

# Trust-Communication Dyad in Inter-Personal Workplace Relationships – Dynamics of Trust Deterioration and Breach

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**Abstract:** Trust has become an important intangible asset in organizations as a foundation for cooperation in workplace relationships. The paper discusses and examines development of trust in relation to communication within work relationships. More specifically, the dynamics of trust deterioration and trust breach is studied empirically. The paper examines the interplay between communication and trust and how building, violation, breaches and restoration of trust develop in inter-personal workplace relationships. The aim of the paper is to provide new knowledge and insights of the dynamics between communication and trust and make practical implications to leadership and HRM for human capital development. By presenting the empirical findings from a qualitative case study with other complementing data the paper also aims to shed more light on how poor communication, in particular, affects trust development between actors involved. The paper advocates the importance of developing trust and communication for intangible intellectual asset in workplaces and their management. Originality of the paper is based on the idea of exploring the relation between trust and communication, specifically in the situation of trust violation and breach. The paper provides a still under researched issue of intangible assets, since relational resources such as trust and communication have not been widely examined in the context of trust breach, in specific. In the theoretical discussion, trust and communication are seen interwoven in interpersonal work relationships. Trust is looked as intangible asset and skill and communication a means and antecedent for trust. The findings show that poor communication plays an important role in deterioration and breaches of trust. Distrust may permeate widely within the organization and beyond the original parties involved. If space is left to the low trust climate to develop the consequences may be unfavorable, harmful and even damaging to the organization. Trust violation and breaches seem to be connected with workplace bullying with harmful consequences.

**Keywords:** communication, case study, intangible assets, inter-personal trust, narratives, work relationship, trust breach, qualitative method

## 1. Introduction

In human activity interaction, communication and co-operation form the essential processes of workplace behaviors. Resources and capabilities are mainly human and intellectual since organizations have become more knowledge intensive (cf. Wright & McMahan, 2011). In the knowledge era, need for renewing of human intellectual capacity in organizations has increased significantly. Ability to implement strategy and respond to continuous organizational change has become more and more important for sustaining competitiveness (Slockum et al., 2008). Trust in organizations forms intangible, collaborative and relational asset and foundation for the processes mentioned above. Trust is a significant asset, built, sustained, broken and restored by and between people and largely through communication. Trust is important in many different ways in organizations and their HRM (Savolainen, 2011; cf. Innocenti et al., 2011) in promoting collaboration, motivation, improving competence development, knowledge sharing, initiation and innovativeness (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman 1995; Lewicki, Tomlinson & Gillespie 2006, Savolainen, 2008). In interpersonal work relationships, job satisfaction and performance are closely linked to the quality of relationships in which communication and trust play a role. While work relationships may be the source of positive effects, they also bring challenges, difficulties and problems which are likely to be stressful both to the individual and relationships affecting atmosphere and work performance eventually.

This paper adopts a relational view of trust. Communication is seen as an antecedent of trust. Trust is seen as an intangible, *relational asset* in co-operation between people (Savolainen, Lopez-Fresno, 2013). Relational view on trust means that it develops in interaction and reciprocal activity between individuals, within groups and in organizations. Workplace activity is largely about interaction, which occurs through communication and trusting between people. The paper brings a new perspective into discussion by adopting a resource-based and relational view on examining trust-communication dyad as intangible, forceful asset in workplace relationships. The empirical study examines how communication (poor or even lacking) affects trust development, i.e., building, maintaining, deterioration, and

breaking of trust. While the role of trust as a collaborative mechanism and in conflict resolving has been recognized, communication as an antecedent for trust, and distrust in particular, has not been commonly brought into discussion. The lessons may be learned of how to develop intangible workplace resources such as trust and communication by gaining better understanding and new knowledge for improving capabilities and skills.

The aim of the paper is to provide new knowledge of the dynamics between communication and trust and make practical implications to leadership and HRM for human capital development. The paper advocates that, in order to retain and develop human relational assets, it is necessary to understand communication capital (Jeffres, Jian, & Yoon, 2013) and trust. Adding to discussion about the inter-relation between communication and trust the paper presents empirical findings from a qualitative case study in the project context and from some narrative data gathered from workplaces.

