Accessing cultural orientations: the online Cultural Orientations Framework Assessment as a tool for coaching

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Recognition is growing of the advantages of building a cultural perspective into executive coaching, particularly where executives and managers are working in a globalised business environment. There is somewhat less recognition of the contribution that coaching from a cultural perspective can bring into any business coaching situation, whatever the role or context of the coachee. Culture may be perceived as an integral part of the individual's identity, as well as a set of characteristics held by other groups, and thus an awareness of one's own cultural orientations and preferences is a powerful aid to self-understanding and sustainable success in roles and relationships. This paper presents and discusses the use of an online assessment tool, the Cultural Orientations Framework (COF) assessment tool (www.philrosinski.com) designed for use by coaches and coachees in an individual or team context. The conceptual dimensions of the COF – as operationalised in the tool – are described, and in order to demonstrate the way in which the tool stimulates reflective learning, one of the co-authors presents a heuristic reflective account of an experience of completing the assessment tool online. The authors suggest that, for the coach, using the COF online assessment tool opens up greater awareness and clarity about one's own cultural starting points and assumptions, particularly the cultural foundations of values and beliefs. For coaches, using the assessment tool within the context of a coaching relationship can open the doors to a wider and deeper understanding of learned behaviours; the degree of congruence or incongruence experienced in different aspects of life; and the possibility of consciously choosing different orientations.

Keywords: coaching; culture; cross-cultural coaching; cultural orientation; cultural identity; assessment tools

Introduction

Culture is commonly defined as the characteristics of one group that distinguish it from another. A focus on outward manifestations (gestures, language, behaviours, artefacts, etc.) has given rise to a veritable industry advising people how to ‘understand’ and ‘cope with’ cultures other than their own. While the best-known contemporary cross-cultural theorists (Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998) locate culture to some extent in internal processes (Hofstede’s (1997) ‘software of the mind’), the emphasis in much literature tends to be on culture as external to ourselves, culture as something that other people have and display. How
we carry culture inside ourselves, how it shapes our perceptions and choices in every situation, has remained relatively unexplored.

This paper aims to raise awareness of and engagement with the culture perspective in coaching by presenting an evaluation of a recently launched online self-assessment tool, related to the COF. The framework was initially developed by Philippe Rosinski and published in Coaching Across Cultures (2003). The tool has been developed for individual and team/project use (http://www.philrosinski.com). Here we introduce it in the context of a discussion of the culture perspective within coaching, and discuss its applications as a learning device in coaching, both for coaches and coachees. One of the authors presents a heuristic analysis of her reflections as a coach during the process of completing the assessment and considering the results. This is a demonstration of the assessment process as a means of generating reflective learning. For the coach, using the COF online assessment tool opens up greater awareness and clarity about one’s own cultural starting points and assumptions, particularly the cultural foundations of values and beliefs. For coachees, using the assessment tool within the context of a coaching relationship can open the doors to a wider and deeper understanding of learned behaviours, the degree of congruence or incongruence experienced in different aspects of life, and the possibility of consciously choosing different orientations.

Culture has particular potency and relevance in coaching because it constitutes parts of both our inner and outer worlds. We both live in, are ‘part of’ a culture or multiple cultures, and culture is part of our identities. In both cases, culture can remain unacknowledged until some experience throws it into relief and challenges our assumptions about what is normal or appropriate in a particular set of circumstances (Gatley, Lessem & Altman, 1996).

This characteristic of culture, being at once a feature of our inner and outer realities and in both its inner and outer manifestations being largely tacit and ‘taken for granted’ offers to the coach a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is to surface cultural assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of thinking and perceiving. The opportunity is to harness the resulting insights to help executive clients towards heightened performance and sustainable success.

The notion that the coaching profession is best served by harnessing a range of perspectives has gained currency in recent years. Within scholarship on coaching, we can see the recent emergence and adoption of the view that coaching is most effective when it is enriched by multiple perspectives (Passmore, 2006; Stober & Grant, 2006). To quote Peterson (2006, p. 51): ‘People are complicated and the world is messy’. Nowhere is this more the case than in today’s globalised business environment, in which organisational structures and processes, people, suppliers and customers may be dispersed all over the world, and global corporations exchange ownership and locations as seemingly casually as playing cards.

