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Murphy, M., and Curtis, W. (2013) The micro-politics of micro-management: exploring the role of programme leader in English universities. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 35 (1). pp. 34-44. ISSN 1360-080X

http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/73316/

Deposited on: 13 June 2013

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The micro-politics of micro-leadership: exploring the role of programme leader in English universities

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This study is based on interviews with 25 programme leaders at two universities in England. Programme leadership is ubiquitous and essential to effective university operations, yet there is surprisingly little research on the role. It is an ambiguous and complex form of leadership, existing as it does in the space between standard academic and manager profiles. Existing literature on other leadership roles highlights such ambiguity as a major source of stress and cause of inefficiency. Drawing from the perspectives of current programme leaders, four main areas of difficulty are identified: role confusion, the management of others, the status and demands of leadership, and bureaucratic burdens. The paper suggests that the role of programme leader should be taken more seriously at both a research and institutional level, and that sufficient support should be implemented in relation to the four challenges mentioned above. Any real engagement with leadership at programme level, however, should also take into account the micro-politics of institutional management, a politics that combines issues of values, status and identity with more prosaic concerns over role definition, workload and student support.

Keywords: leadership; leadership roles; managerialism; university operations

Introduction

Programme leadership is central to the effective operation of the vast majority of universities in the United Kingdom (UK). Nevertheless, the role remains largely in the shadows. There is almost no academic literature and little in the way of training or support for those who take on the role. Programme leadership occupies an ambiguous institutional position, generally taking responsibility for managing programmes, but not for managing staff. Moreover, programmes vary widely – both in terms of size and complexity – so there is little equity or comparability between programme leader roles, even within the same institution. In general, programme leaders have a range of responsibilities, including course management, staff timetabling, curriculum development, coordinating assessment and collating external samples, marketing, liaising with key stakeholders and central services, and supporting students in difficulty.

The lack of emphasis on programme leadership is surprising, given the changing state of higher education in the UK. For a start, the role gets undertaken within the context of an ever prevalent managerialism in universities, a prevalence of concern to academics for some time now (e.g., Lawton, 1992; Winter, 2009; Yielder & Codling, 2004). An emphasis on 'increase[ing] productivity and control while reducing resources'

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(Milliken & Colohan, 2004, p. 389) has heralded a new micro-politics of 'quality assurance', a micro-politics that replaces intellectual responsibility with accountability, and normalises academic identities in terms of centralised regulation, measurable indictors of performance and auditable outcomes (Morley, 2005). A cultural shift from 'collegial' to 'corporate enterprise' (McNay, cited in Milliken, 2001, p. 78) has transformed working practices and relations, which inevitably means that jostling for position over departmental workloads has become increasingly prominent – what Worthington and Hodgson call 'peer exploitation', or the 'tactical micro-political manoeuvring by certain individuals to enable them to continue to pursue their own particular personal research and career interests at the expense of those who are left to shoulder their burden of responsibility' (Worthington & Hodgson, 2005, pp. 97–98).

Alongside this set of professional pressures, programme leadership has become more significant for that layer of university experience currently high on the UK agenda – the *student experience*. Academics who lead programmes tend to be much closer to this experience than other academics, particularly those who occupy 'middle' management positions. They often have significant input into aspects of support and pastoral care as well as aspects of pedagogy and curriculum design, placing them in a unique position from which to reflect on the relationships between both sets of imperatives. The role of the programme leader is therefore of crucial importance, particularly at a time when fees are set to treble in size.

In the present time of financial uncertainty, then, as university budgets in the UK continue to constrict, the subsequent 'streamlining' of management structures means the role of programme leader is increasingly pivotal and, in all likelihood, the workload intensified. The purpose of this paper is to examine this workload, and specifically the kinds of challenges faced by programme leaders in their attempts to fulfil their professional obligations. Using data from two university case studies, the paper explores how colleagues who perform this role cope with different sets of demands – institutional, professional, disciplinary and student – all at the same time. Also included in the paper is a set of suggestions from programme leaders as to how their own situation might be improved in the current challenging climate.