## 2. Theoretical discussion

The literature review deals with the concepts of trust and communication. Trust has been identified as one of the most frequently examined constructs in the organizational literature lately (Burke *et al.* 2007). It is a multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary issue that has been widely studied in different fields of science over the last few years (Ebert, 2009) involving several theoretical approaches, definitions, factors, and models (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). As competition challenges organizations to renew their intangible assets, human intellectual resources such as trust, communication, co-creation, etc. become stressed. In organizational leadership trust building is seen essential and is listed as one of the main tasks of leaders (Yukl, 2010, cf. Dirks, 2006). For leaders trust is *a way of influence* (Savolainen, 2011), and leaders influence largely *through communication*. Trust development is a reciprocal process between leaders and followers with the aim of mutual co-operation and making people to give their best at work. Communication is also a multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional concept, and a very vast and multiple research topics examined in different fields of science. In organization and management research, the gap of knowledge exists in how trust and communication are interrelated as dyad in workplace relationships, leadership and HRM.

### 2.1 Defining trust

Trust has been defined in many ways in prior research. Yet, the concept remains without a generally accepted definition (McEvily *et al.*, 2003). In this paper, *the relational perspective* is in focus and the definition of trust is adopted from Mayer *et al.* (1995, 712) as follows: “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party”. Trust is in a way a person’s assessment of another’s *trustworthiness*. Mayer’s model looks at the formation of trust between actors in a relational context. This means that trust evolves over time through repeated interactions and information available which refer to communication between parties in trust formation. Three interaction types have been identified in trust development: trust between persons, between organizations, and between a person and an organization (Ebert, 2009). In studying trust and communication linkage, this paper focuses mainly on inter-personal trust as an important social resource that can facilitate cooperation and enable social interactions. Concepts of cooperation and confidence are closely related to trust (see Schoorman *et al.*, 2007). Intrinsically trust is a fragile intangible asset. It is built in the course of time. Yet, it can be lost quickly. Trust belongs to human intellectual capital which is interrelated combination of mental, structural and relational resources (Edvinsson & Malone, 1997). Individual level trust is intangible and invisible in nature, and even “tacit”, and easily breakable (Savolainen, 2011).

### 2.2 Defining communication

Countless number of communication definitions exists in literature presented by academics and practitioners for describing, predicting, and understanding communicative phenomena. A quite broad and inclusive definition describes communication as “information that enters a process and eventually leaves its inverse process. For example, information is transmitted by speaking and received after processing by its inverse, hearing” (Losee, 1999). Applicable to the perspective of this study communication is defined as the sharing of formal and informal, meaningful information (Zeffane *et al.*, 2011) between people.

Pertaining to trust and communication dyad the latter definition is more close to the relational view of trust applied and a reciprocal process of communicating, in other words, sharing something meaningful in the context of work relationships. This definition is also linked with Rotter’s (1967) definition of inter-personal trust as “an expectancy held by an individual or group that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of another individual or group can be

relied upon". Willemyns et al. (2003) discuss *relational communication* strategies in the context of manager–employee relationships as a recent addition to communication accommodation theory (CAT). These communication strategies indicate trust supporting behaviors such as empathy, inclusion, and valuing of the other person, for example, when making a mistake in providing negative feedback constructively.

### 3. Trust-communication dyad

#### 3.1 Intangible, relational resources

The relational resources in organizations are created by human activity. The organization is built upon the people and their talents, knowledge and expertise. Trust has been identified as important relational resource in inter-personal relationships, for example, employees' trust in managers (Willemyns et al., 2003) and as a leadership skill. Trust is manifested, for example, in open communication, ethical behavior and predictability (Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2014). Respectively, influence of communication on trust is clearly recognized in some of the prior studies (e.g., Zeffane et al., 2011, Butler and Cantrell, 1994, Zand, 1972). The relation between communication and trust has been studied recently (see e.g., Ruppel & Harrington, 2000, Harry, 2006; Welch & Jackson, 2007). The direction of the interrelation between trust and communication remains undefined (Anderson & Narus, 1990). While some of the research shows that communication affects trust development, (Wong, 2002; Thomas et. al, 2009) other studies suggest that trust requires effective communication and has strong influence on trust building (Chory & Hubbell, 2008). Hence, the relationship turns out to be complex (Zeffane et al., 2011).

