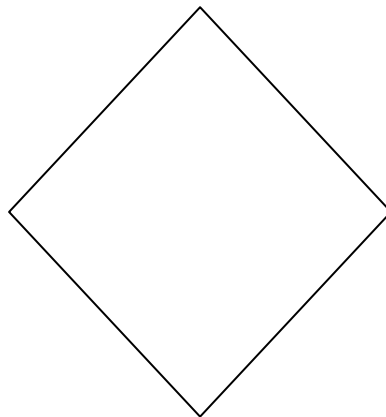


# Dealing with Difficult Teachers



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**Leadership is the  
art of getting  
others to do  
something that  
you want done  
because they  
want to do it.**

**-Dwight D. Eisenhower**

# **Dealing with Difficult Teachers**

**What Is A Difficult Teacher? –**

**Who Is Most Important? –**

**Motivating Them –**

**Making Them Feel Uncomfortable –**

**Weaken Their Influence –**

**Eliminating Them –**

**Miscellaneous –**

**What Is The Purpose?**

**Will This  
Actually Accomplish  
The Purpose?**

**How Will  
The Most Positive And  
Productive People  
Feel About This?**



## Power Plays of Difficult Employees

A three-question litmus test to gauge the likely effect of your rules to change bad behavior  
**Todd Whitaker**

*Reprinted from The School Administrator, February 2003*

Our most negative employees can batter the morale of an entire school or district. Preventing the detrimental effects they cause is one of the biggest challenges an educational leader faces.

Difficult employees can take their toll on the rest of us in various ways. However, the one aspect over which we retain the most control is how much power we choose to give them. We surrender way too much power to these negative people. And it isn't just us. Everyone in our organization does.

People in leadership roles often make decisions based on their least effective staff members

rather than their most effective and essential contributors. Even as peers we give away too much power to our most negative coworkers.

### **Test Yourself**

Leaders often make decisions based on their most negative and resistant employees. That is human nature. We worry about how the most cynical staff member will react or how the few "grippers" will talk about me or this new idea in the lounge. Being aware of their potential reactions is fine. However, making decisions with them in mind rather than our most positive and productive people is a big mistake.

When deciding whether to implement a new policy or rule, ask yourself quick these three questions to determine if the proposal is likely to have a positive or a negative effect:

1. What is the true purpose in implementing this rule or policy?
2. Will it actually accomplish the purpose?
3. How will my most positive and productive people feel about it?

This sounds basic, and it is, but it can be a powerful measure of not only future implementation, but it also can help determine the value of current procedures. Let us apply these questions to a scenario common in many

schools: exceeding the photocopy machine budget.

In many educational settings, we realize about mid-February that we have almost exhausted the copier budget for the entire school year. We also realize several individuals are constantly at the copier and may seem to be using it disproportionately compared to other faculty. One thing that happens in many organizations is a sign gets posted by the copy machine: "Limit 20 Copies!"

### **Forecasting Effects**

With this scenario in mind we can apply the same three questions to the change in behavior we are attempting to put in place to control a few difficult staff members. Will the new rule likely have an appropriate and positive effect on our school?

Another common situation that arises in schools is faculty use of supplies at a frequency that quickly will exceed the annual budget. Our instinct suggests a few people most likely are using things in an inappropriate manner or maybe even for personal use. As a result, we are tempted to implement much stricter restrictions on accessing the supply cabinet. We may require all staff to sign a piece of paper indicating how many copies they use. Or we might have all staff sign up on a list when they take any supplies. We may even issue a memo expecting staff to reduce their use of photocopies or supplies.

This is the guilty until proven innocent approach. Or we can apply our three rules to gauge whether this approach is appropriate.

*What is the true purpose in implementing this rule or policy?*

Your first reaction might be to say that the purpose is to tick people off. However, that is the result, not the purpose. The purpose in creating this rule is to prevent those people who are wastefully using the copier or taking too many supplies from continuing these practices. In other words, it is to stop those who are abusing the copier.

*Will it actually accomplish the purpose?*

If someone is doing something that is inappropriate, they probably already know it is improper and they just choose to do what they want. No one assumes it is OK to run copies of their Christmas card letter on the school copier. You might be thinking, "I have people in my school who think it is OK to abuse the copier."