The politics of programme leadership

It should be noted that, at least in the UK, some universities have started to (modestly) examine the perspectives of current programme leaders. Both authors of this paper have recently been engaged in institution-wide reviews of the role, reviews that form the backdrop of the paper. One was commissioned to undertake a project that identified specific needs of academics responsible for leading programmes. The other was part of a 'programme leader review group', instigated in 2011 after the 2010 'staff survey' found programme leaders to be the most stressed group of staff in the university. Focus group findings from this indicated that programme leaders felt overwhelmed by excessive administrative workloads, that senior managers undervalued the role (as reflected in low levels of incentives, resources and status), and that a lack of a 'culture of teamwork' mitigated against effective leadership (Clarke, Watson, & John, 2011). This lack of acknowledgement occurs within a context of invisibility where the roles of teacher and researcher instead take centre stage.

Paralleling its institutional status, the role of programme leader is for the most part an invisible aspect of academic leadership in the research literature. There is a plethora of research papers on the role of academic leadership generally, and a subset devoted to middle management and leadership, incorporating heads of department and deanery level

(Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Floyd & Dimmock, 2011; Hancock & Hellawell, 2003; Lonsdale & Bardsley, 1984; Vilkinas & West, 2011; Wolverton, Ackerman, & Holt, 2005). However the lack of emphasis on the importance of programme leadership is stark and worthy of investigation itself, and suggests that the capacity of programme leaders to 'lead' effectively and with impact is not taken particularly seriously among scholars of management and institutional change.

A recent and rare study of programme leadership indicates that this is a significant oversight on the part of higher education (HE) researchers. Within the context of Australian multi-disciplinary universities, Krause et al. (2010) point to a number of difficulties associated with the 'boundary-spanning' programme leader role, including high administrative workload, a lack of role clarity or reward, and uncertainty regarding how programme leadership contributes to future career trajectories. These findings suggest that the ability of programme leaders to 'lead' effectively cannot be taken for granted.

This point is taken up by Bryman (2007, p. 705) in his literature review of effective leadership in HE. As he puts it, heads of department and department chairs 'are not the only leaders in university departments':

> One of the problems with the literature ... is that, at least implicitly, it associates significant leadership of university departments with individuals who are at least formally in charge of them. It is well known that university departments contain a variety of formal roles in which there is an expectation of leadership, such as course directors, directors of research, chairs of important committees, such as teaching and learning committees, and so on. These roles are sometimes uncovered by researchers concerned with departmental leadership in universities, but they are rarely considered in relation to the issue of departmental leadership effectiveness. (Bryman, 2007, p. 705)

The academic literature does, however, highlight aspects of leadership that are not necessarily accessible from the vantage point of annual reports and institutional reviews. While these kinds of mechanisms reflect logistical and procedural issues and challenges, the academic literature understandably has a different focus, one more concerned with value systems, institutional politics, role allocation and cultural identities. One point worth noting in this regard is the institutional pressures brought to bear on leaders of whatever type and the ways in which these can have an impact on their performance and the quality of their work. As Knight and Trowler suggest (2000, p. 69), 'the ways in which academic staff (faculty) experience their work often inhibit them from taking up what the research consensus suggests are ways to be better teachers'. This point is one geared towards teaching and learning, but could just as well be used to illustrate the diverse pressures laid at the feet of programme leaders. This is even more the case when Knight and Trowler (2000, p. 70) refer to universities as 'greedy institutions' where they are 'asking for more without caring sufficiently for the humans who work in it'. Programme leaders are particularly prone to pressure as they conduct activities that are for the most part unrewarded and unrecognised amongst the traditional emphasis on teaching and research.

One aspect of leadership that is focused on in the general leadership literature is the unique set of skills that are necessary for successful leadership to take place within a university context – context in this case being everything. While Wolverton et al. (2005) used their research to explore the needs of academic department chairs, their comments could just as easily reflect the needs of those who lead academic programmes within departments. They argue that the Chair embodies a set of skills quite different from that of a researcher or a teacher, in many cases required to embody all of these skill sets simultaneously:

> Research is carried out, for the most part, in isolation or within small groups of extremely like-minded colleagues by individuals who thrive on independence and resent interference. In contrast, managing and leading academic departments is a communal affair. Department chairs no longer have the luxury of long, protracted, uninterrupted expanses of time to think, ponder and write. By its very nature, the department chairship is a series of interruptions and interactions with many people at multiple levels of the institution. Interpersonal skills, the ability to communicate, the willingness to respond rapidly to situations, among other skills, which are not requisite to being a good faculty member, are essential to being an effective department chair. (Wolverton et al., 2005, p. 229)

