

Johnson Institute

for Responsible Leadership

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Fagan Harris and Baltimore Corps: A Case Study on Leadership and Non-Profit Lifecycles

Fagan Harris is President and CEO of Baltimore Corps, a nonprofit organization dedicated to accelerating social innovation, equity, and racial justice. The programs of Baltimore Corps are designed to harness the talent and energy of young people, putting them to work on some of Baltimore's most pressing problems. Harris founded Baltimore Corps in 2013. The organization has successfully navigated the start-up phase and now is addressing the opportunities and challenges of a rapidly growing social enterprise.

This case study can be used to help students explore the leadership qualities and skills of a person who is in the early stages of their professional career. The case is also intended to explore the *organizational lifecycle* as a paradigm for understand the challenges and opportunities facing a young organization.

Part I: Fagan Harris

Formative Years

Fagan Harris was born on April 4, 1987 in San Bernardino, California. His maternal grandfather was a pecan farmer in Georgia with a second-grade education and only two generations removed from slavery. Fagan's mother, Marie, attended segregated public schools in Albany, Georgia and, upon graduation from high school, enlisted in the Navy during the Vietnam War. Fagan's earliest memories of his mother were of her searching for a way to deploy her talents and commitment. "I remember accompanying my mother to the [employment office] where she waited in long lines for interviews. Even at that young age, I internalized her anxiety, as she pursued interview after interview, hoping that somebody would recognize her talent and give her a shot."

Later, Marie worked as a teacher's assistant during the school day, then commuted 30 miles each evening to work yet another full-time job in customer service for FedEx. Subsequently, she pursued her college degree and certification in teaching. "We would spend hours in a dimly lit kitchen ... as she fought to master the precepts of algebra and calculus, subjects never taught to her ... in the segregated schools of the Deep South. I will never forget the pride she exhibited when she was certified as a teacher and the professionalism that she brought to the classroom every day for fifteen years." Fagan's father worked in Job Corps for 30 years. "He helped me understand that a job can be a form of public service, not just a source of income."



Fagan Harris

President and CEO,
Baltimore Corps



Even at a young age, Fagan displayed one of the most important characteristics of a leader – the ability to observe and learn from his surrounding environment and empathy for people facing difficult challenges. A job delivering newspapers brought him into direct contact with the struggles and the resilience of people in his neighborhood. “As I went door-to-door, I saw that some people were struggling to pay the bills and that a lot of folks were struggling with mental health challenges. Seeing that up close and personal was formative for me.”

Fagan was a strong student and he participated in extracurricular activities. However, his experience in high school was defined by a culture of low expectations. Unwavering support and belief from his parents, the commitment of a handful of teachers, and motivation from his summer job as a carpenter changed his life. Fagan recalls how his first boss, Mr. O’Leary, tried and failed to teach him the craft of carpentry. “Fagan, you’re a good kid and I like you a lot. But you’re a horrible carpenter and nothing I can do will turn you into a good one. Go to college, kid. That’s where you belong.”

Intellectual Awakening

Stanford University is 3,000 miles from Baltimore, yet Fagan felt like he had been transported to a different universe. One

of the finest universities in the world, Stanford’s alumni include Nobel laureates, presidents, Supreme Court justices, astronauts, actors, inventors, and other leaders.

Never had Fagan been immersed in an environment teeming with such energy, passion, curiosity, and restlessness. “[At Stanford I was] surrounded by a lot of people who were on fire about changing the world and making a difference, and that peer group was really influential for me.” But he also witnessed frustration and resignation, particularly among students who were uncertain how to translate their passion into a sustainable career path. He watched many of his friends slowly gravitate toward bland and traditional careers that were not fulfilling for them only because they could not envision another path ... and they had debts to pay. “I’d never seen so many people who were genuinely inspired to make a difference in the world [but] frustrated by their inability to do that.” Perhaps it was at this juncture that Fagan first pondered the notion of helping people match their talent and passion for social change with meaningful careers in public service.

A Rhodes Scholarship sent Fagan to Oxford University in England and graduate study at Limerick University in Ireland. The cloistered atmospheres of Oxford and Limerick introduced Fagan to new fields of inquiry – philosophy and logic – that gave him a historical and comparative perspective on the human condition.