Two well-established perspectives are the psychological and the managerial. The notion of ‘global coaching’ offers also the physical, political, spiritual and cultural perspective. (Rosinski & Abbott, 2006; Rosinski, 2006). These varied perspectives can be used as ‘lenses’ by the coachee, facilitated by the coach, to apprehend and comprehend, from the inner ‘being self’ (Rogers, 2004), the complex realities in which the external ‘doing self’ is engaged. For the purposes of this article, we are focusing on culture, but we would wish to stress that the boundaries between these
various perspectives are permeable, like the boundary between our internal and external realities.

The cultural perspective and the Cultural Orientations Framework

The 18 dimensions of the COF are grouped in seven categories corresponding to critical challenges faced by people everywhere, regardless of their role or position. The dimensions have emerged from a synthetic analysis of a range of theoretical frameworks developed by eminent anthropologists, communication experts, and cross-cultural researchers, including Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), Hall (1983), Hofstede (1997, 2001), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), among others. A detailed explanation of all the dimensions in the COF is beyond the scope of this paper, but readers may wish to follow this up by reference to Coaching Across Cultures (Rosinski, 2003, pp. 49–101).

Generally, theoretical frameworks for understanding culture (e.g. Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998), based on large data sets, have been used to explain and highlight differences between nations and groups, sometimes with rather dubious results feeding unhelpful stereotypes. Holden (2002, p. 3) was driven to describe this use of culture as a catch-all explanation as making of culture ‘a specious scapegoat’. Because of their deceptive apparent simplicity, face validity and immediate intellectual appeal, these frameworks have become almost universally adopted as a way of short-cutting thinking in intercultural situations (Holden, 2002).

Yet there is more to culture than this. Similar to the way that the psychological approach to coaching seeks to identify psychological filters to perception, harnessing the cultural perspective identifies cultural filters to perception. These filters are distinguished as cultural by virtue of their being part of the shared ‘mental programming’ that characterises the members of a human society (Hofstede, 1997). This emphasis on the level of populations rather than individuals may explain why this strand of research and theory-building has developed strong currency in the fields of management development cross-cultural management, particularly in the field of expatriate assignments, and the management of diversity, but as yet has witnessed limited consideration of its applications and utility to the fields of coaching and mentoring. The field of coaching, perhaps because of its focus on the individual, has been slower to absorb the wave of interest in culture.

The purpose of the COF assessment tool is to bring to light the individual’s cultural orientations, the cultural filters to perception mentioned above. On entering the tool online, the participant finds each of the dimensions of the COF represented by a question occupying a screen, and is invited to score themselves according to their self-assessment related to that question. The individual works through the questions once, giving their level of agreement, and then again, scoring themselves on their level of competence in that dimension. Having worked through the complete assessment tool, the participant receives a graphic representation of their scores demonstrating the consistencies or gaps between their espoused cultural orientation and their ability to straddle different orientations. As the example given below demonstrates, the process can give rise to quite profound introspection and reflection, particularly on values.
Working through the COF assessment

This section of the paper presents the process of working through the assessment, using an account of the observations and reflections of one co-author on encountering the online assessment tool for the first time. The sections of the assessment are presented consecutively, interspersed with reflections written in the first person and presented as blocked quotes.

The first category of the COF, sense of power and responsibility, relates to one's attitudes towards the place of human life within nature. Do we seek to control nature, taking a dominant and driving stance towards controlling our own lives; or do we 'go with the flow', accepting whatever fate casts our way? Clearly, the very activity of coaching is predicated on the idea that people have and need at least some level of control over their lives, but it is also important to note that individuals will be located somewhere along a continuum between 'control' and 'humility', with a certain degree of 'harmony' along the way:

Is life a matter of will, or of luck? At this point, I immediately found myself contemplating the enormous good fortune of my birth – in the middle of the twentieth century in the longest-established democracy in the world. Had I been born two hundred years earlier, to a peasant family, with my poor eyesight, I would have had a short and probably unpleasant life. So fortune has blessed me there. Then I think of the influence of a protestant upbringing. I am definitely a driven person. So, I can see that my cultural influences are in both directions, but overall, there is a mild orientation towards 'control'.