If that is true, ask yourself this: Would those individuals ask the principal or department chair to run off the copies for them? Obviously not. They sneak around and do it when no one is watching. If this is true, it means they do know it is wrong but do it anyway. Some people will do so at any opportunity. However, these are very few. Is the sign likely to prevent the inappropriate usage of materials? Probably not.

Even if your answer is "maybe" or "yes," we still need to examine the potential result on our most important staff members—those who follow these behavioral standards before they are even put in writing.

*How will my most positive and productive people feel about this policy?*

High achievers, including your most effective staff, are often guilt driven. They are likely to assume that any time a new rule or procedure is implemented it

could be because they have done something wrong.

When you tell the staff that the copier is being used too much, the high achievers recall that time two years ago when they ran 25 copies for an activity for which they ended up needing only 15. They are the most likely faculty members to restrict their usage of materials or supplies. Is this going to have a productive effect on the school?

If you could give any one staff member an extra \$250 for materials and supplies, which teacher would you be most confident would use this in a manner beneficial to students? The answer is the same super teacher who is most likely to reduce his or her usage of materials and supplies when a blanket rule is implemented.

Restricting the creativity of our most effective people seldom will have a positive effect. If you wonder how your most effective staff will receive a new expectation, the simplest method is to ask them prior to putting the policy in place. Effective and respected staff members generally will tell you the truth and not be a part of the rumor mill in a school district. Asking them in advance can help answer the final question before it could have a harmful effect on the morale of your most important staff members.

### **Hindering Improvement**

Sometimes when a school leader considers raising a new idea in a school, the first tendency is to wonder how that individual who we know will be most resistant will react. This is natural and a normal response. However, the true issue is whether we let the resister prevent our school from improving because of his or her disposition.

One workshop I have led for principals deals with applying Allan Glatthorn's work on differentiated supervision, including the idea of self-directed development. This term describes the process of teacher-directed improvement, such as goal setting. One way to carry this out is to train student film crews to videotape teachers in action in their classroom for later viewing and self-assessment.

A nice aspect of this idea is that it does not require more work on the part of the principal and it can lead to instructional improvement without added responsibility. Once I suggest this at a workshop, inevitably one or more principal will indicate they cannot implement the program because some of their teachers will refuse to participate. And my response is always, "so what?" If we do not do something that can assist some people in our school or some of our staff because a few will refuse to do it, then we are giving these resisters a great deal of power and thus limiting our school's potential.

The other thing to remember is that the first teachers who are likely to take advantage of many of these types of opportunities are our best staff members. Once they try something and then speak well of it, other faculty members will join in. So if a few never do, that should not spoil an excellent growth opportunity.

Our best teachers often are the risk takers. If they are the first to try out a new concept, the likelihood of it being successful is much greater than if a less effective staff member attempts it. Thus it is easier to have a positive role model, whose example can be emulated by other staff.

### **Hallway Duty**

Let me share one additional example about the importance of making every decision based on our most positive and productive staff members. I will use an example of a large, traditional high school, whose school day consists of seven equal periods of roughly 50 minutes each. The schedule also allows five minutes or so of passing time when no one knows who is in charge of the school and the students seem to be in a mass state of excitement and hysteria. If you as an adult get caught up in this, it is like being a salmon swimming upstream.

**"Restricting the  
creativity of our most  
effective people  
seldom will have a  
positive effect."**

What would we guess principals would like their teachers to be doing during this passing time? Probably, they privately wish the teachers would be out in the hallways monitoring the students during the passing time. Typically, for the first few weeks of school, many teachers are out by their doors doing so. But then, we all get busy and become less inclined to venture outside. And, anyhow, since fewer and fewer of our peers are out there, why should we be?

By mid-year, the principal becomes frustrated that more teachers are not helping to monitor hallway traffic. So the principal issues a reminder via the all-powerful memo. We can imagine the reaction. Teachers pull the memo out of their mailboxes and immediately salute

the piece of paper it is on and think to themselves, "Yes sir, just let me know the time, the place and the duty and I'll be there."

What happened here is that the principal issued a memo based on their least-effective teachers, not those who were actually out in the hallways. How could this situation be handled differently?