Answering the Call

In the middle of his graduate studies Fagan was approached by Ben Jealous, President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Jealous was the youngest person ever selected to lead the NAACP and a major force in the national civil rights scene. He wanted Fagan to help mobilize the African American vote for marriage equality in Maryland. Fagan learned that opportunities to make a contribution do not always align well with personal circumstances.

[T]he challenge is that I was in graduate school and, to be blunt, I had a lot of privilege. I had a lot of reasons not to go do that. ... But Ben called me again and he said, “You know, when history calls you have got to answer the phone and you must step up.” Well [laughing] when you get shamed by Ben Jealous, you step up.

Watching Jealous taught Fagan that effective leaders help their people grow and learn, being patient even when they fail. A painful experience in this regard was an assignment to organize a rally at Morgan State University in Baltimore. Although Fagan thought he had taken all the right steps to ensure a good turnout for the rally, none of the students or faculty turned out for the rally. Fagan winces as he recalls frantically running around campus trying to round up a few students – at least enough to be filmed by the TV cameras! The event, he admits, was a spectacular failure. Instead of accepting Fagan’s resignation, Jealous encouraged him to keep trying. “I learned from Ben that change happens when you reach up to that line that’s just beyond your comfort zone, it’s just beyond your span of control, your realm of confidence...”

A Puzzle and The Missing Link

On a winter evening in 2013, Fagan Harris sat at the kitchen table in his parent’s home in Baltimore where he had returned to live because he could not afford an apartment of his own. It was the end of yet another long and frustrating day in his search for employment – a quest that was now in its seventh month. Fagan was discouraged and bewildered. How could it be that a talented young person with superb credentials, experience, and a passion for public service, could not find a public service job in Baltimore, a city desperately in need of his talents and skills?

Then an idea came to mind. Could there be a missing link in the system that would match people like him with meaningful jobs in public service? In business terms, could it be that the “supply chain” is broken or flawed? More importantly, could the supply chain be fixed?

That day Fagan Harris began to plant the seeds of an idea that eventually would become Baltimore Corps.

Exercise #1: Fagan Harris has exceptionally vivid memories of a childhood shaped by hardship, resilience, and his parents’ ideals regarding community engagement. These memories have shaped his own ideology and his own aspirations.

All of us are shaped, to some extent, by crucial events or circumstances in our early years.

Construct a timeline of your most vivid memories – positive or negative – from childhood to age 18.

Try to think of what you learned from those events. How have those events and circumstances shaped who you are today as a person, as a professional or aspiring professional, as a leader? What are some themes that appear throughout your timeline – values or attributes that define who you are?

Part II: Baltimore Corps

The Idea

Fagan wondered how to design a system that could enable people with talent and passion to contribute to the City of Baltimore, whether in government or through some other type of impactful career. He knew from experience that people often find jobs through personal and professional networks. Also, he had learned that social change and innovation come most often from collaborative networks of diverse interests, skills, perspectives, and resources. The power of networks inspired the idea that Fagan often articulates:

Baltimore Corps is a network powered by an organization, not an organization powered by a network.

But the network had to be about more than just linking talented people to jobs. In Fagan’s vision, Baltimore Corps needed a core philosophy – a guiding principle – that would infuse its *functionality* with a bigger *purpose*, a soul. Again, the experiences of his mother surfaced in Fagan’s mind:

I think of my mother and her parents before her every day. I ponder the extraordinary distance they traveled in their lives and their unfulfilled potential. I often wonder what shape their lives would have taken in a different era. More important, I wonder how the world would be different if it had more fully experienced their talents. ... The barricades of class, privilege, education, access to social networks, loom large... deferring dreams, and impeding the progress of families across generations. The unconscious bias that lurks in the minds of each and every one of us all too frequently blinds us to the talent, genius, and potential that lays fallow in our midst ... We simply fail to appreciate or leverage the talents manifest in people who don't look like us.

Thus, a feature that would differentiate Baltimore Corps from other organizations would be its commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice. More than just a job-linking organization, Baltimore Corps would attempt to change the narrative in Fagan’s home city from one of division, conflict and despair to one of opportunity and hope.