Anderson and Narus (1990) suggest that the relation between trust and communication in building working partnership is an *iterative process* (expected reciprocity); Communication is seen as an antecedent to trust which in turn leads to better communication. This paper adopts a relational view of trust development and reciprocal nature of trust-building process between actors in interpersonal work relationships. Reciprocity in the trust- communication dyad is depicted more practically by Noreen (2013) "the lifeblood of any organization and the glue that holds us together". Trust and communication are seen closely interwoven. By concluding, communication builds trust forming a basis for 'sharing something meaningful between people'. Trusting in turn within work relationships is the key to open communication and building and maintaining trust.

#### 3.2 Development of trust

Development of trust i.e., building maintaining, violating, breaking and repairing or restoring trust, have been examined in economic, behavioural, and transformational perspectives (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996, Lewicki et al., 2006). Trust is combined of several components – rational, cognitive and affective (McAllister, 1995). In the organizational context it has been researched from relationship-based and character-based perspectives (see, e.g., by Dirks & Ferrin, 2002, and Dirks, 2006). As this paper focuses largely on trust-communication dyad in trust violation and breach, the conceptual discussion of trust development is limited mainly to distrust, violation of trust and trust breaches. Communication is linked to trust to study more specifically how the quality of communication is related to low trust or trust breach.

#### 3.3 Trust violation and breach

*Distrust* as a concept refer to declining, erosion or mistrust meaning lack of confidence in the other, a concern that the other may act in the way to harming one, intends to harm or be hostile (Grovier,1994). Distrust is also defined as negative expectations of the intentions or behavior of another (Lewicki et al., 1998) who see distrust as a separate but linked dimension to trust. The term *violation* refers to the emotional distress and feelings of anger and betrayal arising from acts of breaking trust. Trust *breach* refers to a cognition that a party has failed to fulfill an expectation (Chen et al., 2011). The term trust breach may also mean the actions or withholding of actions on the part of the trustee that constitute a failure to fulfill the positive expectations of the trustor.

According to Lewicki et al. (1998), distrust involves a lack of risk and no dependence on others. It is seen as a continuum with high trust to high distrust as endpoints. Distrust is viewed *separate but linked* to trust and not opposite ends of a single continuum which was the conception in the prior trust research (e.g., Rotter). Distrust may be caused or trust be threatened by the work-related and personal/relationship related factors shown, for example, in the superior-subordinate relationship in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Factors causing distrust (Häkkinen & Savolainen, 2008)

Work-related factors	Relationship-related and personal factors
- Neglecting work tasks	- Unresolved conflicts
- Delayed schedule	- Personal insults
- Malpractice in work	- Talking behind one's back and gossiping

Trust *violations* occur when the trustor's (the victim's) confident positive expectations of the trustee (i.e. the offender) are disconfirmed (Lewicki & Tomlinson, 2003). These violations result in lower trust, and may reduce the extent to which victims of these violations cooperate with the offender. The research within has shown that trust violations decrease support and information sharing, and exert negative effects on job performance, turnover, and profits. In some cases, a single trust violation may seriously *damage or irreparably destroy trust* while in other cases, one trust violation in isolation may not be that damaging (Lewicki & Tomlinson, 2003).

*Trust breach* refers to the reconsideration of and reduction in either trust beliefs or behaviors, or both (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996, Mayer et al. 1995, Chen et al. 2011). In the trust literature, *trust break, erosion* and *decline* are often used interchangeably as outcomes. The degree of trust erosion greatly influences trust reparability. The deeper and the broader the trust erosion, the less reparable the trust is (Chen et al. 2011). Kim et al. (2004) note that parties may often violate trust by intentionally exploiting dependencies or by neglecting to fulfill expectations.

Reina and Reina (2010) links trust breach with betrayal. Trust breaches may not be immediate or obvious. These authors above present that betrayal occurs on a continuum from unintentional to intentional and from *minor* to *major*. Major intentional betrayals are hurtful, ill-intended words or actions that break down trusting relationships. In workplaces, common, minor betrayals can be gossiping or talking behind the back.