The second category, approaches to how we manage time, embraces three dimensions of our attitudes towards the supply and use of time (Hall, 1983). Do we see it as scarce on the one hand, with our seconds ticking away towards death; or plentiful on the other as a wide-open field on which we can relax and literally 'take our time'? Do we see activity as monochronic, i.e. with a sense that it is somehow best to do things or concentrate on relationships one at a time; or polychronic, allowing us to multi-task our way through a more chaotic life? Do we place more of our attention on the past (learning from past occurrences); the present (focus on the here and now and short-term gains); or the future (focus on long-term benefits and a far-reaching vision)?

This second category, orientation towards time, seemed in contrast to the first – a fairly familiar 'surface' issue, calling to mind all the clichés and easy solutions of 'time management'. However, the questions proved challenging. Considering whether I see time as scarce or plentiful, I realise that to me it is both, depending on the context, but I usually act as though it is scarce. My perception of time is as a great roll of carpet. Occasionally, the carpet is being rolled out ahead of me and seems ample and luxurious. At other times, the carpet is being rolled up under my feet, and I am literally 'running out' of it. Like many people of my generation and background, I worry about that elusive 'work-life balance'. Here is a source of stress that is largely self-inflicted. There is my work persona, constantly trying to pack more and more activity into the time available, like trying to stuff more clothes into a bulging suitcase. And there is my other self, who can spend three hours in the vegetable garden gently tending the plants and thinking about not very much at all. Which is 'me'? I place my preference in the middle of the scale, although with the caveat that in reality more of my life is at the 'time is scarce' end.
The dimension regarding a monochronic approach to activities – preferring to do one thing at a time; or polychromic – able to concentrate on multiple tasks or people at once, confronts me with quite profound change in recent years. Although capable of sustained periods of concentration on one activity, work and family life have forced me into multi-tasking. I check my emails at least every hour. I feel somehow uncomfortable if my diary is empty for a day. And yet I long for those precious moments when things become still. When I come to the second part of the questionnaire which asks me to rate my abilities in this area, I find I have lost the power to create that moment of stillness. I have become what I used to pretend to be – a skilled multi-tasker.

The next category, definitions of identity and purpose, resonates with two key dimensions in culture theory; the individualist/collectivist and the being/doing dimensions. Degrees of individualism within a culture are evidenced through an emphasis on individual needs, achievements and projects. A more collectivistic culture would emphasise affiliation within a group, members being as much inclined to identify themselves as ‘we’ as they would be to identify themselves as ‘I’:

Here one faces the question whether it is living itself and the development of talents and relationships that defines our purpose in life, or concrete accomplishments and visible achievements. As a management developer and coach, I immediately see the link in this question with the ‘classic’ theories of motivation. It also resonates with Tao ‘yin and yang’ symbol, the yin representing being and acceptance, the yang the outward-facing drive for accomplishment and recognition (Kim, 2001). I have lived with the imperative to ‘make something of myself’, thanks to opportunities that are denied to others. But what would I really choose if this moral imperative were not present? What truly matters? I place myself in the middle of the scale. But on scoring my abilities, in the second phase of the questionnaire, I am surprised to find that I am a high scorer on ‘being’. So my understanding of my identity is changing.

Considering an individualistic versus a collectivistic orientation recalls an earlier life and becoming politicised during the feminist movement of the seventies. How much did we talk about sisterhood in those days but really mean ‘myself’? This question reminds me of the feedback after a job interview, in which it had been noted that I used ‘I’ far more than ‘we’, even though it was an interview for a role managing a team. It is almost with a sense of regret that I check myself with a mild preference for individualism, and confirm (in the second stage of the assessment) that yes, I am rather good at it too.