Converting the Idea to Action

Soon the lofty goals and vision for Baltimore Corps ran head-on into reality – how does a person go about creating and launching an organization that will convert the idea to action? Many good ideas like Fagan’s never get beyond the first step – a compelling vision. Reality hits social entrepreneurs in the face like a cold splash of water. The boxer Mike Tyson once said, “Everyone has a plan until he gets punched in the mouth.” For start-up organizations like Baltimore Corps, the practical questions seem endless and daunting:

- Should a new organization be formed, or should the visionary idea be attached to an existing organization?¹
- What specific programs or services will be provided by the new organization and what niche will they fill in the community?²

- If a new organization is formed, should it be incorporated as a nonprofit, for-profit, or some sort of hybrid of the two?
- Who will be willing to supply initial funding – the venture capital?
- What will be the long-term business model of the organization? Will it ever be able to sustain itself?
- Will the project require a staff and, if so, with what skills?
- Will the idea require more than just financial support? Will influential people be willing to spend their political capital, if not their financial capital, to advocate for the organization and “sell” it to others?

Fagan readily admits that he had never previously faced these questions. His initial actions were in the spirit of trial and error, with many dead-ends and false starts. The most painful initiation concerned funding. At the time Fagan knew little about how nonprofits obtain venture capital, so he walked into his neighborhood bank and took out a personal loan for \$15,000. He laughs about it now, recognizing in hindsight what a tremendous risk he took. “I suppose I was too naïve to know any better, proving that ignorance can indeed be bliss.”

Gaining a Foothold

As with every other undertaking, Fagan learned quickly and began to share his vision with others to secure their support and participation. Echoing Green, a New York-based organization that invests in social entrepreneurs and their ideas (<https://www.echoinggreen.org/>), provided a modest amount of seed capital of \$70,000, over two years.

Fagan partnered with Strong City Baltimore to establish Baltimore Corps as a 501c3. He formed a board of directors and crafted the organization’s mission and values statement (See inset).

Baltimore Corps

(Source: <http://www.baltimorecorps.org/>)

Mission: To enlist talent and accelerate social innovation in Baltimore and advance a citywide agenda for equity and racial justice.

Vision: Baltimore Corps envisions a city empowered to develop, retain, and connect its leaders to achieve an equitable future for all of its residents.

Values:

Advance Equity and Racial Justice Citywide: Build equitable pipelines into city leadership; apply an equity lens to current policies and practices across the social impact sector; drive resources to historically disinvested leaders and organizations to evolve the profile of institutional leadership.

Improve Sector Effectiveness: Align effort and outcomes by promoting a common agenda across organizations; share data and measurement among and between practitioners to ensure continuous feedback and improvement; recruit and retain the strongest possible talent base dedicated to securing the city’s long-term health, as well as achieving equity in its communities and the organizations that serve them.

Put Baltimore First: Promote an equity agenda by influencing the practices and policies of social impact organizations and mobilizing a movement of leaders dedicated to dismantling institutional racism; provide multiple avenues for participation; facilitate open source collaboration and crowdsharing; model and normalize transparent practice.

In the beginning, Baltimore Corps focused on the flagship Fellowship Program in which promising young people received training and professional development in results-based leadership, management practice, and racial equity.

Exercise #2: Do some reading about challenges organizations face in the start-up phase of their development as well as recommended steps or “best practices” for social entrepreneurs at this stage, especially the development of a value proposition and a business plan.³

Identify the recommended steps in the start-up phase that Fagan Harris did and did not follow.

Assume you are a foundation executive, a wealthy donor, or venture capitalist. What would persuade you to make a financial contribution – to “invest” in Baltimore Corps? What would you require as conditions of your investment?

Try to put yourself in Fagan’s place. What would it take for you to muster the courage to put your own meager resources at stake by taking out a personal loan to start an organization? What might have given you the confidence to do this?

Establishment and Growth

By early 2016, Baltimore Corps had achieved a foothold with a staff of 18, an annual budget of \$2.5 million and growing track record of successful programs including:

- **Fellowship Program:** Baltimore Corps recruits talented individuals from all over the country to work alongside “visionary leadership” in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors working on issues related to public health, education, and workforce development. Each year, over 40 fellows descend upon Baltimore to lend their talent and passion. Approximately 80% of these talented fellows stay in Baltimore following their fellowships, with 50% remaining with their fellowship placement.
- **Elevation Awards:** The elevation awards provide planning grants of \$10,000 and personalized support to people of color who are piloting novel approaches to strengthen communities within Baltimore. These grants provide crucial venture capital at the most vulnerable stage of promising start-ups. As of 2018, 20 of these social ventures are still in operation.