All this must be conducted within the micro-politics of institutional and academic cultures, cultures that need to be negotiated and understood if programme leaders are to be effective in their roles. Milliken's study of the micro-politics of academic life (2001) lays bare the relative lack of power and influence of programme leaders within institutions, even though their roles on paper were significant. When it came to power bargaining and decision-making, programme leaders were low down the pecking order:

> The academic staff believed that the professors who would lobby the Head of School on resource and staffing issues held the real power. It was also widely believed that the Head of School would consult these professors on almost all matters before deciding on a course of action. The indications were that the heads of division and course directors would be consulted at a later stage and their wishes would be considered only if they did not conflict with the interests of the professors. (Milliken, 2001, p. 81)

These power differentials inevitably lead to tensions over status and reputation, with the research literature illustrating how uncollegial institutions can be (as opposed to the sought after ideal of academic harmony) (Meyer, 2007; Sullivan, 2000). It is also inevitable that programme leaders can get caught up in these more political aspects of carrying out their tasks. At the same time, while not covered in the literature base as such, they do occupy similar roles to heads of department in that they must be able to 'juggle' and 'cope' with both the tasks assigned and also any changes that are brought to bear on their role and their programme (Floyd & Dimmock, 2011).

Methodology

Fieldwork was undertaken in two very different institutions – the first, a member of the elite and research-intensive 'Russell Group' of 20 UK universities; the second, a research and teaching 'new university' that transferred from polytechnic to university in accordance with the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. Twenty-five interviews were conducted between June 2011 and February 2012 – 17 at the 'Russell Group' and eight at the 'post-1992' university. Programme leaders were selected to represent a range of departments and programme sizes. Programme leaders were approached directly and asked if they were willing to participate. While the majority agreed, some were too busy to take part.

To protect the confidentiality of respondents, quotes have not been assigned to particular individuals, programmes or institutions. In fact, despite significant differences in the management structures of the two universities, the issues raised by programme leaders proved remarkably similar – so there was little value in distinguishing responses on an institutional level.

Data were analysed to identify issues that spanned institutions and programmes. In the interviews the programme leaders were asked to consider the kinds of challenges they faced in managing their programmes. They were also asked to consider what actions

could be taken in the future to alleviate some of the worst effects of these challenges. The interviews were semi-structured in terms of questions and guidance, designed to focus specifically on programme leadership while being flexible enough to reflect the types of programme leader in the sector, while also reflecting the diversity of disciplines involved. Once transcribed the interviews were examined for any major shared themes and issues that surfaced during the research.

The researchers were keen to emphasise in the account below only those themes that surfaced in the majority of the interviews. While it should be noted that the themes varied in significance from programme leader to programme leader, their inclusion indicates a general trend in the leadership of programmes, and also chime with some of the findings in leadership research generally. These were themes that also surfaced across both institutions.

Findings: issues in programme leadership

While many of the programme leaders interviewed were positive about their role, enjoying the opportunities to shape curriculum and enhance learning experiences, all felt to some extent overworked and stressed. Four themes were particularly evident in this regard across institutions and programmes:

- Role confusion
- The management of others
- The status and demands of leadership
- Bureaucratic burdens

Role confusion

One of the main difficulties that programme leaders reported related to the vague definition of what the role encompasses, which could lead to the blurring of boundaries between different roles and positions:

> The blurring of the role of programme leader and administrator has been difficult and causes tensions, as some tasks tend to fall between the gaps. People are doing things that are traditional [tasks] for one role or the other, and staff are unsure of their obligations.

One example of the impact of this role confusion related to student support:

> When it comes to communicating with students, administration seems to be doing much of the high level communication with students. This is a quality issue. Academics are so busy, and end doing less communication than they should – doing rather than 'leading'.