As to restoring of broken trust, trust is fragile in nature and, thus, difficult to repair (Schweitzer et al., 2006). In order to repair trust, it is critical to first understand how it was damaged, since different means of damaging trust are likely to require different reparative response (Schoorman et al. 2007). Trust repair depends on the *strength* of the trustees' efforts to promote the belief that they should be trusted. The potential outcomes of negotiation between trustee and trustor may vary from weak to strong depending on the input in the process (efforts and time).

## 4. Empirical study

### 4.1 Methodology and data

The case study focuses on trust breach and the role of communication in deterioration and break of trust in work relationships. A qualitative approach is employed in the empirical study, based on the abstract, depth and multidimensional nature of both of the issues and concepts of trust and communication. More specifically, a narrative approach and auto-ethnography method are used. The concepts are complex and even delicate in nature, especially trust breach, which is still scarcely studied empirically. Moreover, as explanation and generalization are not the purpose of this study, but rather gain a deeper and richer understanding of the inter-relation between the abstract concepts of trust and communication, the qualitative methodology is the most appropriate (Yin, 2000, Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

The focus of the empirical part of the paper is in finding out how trust deteriorates and may be broken in workplace relationships through communication. The aim is to increase understanding of the dynamics and inter-relation between communication and violation of trust studied within the project work context. Qualitative data was gathered from several sources by the interview, participant observation and auto-ethnographic methods. In addition, stories (narratives) from workplaces were used and analyzed as complementary source of data. Narrative research analyses the life stories of the individuals as experienced by them and meanings they give to their stories.

Informants of the study (interviewees) were individuals involved in the project. Auto-ethnographic method was used, which clearly differs from theory-driven, hypothesis-testing research methods based on the [positivist](#) research paradigm. In this paper the auto-ethnography means that the researcher reports on his/her personal thoughts, feelings and experiences of the case and context studied, more specifically using written study memos and research diary that are written about and reflects on the project studied. In this sense, auto-ethnography is a social constructionist approach embracing both auto (or self) and ethno (or culture). A narrative approach is also applied by analyzing a few individual narratives on trust breaches. Three narratives were selected among the qualitative data of

the stories of trust breaches which were gathered from individual employees and managers from different organizations and workplace contexts in Finland. Moreover the data contain written project-related documents such as emails, reports and memos. They were also used as complementary source of the data in the study. Written documents are typically included in the data of qualitative studies.

The empirical research data and material was *analyzed* using the content analysis method. Qualitative or inductive materials analysis is roughly a three-way process: 1) *data reduction*, which means simplification, 2) *material grouping into clusters*, and 3) *abstraction* or the creation of theoretical concepts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Narratives were analyzed through the 'lenses' of distrust and trust breach in the paper. As mentioned above, they contained also wider issues on trust development.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Case study of international project

Key findings are presented in this chapter, first from the case of trust violation and breach and after that from the narratives. The case study is focused in an international complex project to strengthen quality infrastructure in several countries. The case study focuses on trust breach in a working relationship in a major project, involving internal and external stakeholders and multicultural environment. The project has a considerable number of stakeholders in different countries. Among them, there are four main actors: the contracting authority; the consultancy firm that won the public tendering for managing the project; the donator; the project team leader. In the findings below quotations in italics from the informants' perceptions and experiences illustrate the authentic communication in the process.

After the resignation of the project team leader, a public tendering process was open for hiring a new team leader. The main stakeholders, including the donator and the contracting authority requested the consultancy firm to assess if there was human capital internally to be appointed as team leader, as the project was almost finishing. In the public tendering five candidates were presented. After rigorous assessment, the committee chose the internal candidate, a consultant who had been working for the project for two years.

Since the beginning of the public tendering process, the candidate could perceive that the consultancy firm had no interest in him. During the whole process there was no any meeting, no any personal call; he just received an email asking for his CV and several later emails with the contractual conditions, with no margin of negotiation (fully asymmetric negotiation). He considered that this kind of communication was not appropriate for a position with such a responsibility and visibility. *"We've been exchanging dozens of e-mails and we are not going forward. May we connect via Skype, at least to see each other's face? This is a typical case where personal touch is needed"* (A candidate to hiring consultancy firm).

