary’s experience had been primarily in Latin America, but in a wide variety of ministry settings. He had personally been involved in church-planting and leadership development. He had become an area supervisor with responsibility for the oversight of numerous ministry programs in many Latin countries. In spite of a relatively short stay in Africa he was able to make a seemingly “off the cuff” observation about this young church plant; “there is potential for a church plant in that community, but not with that couple in leadership.” He was able to intuitively grasp that the “church-planter” was not gifted for such ministry. Sometime later, back in North America, while interviewing a potential church-planter for that ministry situation, he indicated (on the basis of one visit to that city) that a viable church-plant was possible within four years. With the appropriate personnel in place, that is exactly what transpired.

This immediate intuitive situational response was not the result of haphazard “guess-timating” or overly pietistic presumption of God’s blessing, but of the subtle, and perhaps arational, discrimination of an expert missionary. The expert missionary can benefit from multiple learning and consulting opportunities. The expert missionary is most clearly indicated by the respect of their colleagues for their remarkable intuitive capacity and breadth of situational responses.

Conclusion

We can see now that

- a novice missionary must acquire features and rules much like data-entry into a computer;
- the advanced beginner learns to compare experience with those features and rules;
- the competent missionary has struggled through cultural and ministry dissonance and has organized those experiences, features and rules into a plan of action;
- the proficient missionary is able to analyze situations and intuitively suggest plans from his experience toolbox;

¹⁴ Benner, 1986, p.37.

¹⁵ Benner, 1984, p.38.

- the expert missionary intuitively sees what to do without recourse to rules, plans or analysis. The expert does not solve problems. He just identifies what normally works and, of course, it normally works.

When we consider the psychological, spiritual and missiological implications of wasteful practices which have led to missionary attrition, along with the challenge of developing effective cross-cultural ministry skills, it is apparent that preparation, mentoring and oversight are sorely needed. On the basis of Dreyfus's insights we would like to suggest the following practical principles for learning to be a missionary.

1. *The novice stage*: potential missionaries must have adequate preparation through formal learning where the mission task is decomposed and foundational features and attributes are clearly acquired.
2. *The advanced beginner stage*: learner missionaries must have adequate opportunities for informed reflection; identifying various aspects of the task in their context and comparing these with their increasing ministry experience.
3. *The competent stage*: missionaries struggling with ministry dissonance and culture shock in the second and third year of an assignment must have adequate oversight, informed reflection, and insightful dialogue with proficient missionaries to enable satisfactory cultural adjustment and the development of an appropriate plan or perspective to inform ministry priorities. A goal of mission leadership should be to see all missionaries develop to at least this stage of competence.
4. *The proficient stage*: missionaries with heightened intuitive capacity, who have developed competence in one ministry assignment, should be given other opportunities in which to exercise their competence and given freedom to develop their ability to be discerning. Opportunities for collaborative reflection on ministry case studies will further enable the development of proficiency.
5. *The expert stage*: missionaries with heightened intuitive capacity and demonstrated proficiency need to be given the freedom and responsibility to share their insights and wisdom in a variety of ministry contexts. Such exposure will only increase their capacity to identify appropriate responses for diverse situations.

In his report to the REMAP consultation, William Taylor said that “pastoral intervention is not only needed to avert tragedies, but to help career missionaries be effective in packing heaven with worshippers! The challenge of the unreached peoples can primarily be met through long-term missionaries. We must help the right ones to get there and provide the support they need to stay there.”¹⁶ The principles and practice suggested by the Skill Acquisition Model presented in this paper could prove very helpful in the development of competent, proficient and even expert missionaries.

¹⁶ in Jonathon Lewis, *Reducing Missionary Attrition Consultation*, 1996, All Nations College, England. www.ywam.no/misjon/artikkel/atritio.htm

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