Even when these boundaries were apparently clear, programme leaders pointed to the paradoxical nature of their role – that they possessed accountability but not authority. This was perceived to be a major source of difficulty: 'Being accountable for the delivery of programmes for which we have no say over the allocation of resources is really frustrating and stressful'. The most evident confusion centred on notions of leadership. Most programme leaders suggested that they had programme management responsibility, but that they were not line managers. Some viewed this as an artificial distinction, one that could not be maintained in practice; 'how can I be expected to lead and not manage?' Others felt

that they were expected to act as line managers in particular situations and at specific times, but not at others:

> Although I am not a line manager, I do conduct appraisals with teaching staff. Then I take recommendations for their training and development to my line manager, who deals with it. It can feel a bit odd.

The ambiguity of the role was not only confusing for programme leaders: 'Sometimes I am called upon to act as line manager and this causes confusion for members of the team'. In both institutions, role descriptors and guidelines for levels of remittance were available. Generally programme leaders viewed these documents as rather equivocal, open to interpretation and with the potential for manipulation. Some claimed that programme leader working conditions were dependent on localised agreements – 'behind closed doors' arrangements put in place to ensure that programmes had leaders, regardless of personnel.

The management of others

Commonly, programme leaders do not have the authority that comes with official line management responsibilities, and so must 'manage' people without much in the way of power. This was deemed a significant problem by many of the interviewees. One referred to his role as a 'toothless tiger' when it came to his peers: 'If someone doesn't do stuff, if they don't turn up for exam boards, what do we do? What can I do?' This lack of authority, a classic case of responsibility without power, was judged to have a detrimental impact on the programmes they run:

> Management of others is difficult, we have yearly review meetings, prima donnas all of them, only half of them turn up. You don't have any power and it's difficult.

Programme leaders felt their role depended on the cooperation and collaboration of members of their team. Many perceived their leadership to be partial, tenuous and in continual need of renegotiation. If even one member of their team refused to participate, authority and effectiveness were significantly undermined:

> I think it is much more difficult to lead a programme without any real line management authority. You have to try to encourage people to work together and to support each other. If colleagues are not inclined to do this, the only thing you can do is talk to your Head of Department. When I've had to do this, it has felt a bit like 'grassing up' and has made team relationships really difficult.

The main cause of concern in this regard related to the capacity to cover the teaching on the programmes, cover that sometimes conflicted with the research imperatives of departments: 'My main difficulty in running the [course] was the allocation of teaching duties – I was unable to do this'. One of the consequences was the lack of diversity for the student experience:

> For two years lectures were delivered by the same lecturer, when students should have had wider experience – decisions were made about teaching that were not student driven as such.

This lack of influence, according to one programme leader, meant that for teaching, one was 'always reliant on the goodwill of other people', while another felt it was always a 'constant challenge to get others to help out'. Another programme leader felt that the allocation of teaching duties was erratic at best: 'you informally approach people [if you want them to teach]. Which is strange, I mean what do I do if they say no?' While most suggested that staffing was eventually covered collegially – 'there doesn't tend to be acrimony, someone will step in in the end' – (with one or two notable exceptions), this was seen as one of the more stressful aspects of the role.

The status and demands of leadership

For many of the programme leaders interviewed, the status attached to their position was perceived as a key challenge: 'There is no kudos for programme management. You don't get anything for doing it at departmental level even if the department gets money or recognition for it'. One programme leader, when she referred to her position as programme director, said that the Head of Department called it job inflation – 'he didn't see it as important'.

This lack of status is a concern, especially as the intensive nature of programme leadership is often overlooked:

> People don't know what you're doing, the amount of work involved. People will see the tip of it, but not the rest. The work is not acknowledged by management. They might even possibly take it for granted.

The naivety of new programme leaders in particular meant that they could find the political aspects of leadership a struggle at the institutional level – 'staff are not politically astute enough to deal with managerial stuff, and the politics of leadership is going to become even more important'. The leadership role could also take its toll on their professional lives:

> Sometimes new programme leaders can also be perfectionists, which can be a problem or an excuse. But leaders need to be 'good enough' – i.e., they shouldn't expect to spend six hours preparing each lecture. Sometimes this can be quite a convenient excuse to get out of research.