- **Place for Purpose:** Place for Purpose is a job placement service that seeks to place “talented, mission-driven job seekers with social impact career opportunities. Placements include promising jobs with city government, nonprofit organizations, social enterprises, and other organizations that are contributing to civic life in Baltimore.

- Negotiating with other organizations to ensure that there is not counter-productive overlap or duplication of services.

Baltimore Corps faced many of the challenges that typically confront new organizations that are just establishing a foothold and beginning their growth phase such as:

- Focusing only on what the organization does best, and saying “no” to opportunities that might lead the organization astray – what management experts call mission drift;
- Building a board that is capable of advocating and securing resources for the organization;
- Developing the internal management and operational capacity to competently handle the growing portfolio of services;
- Finding time to think strategically, not just tactically, about the long-term future of the organization;
- Finding good partner organizations, in this case, partners who can improve the supply chain of talent to solve Baltimore’s most challenging problems; and,

On the last two points above, Fagan faced some particularly impactful situations, any one of which could have doomed the future of Baltimore Corps. For example, just as Baltimore Corps began to gain momentum, it came to Fagan’s attention that another organization called Thread was preparing to launch a new employment program in the region. While different from Baltimore Corps in focus and scope, Thread’s program was similar enough that it could conceivably be a formidable competitor. A face-to-face meeting with Sarah Hemminger, the President and CEO of Thread, led to an agreement. Hemminger very graciously backed away to give Fagan the space he needed to ramp up his operations.

Fagan refers to this as the “pass the baby” moment in Baltimore Corps history. Thread was willing to “pass the baby” to Baltimore Corps, which in that circumstance was better prepared to meet the need even though the organization was still relatively young. But Fagan knows that “passing the baby” can be a never-ending process that builds lasting collaborations with partner organizations. “We’ve got to put aside our [self-interests] here to get it right.”

In this example as well as many others, Fagan came to appreciate the notion of “coopetition.”⁵ One day an agency may be a competitor for scarce resources, such as a grant

from a foundation. The next day the same agency can be a partner, collaborating for the common good. It is the greater good that Fagan tries to keep in mind when deciding whether to compete or collaborate.

[This] movement will only succeed if we transcend the interest of only one organization to put the interest of our cities first. Baltimore Corps’ network is single-minded in its focus on [Baltimore] itself as the unit of change. Too often, leaders ... measure growth, and impact... at the level of their organization, competing for funding and talent, celebrating ... others’ failure, because we might look better. This limits our progress.

Exercise #3: This section of the case study has described some significant challenges and turning points for Baltimore Corps. Yet, through it all, Fagan Harris seems to maintain a singular focus on improving the prospects of his beloved hometown.

Discuss the following personal and professional challenges Fagan may have faced during the growth phase of Baltimore Corps. How do you suppose he addressed these challenges? What new challenges will face Fagan and Baltimore Corps in the next phase of its development?

- Transitioning from “visionary” social entrepreneur to managing the day-to-day challenges of growing a promising, yet still fragile, organization.
- Making difficult choices, saying “no” when resources are limited.
- Establishing himself, as well as his organization, in a network of social service professionals who have high ideals, but who also protect the interests of their respective organizations.

A Maturing Organization

As of this writing, Baltimore Corps is a well-established and respected agency, not only in Baltimore but in other places as well. With a staff of just under 20 and an annual budget of \$3.5 million, Baltimore Corps is building a record of accomplishment and has carved out a stable niche for its services.

As his organization has matured, so has Fagan Harris’ reputation. He has given talks around the country and has been featured in many local and national publications. ZY hailed Harris as “Baltimore’s Cory Booker in the Making.”⁶ In 2015, Forbes Magazine named him one of the 30 under 30 most promising social entrepreneurs.⁷ In 2016, Chronicle of Philanthropy selected Fagan as one of the 40 under 40 top young professionals “to watch [as] trailblazers crafting innovative new approaches to entrenched problems.”⁸ In 2017, Harris received a prestigious Ashoka Award to help advance his mission. He is the 2018 recipient of the Johnson Institute Emerging Leader Award.