### **Alternative Situations**

Let's consider two possible scenarios involving a faculty meeting, where the administrator needs to address the issue of hallway monitoring. The administrator is determined not to let a few negative staffers ruin it for the rest.

**Scenario No. 1:** A faculty meeting in progress. The principal is speaking.

"Hey folks, listen. I expect every one of you to be out in the hallway between classes. Today there were two fights in the lower hallway and there were not any teachers out there. I expect every one of you to be out there between each class. We talked about that at the first meeting of the year and it is even in the faculty handbook!"

Now we apply our three rules and examine the results.

*What was the purpose?*

The purpose was to get more staff to monitor the hallways. How do the superstars feel? Probably ticked off. "What are you talking to me for?" they are thinking. "Why don't you talk to them!"

*Will this actually accomplish the purpose?*

Are the effective staff more or less likely to be out in the hallway tomorrow. Less likely. And they are likely to be in a



bad mood because of the approach we used.

Wasn't it the mediocres we were addressing? Those that were even at the meeting could not care less. Those who were in attendance are thinking, "If I was going to get yelled at, I am glad I wasn't out there!"

*How will our most positive and productive staff feel about it?*

Unfortunately, our best people will have a less positive view of us.

**Scenario No. 2:** A faculty meeting in progress. The principal is speaking.

"Hey folks, listen. I know how full everyone's plates are and I just appreciate, so much, those of you who have made that extra effort to be out in the hallway. Today I happened to be out in the hallway and there were two boys who were about to fight. There also was a teacher out in that hall, and I don't even think the teacher saw those boys. Anyhow, right before they came to blows, one of the boys saw the teacher, tapped his potential combatant on the shoulder and pointed to the teacher. They both shrugged and walked off in separate directions. I just appreciate so much those of you who are out in the hallway between classes. It makes our school a safer place for all of our students, and it makes our school a safer place for all of us. Thank you."

Now apply the three rules and examine the results.

*What was the purpose?*

The purpose was to get more staff out in the hallway. How do the effective staff feel? Darn good.

*Will this actually accomplish the purpose?*

Amazingly, most of the effective teachers probably think the principal was talking about them since they didn't see any students about to fight! And they are more likely to be out in the hall tomorrow.

How do the mediocres feel? Some probably were feeling a little guilty. Some still were not paying attention. And some could not care less. But are they more or less likely to be out in the hall tomorrow? They will not all be out there, but at least some additional staff are more inclined.

*How will our most positive and productive staff feel about it?*

Fortunately, our best people will have a more positive view of us. They enjoyed the praise without being singled out. This is called anonymous public praise. Everyone who was doing what was right thinks you were talking about them. Amazingly, even if no one was out in the hall, you can still use this approach. Because if no one was out there, then no one could know that no one else was out there!

Additionally, our mediocres will usually feel better. Some will want to get a piece of that praise so they will venture out in the hall the next day. Even our most resistant people will go out into the hall at least one day, even if only to see who the goody-two shoes are who are out in the hall.

## **Controlling Ourselves**

The benefits to the group are pretty obvious. People will feel better and more valued. However, how does this make me feel? It makes us feel much better than a negative approach does. Think about your behavior at some moment in front of a group of students or staff members of which you are least proud. Maybe you lost your cool or laced your verbal barrage with sarcasm? How did you feel? Of course, we regretted that we chose to behave in that fashion. It may have even been a challenge to look those people in the eye for a while. Now think about which student or staff member we were most ashamed saw us this way. Most likely the student we had the most respect and regard for.

What is in it for us is that we can feel better about the way we treat others. The more respect and dignity we show for others, the more respect and dignity we feel for ourselves.

Making sure that we take control of ourselves is an essential step to reducing the impact and influence we have on negative people that we come in contact with. After all, managing difficult people first requires that we manage ourselves.

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**Raise  
The  
Praise**

**Minimize  
The  
Criticize**

**5 Things That  
Help Praise Work**

**Authentic**

**Specific**

**Immediate**

**Clean**

**Private**

# Respect & Dignity

Peggy Sweeney

Reprinted from *The Register* magazine, Ontario Principal's Council, Spring 2004

Todd Whitaker explains why these principles are keys to being a great principal

**T**he one thing that differentiates great educators, great principals, from others is the insistence that every day we treat every person with respect and dignity." This is the motto, the mission statement, of Todd Whitaker – educator and internationally recognized speaker – whose work focuses on relationships in the education community.