Another aspect of this is the different levels of work demanded by different programmes – some leadership roles being more intensive than others: '. . . there are some tensions – some programmes are bigger than others. . . . There is an issue of equity here'. The key underlying issue with this lack of status is the relative levels of prestige attached to teaching-related activity and research, evident in both the Russell group and the new university. As one programme leader stated, 'programme leadership is something nobody wants to do, because of the research angle, so it's left floating around'. Another claimed, 'I kind of got the role by default. Nobody else who teaches on the programme was prepared to do it'.

There is a major disjuncture at departmental level between what is publicly and privately acknowledged, which means that leadership and management come lower on the list of priorities:

> The problem is that the emphasis is on research and that gives you kudos but less time to spend on management. So there is a need to recognise leaders and what they do. One big issue is how to allocate time correctly so that leadership is done properly. Because it's not recognised you then have to spend your time juggling.

The relatively weak status of programme leadership also impacts on promotion prospects:

> The higher up you go is based on research, not on your man management [sic]. Research does inform teaching but A-star researchers do not necessarily make good teachers. My colleagues know research is important for career, and to manage that [perception] is very difficult.

Bureaucratic burdens

A strong message that came across in the interviews at both universities was that institutional practices sometimes provided obstacles to effective programme leadership. Feeling on this ranged from mild frustration to anger. At one end of the spectrum were programme leaders who were unsure as to what the institution expected of them: 'I'm not sure what the relationship is between what I would like to do as a professional and what the institution would like me to do'. Others expressed concerns over the ability of the institution to provide effective administration at the departmental level:

> With timetabling, requests for people who were research-oriented needed to be taken into account. But I have to fight for timetabling, as it is organised centrally, where before [when it was school-based] it was quite straightforward.

Administrative support was often perceived to be inadequate:

> [The university] as an institution is not very good at being supportive, there is a lack of administrative support compared to other places. But it is good at patting you on the head . . . . None of us know what the regulations are even now.

Others believed that, rather than needing more involvement from the centre, departments needed less – for example, one programme leader thought there was too much surveying of students: 'we over survey our students, module evaluations, alumni, then we ask them over the summer about library resources, then there's [student surveys]'.

Others believed that institutional interference negatively impacted on their ability to lead and deliver quality programmes:

> There's a lot more work now because of central demands, it is absolutely overwhelming. For example, with the recent edict on _____, it has taken me an enormous amount of time doing this, and we end up spoon-feeding. Students are becoming consumers and we're not skilling them into how to find information. Each section seems to believe that's all that you do. Nothing is allowed to give, and it impacts on your private life.

Another programme leader, in a department where resistance to central administration was high, reiterated this:

> The institution is tolerated by the academics at best. We have seen [the university] become more directive and grow, and this is viewed with resentment and seen as irrelevant, not useful . . . very rarely does [the university] remove duties, we're now asked to do more feedback, but what about doing less, anything we could de-prioritise? There is no realisation that extra duties have an impact. This has to be seen as a balanced initiative.

Another programme leader felt that institutional imperatives could easily act as obstacles to what he considered core activity:

It's easy to get sucked into bureaucracy, form filling. Sometimes you need to get rid of some of this stuff as there's not enough time or will to think about assessment patterns.

What is to be done: how to support programme leaders

As well as asking programme leaders to discuss the challenges they faced in their professional work, they were also encouraged to reflect on what kinds of support mechanisms would be of benefit to their development. It quickly became clear that rare is the programme leader who has been offered any training prior to taking on the leadership role – an oversight viewed as a problem by some of those interviewed: 'You just have to get on with it, and that is the biggest problem – you are thrown into doing the job without skills'. Respondents perceived there to be a real need to enhance the skills, knowledge and understanding of programme leaders across a range of issues.

One of these issues related to role definition. Respondents suggested that programme leaders in many cases need to develop their understanding about what the role of programme leader entails, as there appeared to be some confusion around this basic issue: 'Explain what a programme leaders actually does – what is the definition of a programme leader? Explain all the politics of it.' Oftentimes programme leaders are not aware of what they are taking on as part of their everyday obligations, suggesting that prior understanding of the complex nature of academic leadership would be of major benefit:

It should be explained that the job is about juggling everything, managing students and staff, situating courses in the context of student lives, while thinking of the bigger picture and how the programme is aligned to that.

