

Appreciative Intelligence®: post merger communication in a public organisation

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Abstract: The purpose of the study is to show how the appreciative approach can be applied to support post merger management. Appreciative Intelligence® and appreciative inquiry approaches were applied in a public organisation which had undergone an integration process where three government units merged into a single operating unit. An appreciative inquiry intervention and two follow-up interviews were conducted in the case organisation. The study contributes to the literature on the management of the post merger integration process by a focus on the human integration and by a focus on the outcomes of positive interaction.

Keywords: Appreciative Intelligence®; appreciative inquiry; post merger management; communication.

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1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate post merger integration in a public organisation. Previous studies on post merger integration emphasise task integration and human integration (Birkinshaw and Bresman, 2000), communication (Dooley and Zimmerman, 2003; Epstein, 2004; Allatta and Singh, 2011), trust and collective success (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001) and organisational identification (Elstak et al., 2015). Adopting an appreciative approach, this study will focus on the human integration in a post merger situation, which has gained much less attention in the literature than the financial and legal aspects of the merger (Lawlor, 2013; Buono, 2003; Cartwright and Schoenberg, 2006).

The study presents a case study where an appreciative approach was used as method in fostering social interaction and communication in a post merger situation. This case depicts a post merger situation in a public organisation after three governmental units integrated in 2010. First, an Appreciative Inquiry intervention was conducted to support post merger management by focusing on the positive potential of the newly formed organisation. Managers and leaders from all three parts of the organisation were invited to meetings to share their own experiences of when they had been appreciated and valued, identifying what they consider as valuable in the organisation, and what they see as the positive potential in the future.

Second, follow-up interviews were done to collect data on how the results of the intervention had been utilised in the organisation. The Appreciative Intelligence[®] approach was utilised in analysing the progress of post merger integration in the organisation.

Thirty members of the organisation participated in the study. The data comprise 15 semi-structured interviews and notes from two workshops. The process involved the identification of organisational core values and life-giving forces through sharing positive stories, discovering core values, formulation of possibility propositions and valencing and prioritising possibility propositions. The data was collected by four Master's level students at the University of Eastern Finland.

As a result of the intervention, five operational core values and seven propositions for activities to be implemented immediately or within a year were identified. Detailed propositions were made to engage the members of the organisation to act towards the identified potential. The process resulted in highlighting how the appreciative approach can benefit the post merger integration process by enhancing communication, shaping conversations to focus on the positive potential and bringing attention to the human aspect of a merger.

In the following, we will first present literature review on post merger studies. We will then introduce the case organisation and discuss the qualitative methodology used in this study. After presenting the results of the intervention and follow-up interviews, we will conclude with the key findings and discussion.

2 Theoretical background

Public sector organisations provide a unique context for post-merger studies. Pedersen and Hartley (2008) address the challenges faced by public sector managers who are in the middle of the tension stemming from both the “new dynamic image of public leadership”

and “strengthening of central interventions and control, and explicit and rigorous standards and performance regimes” [Pedersen and Hartley, (2008), p.328]. This juxtaposition of rivaling values forces public sector managers to balance between the rules, standards, efficiency, and demands for productivity and the call for providing excellence in user satisfaction. Managers in public organisations have to consider bureaucratic organisational design and the impact of numerous authorities, legislation and stakeholders [Sminia and van Nistelrooij, (2006), p.100]. Managers need to answer to the need of providing upgraded and reliable services to the public while in the meantime these very services are also being reconfigured and dismantled [Pedersen and Hartley, (2008), p.333].

Previous literature on mergers presents cases primarily on private organisations. A merger is considered as a coupling of equal organisations [Epstein, (2004), p.174]. Epstein (2004) argues that the planning of post merger integration demands a sophisticated approach and a carefully drafted plan. He notes that planning before and after the merger calls for a thorough understanding, and many seemingly successful mergers can fail due to failure in the planning phase, which should be completed well before the merging event takes place [Epstein, (2004), pp.174–175]. Teerikangas (2008, p.68) addresses that after a merger, the new organisation must form an integration strategy which also depicts the desired level of integration. The strategy should also consider the equality of the merging organisations [Epstein, (2004), p.176]. The integration strategy can be planned in phases, meaning that immediately after the merger, the level of integration stays on a moderate level but is increased later on [Teerikangas, (2008), p.69].

Teerikangas (2008) has studied the speed of the integration implementation process in Finnish companies. Characteristically, Finnish companies have a slower pace in the integration process compared to US companies. Also, in the Finnish companies changes are divided over several years after the actual merger where as US companies move through the integration with a more aggressive rate [Teerikangas, (2008), p.73]. There is evidence that a swift implementation of the integration-enhancing activities predicts a success in a merger (2004, p.178).