Dr. Todd Whitaker is a Professor of Educational Leadership at Indiana State University. A former teacher and principal, Whitaker has written over 35 articles and eight books including: *What Great Principals Do Differently*; *Dealing With Difficult Parents*; *Dealing With Difficult Teachers*; *Motivating & Inspiring Teachers*; and *Teaching Matters*.

In his book, *What Great Principals Do Differently*, Whitaker outlines 15 "hallmarks" of a great school leader. "Principals need to understand that everything in a school is all about people, not programs. I often hear, 'This new program is the solution;' or 'whole language is the savior' or 'whole language is the devil.' Great principals understand that it's never been about programs and it will never be about programs. It will always be about people.

"That doesn't mean that programs can't help round out the school," Whitaker clarifies. "That doesn't mean that programs can't help improve the skills of some of our people. But sometimes we get so caught up in the programs that we forget about the people. We forget that it's the people who make a great school."

Focusing on the people is the basis of Whitaker's mission statement. "Another hallmark that is just essential – and this is probably as much of a core for me as anything else related to both principals and teachers – is the idea of treating everybody with respect and dignity every single day, all the time. We've all interacted with people, maybe in a supervisory role, who treated us nicely, most of the time, who treated us nicely 29 days out of 30. What's amazing is we've never forgotten that 30th day."

Some may argue that in today's school system, where respect between and among students, teachers, parents and school leaders is often lacking, Whitaker's statement seems somewhat unrealistic. How do principals and vice-principals maintain respect all the time when they don't always work in an environment in which they feel respected?

Whitaker uses students as an example to illustrate his insistence that it is doable. "What we're talking about here is earning people's respect. Think about the first day of school. Think about the kids' behavior on the first day of school. It's amazing how during the first day, in all the classes, whether the teachers are good or poor, the kids' behavior is generally very good. The teachers haven't yet earned that respect – the students hand it to them on a platter."

"But what happens in some teachers' classrooms," he continues, "is that the respect continues to grow and develop every day, all year, while in others, that respect is shattered two weeks into the school year. In that case, the variable was not the fact that kids nowadays don't respect their teachers. The variable was how the teacher interacted with the students, which either caused that level of respect to grow, or caused it to disintegrate. The very same thing is true at the building level in terms of principals."

Whitaker acknowledges that almost all principals have to deal with disrespectful people. But they also have the opportunity to work with many who are very respectful. "As leaders, we have a decision to make every day in terms of how

we're going to treat people. We also have to recognize that we're the filters. If someone treats me rudely, I have a choice as to whether or not I'm going to treat him or her rudely. Great principals filter that out. They continue to treat people with respect and dignity, they model the behavior they expect in others."

"Principals need to realize that this is in their control because if it wasn't, I couldn't find any principals who enjoy that level of respect. And I know lots who do."

The hallmarks of great principals that Whitaker references in his book stem from a number of studies he has conducted looking at tools used by effective principals that make them more effective school leaders. The studies surveyed teachers as to the effectiveness of their principals and developed an instrument to measure teacher input. Principals were then "ranked" based on their effectiveness. The studies also involved personal visits to the schools, comparing the "effective" principals with the "ineffective" ones.

"We look at schools that on the outside are alike, but that on the inside are very different because of the principals in them," Whitaker explains. "We also consider other factors. We've done studies related to test scores; we've done studies related to school climate and school culture. We survey principals themselves, and then we identify the sites we want to visit. And the reason

we go to both more effective and less effective schools is so that we know what the difference-makers are.

"We aren't looking for what it is that great principals do, but what it is that great principals do that the other principals don't – the difference-makers."



**How do principals and vice-principals maintain respect when they don't always work in an environment where they feel respected?**

One of Whitaker's familiar quotes is that, when a principal sneezes, the whole school catches a cold. "That can be a good thing or a bad thing," he notes.

"Principals create an environment in the school that everyone else notices. As a principal, I can create an environment where everything is good, noting how fortunate we are, how lucky we are. I can talk about the three students who misbehaved or I can talk about the 150 students who didn't.