Despite all of the accomplishments and growing momentum, Baltimore Corps is not immune to the challenges that face organizations that are maturing. Typically, organizations in the maturing stage of the lifecycle face challenges such as:

- Remaining innovative while simultaneously perfecting systems and processes for maximum efficiency;
- Continuing to focus on the communities being served, avoiding the creeping onset of bureaucratic thinking;
- Demonstrating outcomes in increasingly sophisticated ways, relying more on data and less on anecdotes and stories of success;
- Diversifying and solidifying revenue;
- Developing an identity and culture independent of the founder; and
- Developing smooth and predictable succession processes so that the organization does not become overly dependent on incumbents, especially in mid-top management positions.



Baltimore Corps is facing these and other challenges. For example, Fagan is proud that Fellowships pay a competitive wage of over \$40,000 per year. This is in stark contrast with other programs that promote a “service year” for college graduates that pay only modest stipends. “I think ‘service years’ are great, I think service *careers* are better. And we only get people to service careers by making it sustainable for them.”

The reality hits, however, when Baltimore Corps must advance the salaries of its Fellows and the Place for Purpose recruits while employers, many of which are large bureaucracies, catch up with salary payments. Fagan says that on a few occasions this glitch has put Baltimore Corps in a cash flow crisis. As a maturing organization, Baltimore Corps cannot stagger from one grant to another. Predictability and sustainability are key indicators of a well-established organization, and Baltimore Corps must find a way to stabilize its cash flow.

Fagan also notes that it is becoming more urgent for Baltimore Corps to implement rigorous outcome metrics. Funders and other supporters eventually want more than mere anecdotes of success, however compelling they may be.

Sarah Flammang, who is Director of Employee Engagement at Baltimore Corps notes how challenging it is to provide meaningful metrics of performance:

Because we are not directly involved in day to day service to clients, our metrics are even more complicated than a typical social service organization. We need to look at the progression and growth of people we serve throughout the year – how we prepare them to be successful. We do research on best practices, but also must assess our own methods. Another important layer is demographics. We want to provide equal access, which is essential to our mission.

Funders are beginning to press for the logic model of Baltimore Corps and hard evidence of impact on the community. This requires Fagan to raise the stakes and the expectations of his employees as well as himself. He notes that he has recently sent the message to staff that they must match their idealism with a comparable commitment to performance and meeting the increasingly demanding metrics of success. Flammang notes that this has not been a seamless transition for some staff members.

Our first metrics early on were “butts in the seat,” how many people we served or placed – but now we have moved on to outcomes and growth of clients, not just outputs. There must be constant improvement in what we track. Fagan has helped all of us along on that path. Nonetheless, some people have trouble moving to the point of metrics. They played an important role early, but it’s ok to move along.

Fagan’s distinctive management style is well-suited to an entrepreneurial organization, particularly in its early start-up phase. He recognizes, however, that the leadership skills that worked early on may need to be adjusted as the organization matures. Sarah Flammang notes that Fagan is “not someone who provides a lot of structure in management style ... not one to come in with a fully built out plan. The staff have to ask a lot of questions. This works well for some people but not for people who need structure.”

Along with these challenges, there are new opportunities that evolve from Baltimore Corps’ growing expertise. For example, several years ago Fagan noticed that the successful placement and retention rates in the Place for Purpose program was significantly lower for African Americans than that for whites. He suspected that there might be systemic bias in the employment practices of partner agencies, despite their verbal commitment to the ideals of Baltimore Corps. Fagan made a substantial investment, money as well as time, in the development of a sophisticated information management system to attack the bias. The system now is based on double-blind reviews of all application materials across the Baltimore Corps network. They stripped away obvious identifiers like name and gender. Fagan says, “we positioned individual achievements, and validated capabilities as the most important criteria for consideration in hiring, instead of relying on conventional proxies for talent – the name of your university, for instance – making it easier for institutions and hiring officials to truly see talent wherever it is found.” This simple change nearly doubled the placement rate for candidates of color, laying the foundation for today’s Corps, which is more than 60% people of color.