The fourth category relates to how we arrange our organisational structures and processes, our organisational arrangements. Having four dimensions, this is a complex category, and of particular salience in executive and team coaching. It is often around these dimensions that the individual may feel either particularly at ease with, or ‘at odds’ with, the accepted mores, culture and climate of their organisation. The key dimensions here are hierarchy versus equality, linked to the concept of ‘power distance’; universalistic versus particularistic, which maps whether we believe that all cases should be treated in the same manner no matter what the circumstances, or that the circumstances will dictate how a case should be treated; stability versus change, relating to how comfortable people feel with change; and competitive versus collaborative, a dimension relating to how success is promoted and pursued within the organisation. While these dimensions pertain to organisational arrangements, they have their roots deep in a culturally defined sense of value and purpose, linked
to moral notions of what is right and wrong, justice and fairness, as well as what people prefer in terms of their personal psychological ‘comfort’:

The logical consequence of an orientation to equality is a preference for participative decision-making and empowerment. Distaste for the British class-system, coupled with the radical persona of the past, dictate that I should come down firmly in favour of equality. Yet bitter experience has taught that that consensus and empowerment, when badly managed, can cause negative consequences in organisations. I score myself mildly in favour of equality, although recognising that on a day when I feel more empowered, I would be likely to place the score higher. And sure enough, I display a talent for equality, when it comes to the second stage of the assessment. Seeing this result is encouraging. Yet it gives also prompts insights into times that I have been at odds with the culture of my employing organisation.

The British culture of my origins is understood to be rather ‘universalistic’ in its approach (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). So it came as a surprise to discover a preference for particularism, i.e. valuing tailored solutions, over the application of universal rules, for the resolution of problems in organisational life. This item relates directly to how comfortable one might feel working in a bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is now so dirty word in organisational life it is easy to forget that it was developed as a way of avoiding abuses of power and position. I would be an apologist for ‘classic’ bureaucracy that values transparency and probity. And yet, on the other hand, it appears that fifteen years of living and working in Russia and Italy, where decisions are typically more relative, have made their mark on my values and assumptions.

The item on attitudes to stability and change was possibly the most surprising in the whole questionnaire. With strong preference for dynamism and flexibility in the environment, I had to admit that I find routine boring and will go to almost any lengths to avoid it. So what does this mean when set against valuing ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’? These two different but related dimensions of the framework, when juxtaposed, highlighted an intriguing contrast and a glimpse into an area of personal complexity.

Regarding attitudes towards competition as opposed to collaboration as a way of organising, a combination of instinct and intellectual conditioning led me – at least on the surface level – to favour collaboration. Or is this better described as an antipathy towards competition? Pondering the conflation of ‘success’ and ‘progress’ in the questionnaire item leads to a further insight into beliefs and values. I realise that I do not necessarily believe that success is always accompanied by progress (or vice versa).

The next two categories on the COF tool are bound up with attitudes and behaviour oriented towards relationships. The category of notions of territory and boundaries has a single dimension, which defines whether the individual tends to form clear and strong boundaries between different areas of his or her life (such as the boundaries between work and home life) or allows boundaries between spheres and roles to be permeable, and how the individual manages their physical space:

This is one of the more sensitive aspects of the COF instrument, an issue that feels personally very ‘live’ at the moment. The realisation dawns that I have not successfully protected my physical and psychic space and at times have experienced a sense of invasion. Self-protection is a fundamental aspect of resilience. As a coach, teacher and family member, it might benefit me and others if I could experiment with setting the boundaries more clearly, although this will challenge patterns of behaviour learned long ago.
Next, the category of communication patterns, another four-dimensional category, focuses directly on the enactment of relationships in many spheres of life. The dimension of high versus low context is perhaps one of the subtlest, and brings into play aspects of language as well as other forms of behaviour. High context cultures rely greatly on implicit forms of communication such as gesture, body language and inflexion. Low context cultures favour a ‘what you see is what you get’ direct style of communication. The low context communicator may interpret high context communication as baffling obscure and even, in negative situations, a sign of untrustworthiness. The direct versus indirect dimension is closely linked to levels of context, and indicates how we will prefer to communicate in a conflict situation:

This section of the tool speaks directly to my twin interests in language and culture (Gilbert, 1999). I’ve found from bitter experience that the failure to spot high and low context cultures and its implications is one of the commonest stumbling blocks in cross-cultural relations. As a coach and consultant, the ability to operate both in high and low context communication environments is one of the key skills in my repertoire.