During the period since the former team leader resigned, there was no communication from the consultancy firm with the project team, no telephone call or even an email. The lack of communication contributed to generate distrust on them, from the candidate and from the project team and contracting organization.

After three months, one of the directors from the consultancy firm travelled to visit the project team on site. He planned the visit when the candidate to team leader was not in the country, so they could not meet. Neither any of his emails were answered. All of that contributed to generate a trust breach among the candidate and the consultancy firm. *"It is a pity that he will come when I'll not be around, if as he said one of his goals is to really know the team and how the project is performing. This way of doing talks a lot about him"* (A candidate to a colleague who helped to organize the agenda of the visit, following instructions of the consultancy firm).

The contracting authority made the decision to appoint the internal candidate as a project team leader. The decision was communicated by the consultancy firm to the candidate in an email addressed to the whole team, including him as the appointed project team leader. No any personal communication was held previously, by email or by telephone. *"I'm travelling to attend an activity of the project, I've just opened my email and I found this story ... Honestly, this is not a proper way of doing things. So, in the case that I will accept the position, I know about the notice at the same time that the team to be managed under my responsibility? I do not know how you see it, but I would like to talk about it whenever possible for you"* (A candidate to his boss at the time).

Even not any contract proposal was sent to him before, and contractual conditions were still pending. The only email received requested the candidate to prepare an extra work (report) even before he will initiate his new functions. That behaviour led to a total distrust towards the consultancy firm from the candidate (now formally appointed as project team leader), from the whole project team, and from the donator and the contracting authority, but also a trust breach appeared among the team and other stakeholders. *“In other circumstances I should help you, as I did during these years for my colleagues and previous boss. But at the moment I do not have in hand any single element to trust you. There are many evidences accumulated during these months that made me to lose any possible trust on you and your organization, I couldn’t find any single example of respect. Communication was defined by your silence all this time”* (A candidate – now appointed as a team leader by the donator- to the consultancy firm).

The situation developed into total breakdown in communication and trust breach followed towards the consultancy firm, by all internal and external stakeholders. For five months the project had no team leader and not any communication from the consultancy firm in charge. Deep uncertainty was experienced by all stakeholders involved. *“The consultancy firm doesn’t care about the project or the team. They just want the money. They never showed interest neither care”* (A project team member).

In that context, the contracting authority intervened and forced the main actors to find a solution. One of the directors of the consultancy firm got in contact with the candidate; it was the first telephone call he received in months. *“Let me tell you that the way you managed the situation was awful. This is the first phone call I received since the contacts started, five months ago, even when I requested a personal contact, and you came visit the project when I was travelling. Along this time I couldn’t find a single signal of respect to me, and the only thing you did was requested me extra work even before the contract will be signed. Sorry to say you this, and will all my respects, but I fully distrust you”* (A candidate to the consultancy firm – first phone call).

After that phone call, communication improved a bit, and two months later a person from the consultancy firm visited the project. Personal communication clarified some misunderstanding and laid the foundations to restore relationships. *“Communication failed since the beginning. Too many actors implied with partial information in all sides... that derived in assumptions by all actors, you, us, the donator...When you do not have communication everything is potentially misunderstood”*(The representative of the consultancy firm to the candidate, first meeting).

When communication improved, trust repair could begin. However, it will take time to restore trust among all actors, mainly with the consultancy firm. Distrust affected moral, productivity and cohesion among the team (workplace environment) and also relationship among stakeholders. *“I really appreciate your visit, it should be taken a long time ago. Communication is always a sensible issue. There are circumstances in which personal verbal communication will never be substituted by written communication, and this is one of them. I lost any sign of trust on your organization, in the personal and professional sides. We need transparency and agreed objectives to build up trust, but it will take a time, a long time...”* (The candidate to the representative of the consultancy firm, first meeting).