"That's a choice I have to make every day as a principal. I can talk about the

one parent who is very irresponsible, or I can talk about the 150 parents who are very responsible. And those are the kinds of things where, as a principal, we set the mood every day in our school, whether we mean to or not. It's critical that we are aware and sensitive to that."

In addition to school leaders, teachers, Whitaker points out, are crucial to the success of schools. And although most principals enter schools with a staff already in place, having had little or no involvement in the hiring process, there is still a large and important role for the principal to play in terms of staff relations.

Expectations, according to Whitaker, are key.

"At the very minimum, I as the principal, have to consistently define my expectations. For new teachers, that induction takes place during the interview process. For existing staff, those expectations need to be clearly defined and laid out at the first staff meeting of the year."

In general, Whitaker believes that teachers do the best they can with the skills they have. So one of the major roles of a principal, and one of the things that great principals do differently according to Whitaker, is to mentor teachers on an ongoing basis. "One of the most important things that a principal understands is that their role is to teach the teachers, not to teach the students. If I don't teach my teachers a better way, they're going to continue to

behave in the same old way. But if I teach them a better way, they will try the better way because it makes their life easier and it makes their life better. But the real bonus is, it also makes them a better teacher.”

Throughout his travels, Whitaker has heard from many school leaders who lament the personality conflicts they encounter with their staff. While acknowledging the dilemma, he dismisses the impression that nothing can be done. “There is no difference in desire between the best principal and the worst principal in terms of dealing with difficult teachers. The best principal may not want to deal with difficult teachers, but he or she does it anyway. There is a difference in their actions, and that is what’s critical.”

The most common question Whitaker hears from teachers and principals is “How does one become a great principal?” Self-awareness knowing what you are like and how you come across, is critical. “If there’s any one common denominator that both ineffective principals and ineffective teachers lack, it’s the ability to know how they’re coming across. One of the things we found in all the studies we conducted is that every principal thinks they’re good.”

The good ones, according to Whitaker, know their strengths and their weaknesses and know what areas they want to grow in. “We’ve all seen it in the classroom. We’ve all been in

poor lectures and realized that the person standing at the front of the classroom probably didn’t understand how he or she was coming across.”



**“As a principal, if you treat your teachers like the best teacher in your school treats the students, you’ll be a great principal.”**

Whitaker has some suggestions for dealing with this. Gaining self-awareness, understanding how you come across to others and how you are received, will help you to address your weaknesses. And to whom should you turn to help with this introspection? A good place to start, says Whitaker, is with your best teachers. Rely on them for feedback, he suggests, as they have a more global view of the school. Ask them what they’re hearing, if your message is getting out and how it is being received by the rest of the staff. Whitaker acknowledges that this takes some confidence, but believes the result – becoming a better leader – is worth it.

Another suggestion for success as a principal is understanding that you don’t have to change all that much

from the way you operated as a teacher. “If I’m going to hire a principal, I look for a great teacher, because the likelihood of them becoming a great principal is much higher since the skill set is so overlapping.

“The thing that I have found as one of the biggest challenges for great teachers making the transition to the principalship is to realize that they don’t have to be different. What’s interesting is that, as a principal, if you treat your teachers like the best teacher in your school treats the students, you’ll be an amazingly good principal. Oftentimes, we think we need to treat adults differently than we treat students. In reality we need to treat adults just like the best teachers treat the students.”

Another characteristic of a great principal is the ability to effectively deal with parents, particularly what some might term “difficult parents.” Here again, Whitaker has some suggestions to help diffuse potentially difficult situations or to help avoid an escalation.

“There are three things that should never take place in a school: we should never argue, we should never yell and we should never use sarcasm.” Some people, Whitaker admits, use these tactics regularly, goading principals into arguments. “As a principal, you have complete control over how many arguments you get into. If I get into an argument with a belligerent parent, they may not be uncomfortable, but I am. And

when I'm uncomfortable, I change my behavior. It's very important to make sure we do not do inappropriate things that escalate the situation."