And what of direct versus indirect communication? I reflect on the value I was taught as a child of honesty, together with a learned belief, from Gestalt therapy, that individuals need to own their own feelings and take responsibility for their reactions to unwelcome feedback from others. People need to know or they cannot do anything to improve the situation. And yet as a manager I may have perpetuated poor performance through not wishing to sour relations in the workplace. Being committed to human growth and learning I tip the balance towards direct communication. But does this contradict my preference for high context communication in the previous item? There is clearly plenty of scope here for exploration and extending my repertoire of conflict handling strategies.

The affective versus neutral dimension indicates how we will manage our feelings in a communicative context. An affective culture will place a high value on display of feelings and emotions as a way of building and maintaining social connections. A neutral culture will tend to view such displays as inappropriate in certain contexts, and a person with a preference for neutrality will tend to display a level of precision and detachment in communication. Finally comes the dimension of formality versus informality, which relates to the relative value placed on strict protocols or conversely on spontaneity:

For many years a woman working in a ‘male’ environment, I learned ways of keeping displays of emotion in check. This was as much for the comfort of colleagues as to avoid the ignominy of ‘leaking’ emotions considered inappropriate. The question on affective/neutral communication style led to some considerable reflection on how these experiences have shaped dominant patterns of communication. It seemed to me that this item, perhaps more than any other, would depend on the specific context in which the communication was taking place, relatively neutral in work settings, definitely affective in the ‘private domain’. This dimension had congruence with the next; a definite preference for informal communications over formality, but with the caveat that informality and familiarity have to be authentic.

The seventh and final category in the COF pertains to preferred modes of thinking. To some extent there is a direct link here between modes of education, and dominant epistemologies. Here there are two dimensions. That of inductive versus deductive thinking, charting the dominant direction of thinking from practical experience to
theoretical generalisation, or vice versa. The analytic versus systemic dimension denotes a style of thinking, either analytically separating a whole into its constituent parts in order to examine their precise characteristics in isolation, or assembling separate parts into a cohesive whole, looking for connections:

This is the element of culture that first fascinated me. When working with groups of eastern European managers and academics on western-sponsored management development programmes, after the collapse of communism, my colleagues and I would use our time-honoured and fairly standard approach of facilitating an activity, such as a game, in order to draw out observations and some theoretical principles and to elaborate upon these. A clear case of ‘building on experience’. The eastern Europeans – products of a different education system – displayed an opposite way of thinking and were sometimes acutely uncomfortable with what they considered a ‘childish’ approach. Their view was ‘give us the theory first and then we will understand why you are asking us to do these silly things’ (Gilbert, 2001).

Coming down in favour of analytical versus systems thinking proves a challenge. Do I see it as an either/or or a both/and? Reflecting on the experience of completing the Cultural Orientations Questionnaire leads to the observation that it has stimulated a tremendous amount of analytical thinking. However, the direction of that thinking has all been towards creating connections, realising not only the complexity of these multiple dimensions but also the beautiful synergy in the way that they come together holistically and uniquely in the individual.

Leveraging cultural knowledge

If coaches approach individuals as ‘culture-neutral’ they may be missing a rich vein of values, orientations, assumptions and behaviours. The COF enables coaches and clients to access and reflect on the cultural characteristics embedded in the individual – those traits and preferences that have a learned origin through having been formed within a particular culture, rather than being attributable to personality or other individual psychological factors. The COF assessment tool can be used within individual and team coaching to:

1. Assess cultures, focusing attention on key variables and tendencies.
2. Discover new cultural choices, opening up new options, finding new ways to generate solutions.
3. Assesses cultural differences (and by implication, similarities) and thus improve the quality of communication.
4. Bridge different cultures (moving from recognition of differences and similarities to action to bridge the gaps).
5. Envision a desired culture, by providing a vocabulary with which to describe culture.
6. Leverage cultural diversity, using diversity as a resource and creating synergy.

Understanding our own and others’ cultural orientations should help us as coaches to identify how an individual or team might be similar to, or different from, the ‘average’ person who only exists only in myth. Coaching supervision provides an opportunity for the coach to work through the COF profile generated by the online assessment tool, identifying areas where the coach’s preferred cultural orientations
might lead to their values coming to the fore, and increase self-awareness to certain propensities, for example the propensity to become judgmental in certain circumstances.