Developing an ability to cope with the administrative load was another issue identified in terms of supporting programme leaders. Interviewees felt that more systematic guidance and support could be provided for staff around a range of tasks essential to this load: 'There is a need to focus on structures and procedures in the College, committee structures and [student records] procedures, regulatory complications'. Although considered quite basic functions to more experienced staff, understanding core tasks associated with programme management can be quite daunting to new programme leaders. This is why, for example, programme leaders want 'more information about how to write annual reports, how to manage feedback, deal with feedback'. It is why they want help 'understanding admissions systems, curriculum design and benchmarking, help with setting up new programmes'. An even more practical suggestion related to the desire for a 'calendar so that people know what to prepare for, and a handbook for programme leaders'.

Enabling programme leaders to deal effectively with students on their programmes was identified as a crucial support mechanism at institutional level. Some programme leaders felt they needed guidance in relation to student support and the student experience generally. There was a sense from the interviews that this aspect of the job tended to be overlooked when leaders spent their time firefighting and carrying out numerous administrative tasks. One of the programme leaders suggested that having to deal with student issues that were non-academic related, was 'a big issue on programmes and should be dealt with more effectively'. The positioning and role of programme leaders within departments means that they inevitably come into contact with the personal experiences of students, and therefore 'need to understand the student perspective, including student problems, illness and personal problems'. One programme leader went further by stating that making sure students 'are ok' is 'part of the definition of a programme leader'.

Programme leaders also tended to lack confidence in their capacity to formally assure the *quality* of the provision they had responsibility for. They felt they would benefit from more guidance in terms of interpreting and putting into practice institutional policy. Once again, while such tasks can often be taken for granted and sometimes seen as beneath the status of the 'academic', understanding how 'to do QA at programme level' was seen as invaluable by programme leaders. This was viewed as important, not just because of the bureaucratic demands of institutional regulation, but also because programme leaders 'need to focus on managing [programme] quality and course improvement'.

A final area of support for programme leaders related to the development of appropriate skills. Although clearly a significant concern, the development of relevant skills was emphasised less than the knowledge and understanding identified above, although some helpful recommendations were made in this regard. Interestingly the area most focused on in terms of skills were 'people skills', the capacity to be able to deal and cope with other people in a variety of contexts: 'Leaders need to develop a capacity to manage personality types' was one of the recommendations put forward, but there were plenty of others, including for example, developing 'good communication skills', which in many contexts can be too generic to mean anything useful, but in this case came with some specifics attached. These included: taking 'an interest in people, which helps to motivate them in their daily lives – the interpersonal aspect is quite important'; knowing 'how to manage people, up and down and sideways especially around work load sharing'; developing 'diplomacy skills when dealing with negative feedback implicating staff, and looking out for weak areas across teachers'; gaining 'chairing skills – the ability to plan meetings to avoid domination and ensure inclusiveness'; and 'learning how to value people's discussion and be good at taking issues forward'.

Conclusion

To some extent, the findings of this research sit comfortably alongside the existing literature on leadership and its emphasis on the micro-politics of institutional management. While there is clear evidence of power relations and their capacity to distort and manipulate professional working practices, there is also evidence of another form of micro-politics, a politics of *accountability* not just to the institution but also to the programmes and the students than enrol on them. While definitions of 'quality' teaching and learning are not without their problems, it would be unwise to ignore the damage to university life that ineffectual programme leadership can inflict.

Universities rely heavily on programme leaders in the development, delivery and management of their provision, yet little in the way of resources, training or support appears to be offered. The role is high in workload and stress but low in recognition and reward, high in responsibility but low in authority. Much of the routine work 'falls below the radar', as programme leaders 'take up the slack' to ensure the quality of student experience. This key aspect of the role is often undertaken at significant personal expense – impacting negatively on their research career and/or family life. While there was plenty of evidence of 'goodwill' found during this fieldwork, this research identifies significant areas for universities to address in terms of balance and equity. While this paper makes recommendations for specific training and support, what is really required is 'a cultural shift', whereby programme leaders become empowered to *lead* and the role 'isn't just a drudgy job' as one programme leader bluntly put it. This means promoting collegiality and teamwork on an institutional level. It also means that all members of academic staff are expected to take on responsibility for programme quality. Most of all, it means valuing and recognising

leadership in an institutional context where politics will increasingly have few places to hide.

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