## 5.2 Findings from narratives

Four narratives, two from the subordinates and one from the supervisors, show how distrust develops and trust breach occurs and what role communication plays in it. In the first narrative of *subordinate*, rumors caused a negative atmosphere at work and violated trust. Poor, insufficient communication played a role in that. Narrative 1: *“At some point, rumors started to arise in the work community about the possible future changes in the company.”* According to the subordinate, there was a point when the relationship with the supervisor became filled with distrust as a consequence of several consecutive issues. Narrative 1 continues: *“It is very apparent that these organizational change options were handled in the top management much earlier than rumors started to spread among the employees. My supervisor’s actions in the situation continued and kept repeating itself case after case, trust declined and distrust developed.”*

The other narrative of a subordinate is an example of a manager who had emailed confidential information to her own supervisor. Narrative 2: *“He forwarded my email to a large group. At the moment there was a lump in my throat. I tackled him about it but he didn’t even realized his misbehaving. So I decided not to trust him anymore.”* Misunderstandings in communication may lead to serious trust breaches notably, when construed intentional as in this narrative.

In the first *supervisor's narrative* giving promises was an issue leading to trust breach. Continuous change in the workplace gave a challenge to the supervisor who gave promises to the subordinates that he could not fulfill due to unexpected and sudden changes. Breaking the promises usually leads to trust breach. Narrative 3: *"I had been talking with my boss and was assured that my employees' jobs are definite. So I promised of course to the temporary workers that their job would continue. We were not allowed to hire new personnel. Unfortunately, I couldn't keep the promises I gave to my team and subordinates, I was no more trustworthy and they lost trust in me."* Communication played again the role in this, as unreliable words caused declining of trust in the supervisor.

The narrative from another supervisor shows how crucial the role of communication may appear. Narrative 4: *"Trust means also that we can share positive ideas and encourage each other but also give critical feedback and developing suggestions without taking offence. In my case, I gave critical feedback and then my subordinate just lost his temper. I think that our relationship wasn't trustful enough."* Obviously, trust deterioration occurred due to lack of communication skills of expressing and receiving feedback which are quite essential skills in supervisor-subordinate relationship.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

The findings show that poor communication plays an important role in emerging distrust and trust breaches. It is notable that distrust may permeate widely within the organization and beyond the original actors and parties involved. If space is left to the low trust climate to develop the consequences may be unfavorable, harmful and even damaging to the entire organization. Trust violations may lead to the breaking point of a trusting relationship and finally to the ending of the relationship unless the trust can be restored.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that trust violation seem to be connected with workplace bullying. Further, the entire data show that conflict situations, caused by trust violations and breaches, are quite often solved by changing the workplace. Taking a distance is perceived to be the easiest solution or option when trust breach cannot be handled constructively and trust restored. This supports the earlier findings of trust research that 'the silence', i.e., lack or very poor communication creates distrust and sooner or later leads to trust breach and needs for trust restoration (Ikonen, 2013; Csik, 2012).

*The project work case implies* to managers that in daily practices, leaders should adopt and use relational communication strategy (Willemys et al., 2003) to openly inform about, e.g., changes and daily issues. They also need to be aware how they could show trustworthiness in daily work. Communication plays a crucial role in restoration of trust. HRM practitioners should provide new skills development for managers in building and repairing trust (Willemys et al., 2003). If the organization's vitality is maintained through effective communication, conflicts and tensions can be decreased. Trusting relationships can empower people for success even in a time of great uncertainty. When people trust each other, their energy can be focused on the core activity instead of games, politics, and control (Savolainen, 2011). The development of this positive 'cycle' requires proper and constructive communication.

Further, the findings from both the case and narratives imply for leaders that openness, honesty, and transparency are important for building and sustaining trust as well as restoring trust. No unfulfilled promises should be given. The practical implication for group leaders is to understand how important it is to develop communication skills to sustain trust in group relationships (Savolainen, 2008). For leadership work these findings imply that it is the small daily deeds that make a difference in building and maintaining trust - and not the great promises!

Finally, the empirical findings show that communication and trust (trust-building or trust breach) are inter-related. To avoid harmful consequences of trust violation and breach Noreen's (2013) suggestion is in place, *"once you lose trust, you lose your ability to communicate and lead."* It is important to develop leaders' communication skills for trust-building. This paper has made an attempt to add to the knowledge of the interrelation between communication and trust and the dynamics of trust deterioration and breach in workplaces. In further research, the relation emerging in the findings between workplace bullying and trust breaches need to be studied in more detailed.

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