There are things principals can do, according to Whitaker, to de-escalate certain situations. One of the most powerful is to say you are sorry. "The best diffuser I've ever seen is to say 'I'm sorry that happened.' Even if I wasn't responsible for the situation, if it affected learning in my school for a

student, then I'm sorry it happened. And I say that." Whitaker's comments always weave back through his main hallmark of respect: "Treating somebody with respect and dignity is incredibly simple. The challenge is doing it every day. I won't say it's easy, but it is a simple concept."

And it's a concept that many principals and vice-principals from Ontario and other jurisdictions have listened to and read about. Whitaker remains a favorite author

among educators and a sought-after guest speaker. His attitude is infectious and it is clear that he truly believes what he says.

Respect – a little thing but, according to education guru Todd Whitaker – one of the most important ways to become a great principal.!

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***Todd Whitaker's books can be ordered at [www.eyoneducation.com](http://www.eyoneducation.com)***

*Email Peggy Sweeney at [psweeney@principals.on.ca](mailto:psweeney@principals.on.ca)*

## Friday Focus Tips

- Create an attractive format that is used weekly
- Use colored paper
- Make sure it is in staff mailboxes at the same time each week
- Post the current Friday Focus in the teacher's lounge each week
- Collect Quotes, Inspirational Thoughts, and Cartoons
- Use graphics and clip art
- Make notes of events you see when you are "out and about"
- Keep a running list of items in your planner that you want to include each week
- Send it to your PTA President
- "Friday Focus Featured Folks"
- "Quote of the Week"
- Make sure you are upbeat and comfortable when you begin to write
- Put your heart into it and HAVE FUN!!!



# Lewis and Clark Middle School

## Friday Focus

September 10

1. Thanks so much for all of your efforts on Open House Night! We had a great turnout, the hot dogs were excellent, and best of all we had a chance to really show off. Estimates are around 1,500 people. All I heard was how much everyone's kids like the school because of the teachers. It's funny, because of our beautiful facility you would think that is what we would hear about, but instead its "my son sure loves his teachers or my daughter can't wait to get to school and go to her classes." Thanks to each of you for making last night a success and for making each day a success for our students. Great job!
2. Congratulations to Bethy Ayers, Donna Horn, and Kathi Rust our three faculty council representatives!
3. Speaking of congratulations, I was looking through the latest issue of The Transescent, the publication for the Missouri Middle School Association and there was an excellent article about "Stormin' into Normin' Finding Ways to Survive Change." Well, lo and behold if it was not written by two of our own, Georgia Humphreys and Eva Studley. Great job, ladies!
4. I also really meant what I said in the note on Tuesday about how important it is for all of us to focus on our successes and we have so many here! Over and over everyone I talk to – students, parents, and community members all say how great things are here at Lewis and Clark and the adults consistently share that their children come home excited and challenged by school. Yesterday morning I had a meeting with some community business members and they went on and on about all of the great things they have heard about us and what a shot in the arm it is for our community and students. We are doing what we hoped to and let's make sure we enjoy it. Way to go gang!
5. I appreciate the efforts many of you made assisting with reporters from the News Tribune this week and helping show off Lewis and Clark to our visitors from Digital Computer Company. They were all exceptionally impressed.
6. Speaking of visitors, we have two people from Blair Oaks School District coming over today to look at the compute set up that we have. I am sure they will be visiting the computer labs, classrooms, etc. They may be on their own, or with an escort. Just another opportunity to show what we're made of! They may have questions, etc. so feel free to share your expertise.
7. Feel free to leave at 3:05 today. Have a great fall weekend! P.S. every Friday is staff T-shirt day – be there, be square (or be like me and be both!)

Thought for the week, "You're teachers are really nice, you're lucky" Overheard a mom talking to her daughter at open house night.



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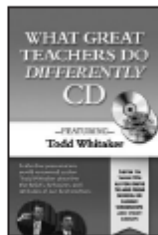
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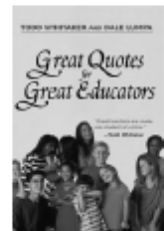
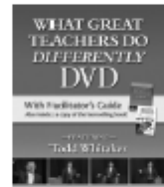
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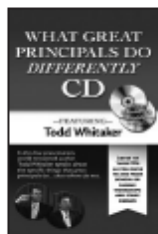
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