Birkinshaw and Bresman (2000) distinguish two aspects of organisational integration after a merger, namely task related integration and human integration. Task integration refers to sharing of resources and competencies of the organisation whereas human integration refers to the sense of shared identity and work satisfaction [Birkinshaw and Bresman, (2008), pp.398–399]. The psychological processes taking place during a merger and their impact on the merger’s outcome have received some attention [Lipponen et al., (2004), p.392]. Literature suggests that while the majority of research focuses on the financial and legal aspects of the merger, more attention should be paid to the merger’s impact on the members of the organisation and the post-merger integration (Lawlor, 2013; Buono, 2003; Cartwright and Schoenberg, 2006). In this paper, we will focus on the human integration process in the organisation studied.

Research on human integration has paid considerable attention to communication in integration. Dooley and Zimmerman (2003) state that conversations are a way of gaining an idea of which factors require attention in terms of the long-term success of the integration [Dooley and Zimmerman, (2003), p.65]. In addition, the characteristics of communication in a post merger integration process should include consistency and high frequency [Epstein, (2004), p.177]. Communication and conversations have a fortifying

quality in a post merger integration process and whether positive or negative, they help to reinforce the perception of the other merging party. A negative first impression can be hard to overcome later on but in contrast, a positive impression can prove to be beneficial during harder times [Dooley and Zimmerman, (2003), pp.59–60, 65].

There are several ways of supporting active communication. Teerikangas (2008) lists tools to encourage the integration of the merging organisations. A shared intranet, visits across the organisation and collective briefings are ways to enhance communication. Often attention to communication tools or effort in activating knowledge and information sharing is not enough. Allatta and Singh (2011) found that communication increased between the merged organisations when there was interdependency of tasks. They studied the routines and communication in a post merger situation, and found that the communication patterns evolved slowly during the integration and reached the highest level after two years of the merging [Allatta and Singh, (2011), p.1116]. Similarly, Teerikangas (2008, p.75) suggests that shared projects and processes are ways to increase exchange of ideas and learning between colleagues.

Collective successes have also been found to advance the change process (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001). Bijlsma-Frankema (2001, p.203) states “experiences of collective success have been found to be very strong triggers to change preferences from the old way of doing things to the new ways”.

A variety of factors in addition to communication can be held responsible for a successful integration process. While considering the human side of the post merger situation, Epstein (2004, pp.176–178) lists coherent integration strategy, strong integration team, communication, speed in implementation and aligned measurements as factors of success. Birkinshaw and Bresman (2000, pp.419–420) conclude that successful human interaction can enhance the integration of tasks after a merger, and the result of aiming at integrating tasks before the human integration has been initiated, is a potentially meagre outcome of the merger.

Besides the internal success factors there are several external contributing factors to the successful merger. Lawlor (2013) studied the effect of change in the physical surroundings after a merger on the members of the organisation. She discovered that a new environment can prove to be a source of motivation and work satisfaction, particularly in a situation where the new environment was specifically built to suit the post-merger situation [Lawlor, (2013), p.717].

Through dialogue, norms and expectation are communicated and more easily shared [Bijlsma-Frankema, (2001), p.200]. Cording et al. (2014) pay attention to the role of organisational values during the post-merger integration process. They suggest that executives who are engaged in the post-merger integration should pay attention to the connection between the espoused values and realised practices. When the espoused values are not aligned with the actions and communicated values influences both organisational authenticity and performance [Cording et al., (2014), pp.40, 52].

Elstak et al. (2015) point to the importance of motives for organisational identification during a merger. In order to foster organisational identification management should communicate the identity of the organisation during a merger in addition to communicating the rationale. Internally driven image of the organisation is important in shaping the organisational identification, meaning that employees seem to hold on to their own beliefs of the organisation rather than external opinions [Elstak et al., (2015), p.52]. More research on organisational identification in an organisational merger context is called for [Lipponen et al., (2004), p.395].

The qualities of an appreciative inquiry process bear resemblance to the success factors of post merger integration. Appreciative Intelligence[®] is based on an assumption that studying what works the best is the greatest way to learn and change (Thatchenkery and Metzker, 2006). When sharing stories of what works well, the members of the organisation learn about each other's strengths and build up faith in their ability to perform well [Whitney, (2010), pp.77–78]. This has direct connection to building trust. Bijlsma-Frankema (2001, p. 204) asserts that trust has been found as a key element in integrating cultures, and that dialogue, shared goals, and positive experiences have the potential to enhance it.