There are also other promising impacts. For example, shortly after Leana Wen became Baltimore City Health Commissioner, Fagan and Baltimore Corps undertook a massive talent search for her, a task that put significant

strain on Baltimore Corps capacity. Wen wanted to launch an attack on the overdose crisis in the city. This was the first time that a single organization had turned to Baltimore Corps to lead a significant hiring strategy. Harris and his staff identified 20 highly qualified people and Wen’s aggressive campaign has resulted in 800+ saved lives over two years. Now, Baltimore Corps regularly provides on-demand talent to organizations in need.

Looking Ahead

Fagan Harris has high ideals and an expansive vision. Yet he is also a realist. As he looks ahead, he knows he needs to enlist stakeholders in drafting a strategic plan. Like all nonprofit executives, he worries about funding and burnout with his employees and himself. He continues to worry about the future of Baltimore. “Our ambition is to really be the front door to a meaningful life and career here in Baltimore, so that anyone who wants to connect can connect, and can make the city a better place.”

It’s natural for the observer to ask, “Could Baltimore Corps sustain itself without Fagan’s leadership?” Again, Sarah Flammang notes:

Fagan is rarely in the office. He’s always out doing promotion, fundraising, forming strategic partnerships. We do a lot when he is not there and he ... is doing a great job of empowering people and pushing people to take the lead. So, the organization would be able to survive from an operational standpoint. But from a representation standpoint – promoting Baltimore Corps and building partnerships – Fagan would be difficult to replace.”

Baltimore Corps has leaned into its role as a platform for connecting talented people to opportunities to strengthen Baltimore City. Fagan says, “Our job is to create on-ramps so that anyone who is inclined to serve the city can do so with minimal friction and maximum support.”

In 2019, Baltimore Corps operates six programs that recruit and deploys talented people to drive forward social change in Baltimore City. Some of those programs, like the Baltimore Corps Fellowship, focus on full-time career opportunities. Others, like the Elevation Awards, tap into someone’s desire to work independently as a social entrepreneur. Their latest program, the Civic Innovators

Program, recruits technical talent from the corporate sector into the public sector on a volunteer basis. By broadening and differentiating the opportunities to serve, Baltimore Corps also expands the funnel of people interested in this work and reinforces a citywide narrative of Baltimore as a destination for social change.

One thing Fagan evidently is NOT worried about is his own stamina. “I’ve got the best job in the world – I love it. I get up every day fired up to work with my team to work with our community stakeholders, to work with people across the country to tell the story of our generation, and the role we’re playing to make the world a better place.”


Exercise #4: Imagine that you have invested a lot of time and effort in Baltimore Corps. Perhaps you are a member of Baltimore Corps’ board of directors or a major funder. Or maybe you are a long-standing employee and you hope to continue your career with Baltimore Corps.

- What are your major questions or concerns at this point in the organization’s lifecycle? What challenges and opportunities might be on the horizon for Baltimore Corps?
- What challenges and opportunities will Fagan personally encounter in his own leadership development?

References:

1. In the nonprofit sector this is called “fiscal sponsorship.” It is a kind of incubation strategy in which a fledgling organization becomes a “project” of an existing organization, piggybacking on that organization’s physical and governing infrastructure. If the incubator succeeds, the fledgling organization may strike out on its own, incorporating and establishing the proper structure to function as an independent organization.
2. With tens of thousands of new nonprofit organizations formed every year, there is growing concern in philanthropic and regulatory circles about duplication of effort, redundancy, and “cannibalization” of funding.
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4. <https://www.thread.org>
5. Brandenburger, A. M. and Nalebuff, B.J. (1996). *Co-opetition*, Currency/Doubleday. <https://www.strategy-business.com/article/17483?gko=30cb6>; <https://www.amazon.com/Co-Opetition-Adam-M-Brandenburger/dp/0385479506>
6. <https://www.ozy.com/rising-stars/baltimores-cory-booker-in-the-making/68726>
7. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erincarlyle/2015/01/05/30-under-30-these-social-entrepreneurs-are-making-the-world-better/#3a20c66213f3>
8. Chronical of Philanthropy, January 5, 2016
9. For example, Peace Corps, Teach for America, Americorps, City Year, and many other programs that provide opportunities for people to serve for a temporary period, generally with little or no compensation.





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