Additionally, in performance coaching, the COF framework can be a key to unlock insights into underlying aspects of performance at work. Cultures are embodied in organisations and institutions of all types and sizes. If an individual’s cultural orientation is at a distance from that which is typical for the organisation, this might give rise to some discomfort, perhaps a certain sense of unease or dislocation; a feeling of ‘not fitting in’. Sometimes, people who do not fit the organisational norm can be of great importance to the organisation’s health and well-being because they challenge the status quo and taken-for-granted assumptions. But this can be at considerable personal cost. There may be interpersonal misunderstandings, leading to stress, and that permanent feeling of being a fish out of water. That is, unless the organisation is able and willing to leverage the benefits of the cultural diversity within its people.

Working through the COF with the support of a coach should provide new perspectives and insights, sharpening up focus on what can be changed, and by presenting alternative ways of orienting oneself on a particular dimension, suggest new strategies to add to a personal repertoire.

It could be argued that nowhere is culture more evident than in the home, in the nurturing and upbringing of children and in their early education. Cross-cultural knowledge is highly contingent, being embedded in complex specific situations. Rather than experiencing a cultural shift from one environment to another, one is more or less constrained to behave according to one’s cultural orientation in different circumstances. By highlighting areas of incongruence and dissonance between how one acts and feels in different contexts, the COF can help a coach to facilitate a client getting in touch in his or her work context with the kind of authenticity he or she experiences in the private domain.

There are also significant opportunities for leveraging cultural awareness within teams. The COF assessment tool in its online version provides a facility for team projects to analyse aggregated and disaggregated data for groups of individuals. As the instrument comes into wider use, it is intended to build larger and more complex data sets for quantitative analysis in future studies. The instrument may be used in conjunction with psychometric instruments such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator to provide a multi-dimensional toolkit for identifying, calibrating, and eventually celebrating diversity within the team. One aspect of the COF assessment tool that lends itself particularly to group and team contexts is that there is no sense of ‘labelling’ in identifying cultural dimensions and preferences. They are recognised as being contingent, flexible and shifting.

Under-represented orientations might be overlooked and may well include the wisdom, perspectives and skills necessary to address challenges that resist habitual solutions. Here the coach has a role in drawing out the value of adopting new perspectives on issues and generating new strategies for dealing with them. This is instrumental in identifying new growth opportunities and new choices for dealing with complex challenges. In other cases, the coachee could systematically recognize and build upon existing assets. The cultural inclinations of an individual or team might already be particularly suited for addressing certain challenges.
For example, a recent global coaching seminar of 15 coaches completed their cultural profiles (Rosinski, 2007). The overall time orientation showed clearly toward ‘scarce’ versus ‘plentiful’, reflecting the mainstream Western current bias that ‘time is money’ and that we should strive to use time efficiently. Furthermore, only 28% scored favourably on the ability to use the ‘plentiful’ time orientation (in spite of the fact that as coaches we are often called upon to help our clients learn how to ‘manage time’ more effectively). The possibility that time could be viewed as ‘plentiful’ seemed to be overlooked by the group and thus represents a developmental opportunity (the value of slowing down, of giving time to time).

On the ‘being/doing’ dimension, the orientation distribution was close to a normal curve (even bell shape) and the abilities scores were high both for ‘being’ and ‘doing’. These results echo the thesis that executive coaches contribute significantly by leveraging ‘being’ and ‘doing’. They bring an invaluable help in corporations where the emphasis is often on ‘doing’ at the expense of ‘being’.

Part of the strength of taking a cultural perspective is that culture is manifested both inside the individual, in the inner ‘being’ self, and externally, in the reality in which the ‘doing’ self is operating. Together we are engaged in a constant shaping of our cultural mores. The internal reality is in constant tension with the external. But it is a creative tension. The organisations and structures in which clients are working are at once shaping and shaped by a collective human activity. The coach with acute cultural ‘antennae’ can keep an eye on the overall cultural context of the client. By using the COF assessment tool the coach and client together can build awareness of the internalisation of the external culture, and the externalisation of internal culture. The starting point of cultural sensitivity is not an understanding of what makes other cultures different, but an awareness of one’s own cultural assumptions and patterns of thinking and doing; and an appreciation that these are relative and not absolute. Recognising that our own culture does not represent ‘normality’ but is just one way of seeing the world can be liberating in freeing up thinking and opening up new possibilities.

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