Dooley and Zimmerman (2003, p.65) conclude that Appreciative Intelligence[®] as a method can help in shaping the conversations in a post merger integration process as it deliberately focuses in the positive potential and alters the existing conversational patterns. Whitney (2010, p.76) points out that focusing on the positive potential in the organisation is a more likely way to achieve goals compared to finding insufficiencies. The challenge of focusing on the positive potential during post merger integration is to convince leaders of the significance of everyday conversations [Dooley and Zimmerman, (2003), p.64]. Sminia and van Nistelrooij (2006) studied an organisational change process in a public organisation context and found that an opportunity to participate to the change project provided by the top management for the employees had a significant impact on the outcome of the change. They reported that conferences that the organisation held at the start of the project advanced employee commitment and enthusiasm [Sminia and van Nistelrooij, (2006), p.110]. In the following section, the impact of an appreciative inquiry project on a post merger integration process will be considered.

3 The case study

The case organisation, Northern Savo unit of the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY-Centre) is in charge of regional implementation and development tasks of the central government. The abbreviation for the ELY-Centre comes from Finnish and refers to the areas of responsibility the organisation has: business, industry, labour force, competence and cultural activities (E), transport and infrastructure (L), and the environment and natural resources (Y).

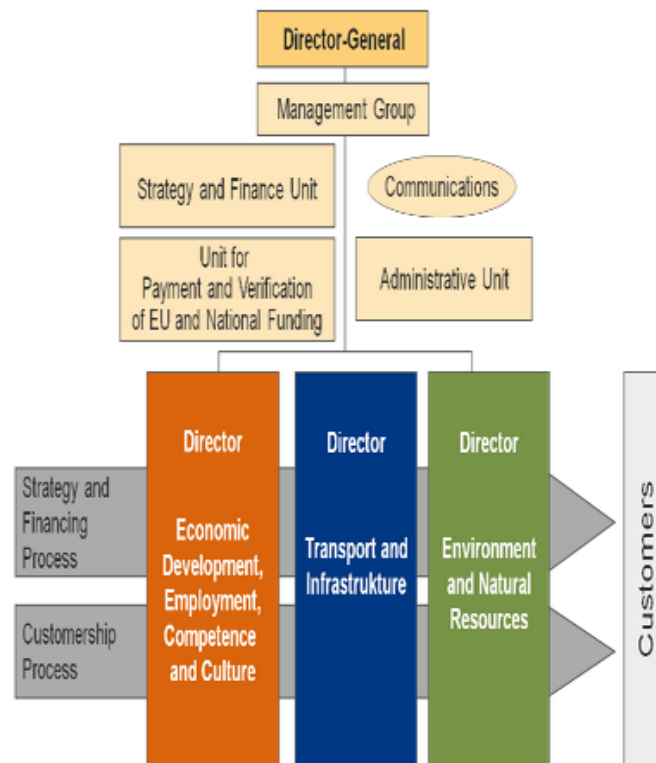
This is one of the 15 centres in Finland. Each of the three areas of responsibility contains a number of legislated regional tasks to be taken care of. These include advancing competitiveness, supporting the well-being of the citizens, and working towards curbing the effects of climate change in each region. The Ministry of Finance (2014a, 2014b) conveys that each centre secures transport operations, encourages entrepreneurship and deals with matters regarding immigrant integration. The main task area of the ELY-Centre is analysing and forecasting changes in the operating environment. By collecting information on, for example, the infrastructure and business, the centre provides valuable support for regional decision-making.¹

The centre operates under the Ministry of Employment and the Economy and acts in collaboration with the various ministries including Environment, Transportation and Communications, Agriculture and Forestry, Education and Culture, and Ministry of the Internal Affairs. The centre supervises the activities of local employment and economic development offices.

All ELY-Centres in Finland cooperate with the European Union and act as the local authorities in allocation of funding and driving regional development. The EU funds are combined with national funds and granted to activities which improve the competitiveness of Finland and its regions. The international cooperation expands also to the neighbouring areas such as Russia, with a goal to promote economic cooperation and advance environmental protection.²

Figure 1 Organisational chart of ELY-Centre (see online version for colours)

Organisational chart



Source: <http://www.ely-keskus.fi/en/web/ely-en/organisation>

The organisational chart is depicted in Figure 1. ELY-Centre has three responsibility areas:

- 1 economic development, employment, competence and culture
- 2 transport and infrastructure
- 3 environment and natural resources.

Each responsibility area has its own director and own organisation. The organisation has also units for strategy and finance, EU-funding, communications and administration. A director of ELY-Centre is in charge of the operations.

The current organisation started its operations in 2010, when the government made a decision to combine the previously separately operating units. The new legislation was passed in 2009 and the centres started to operate from the beginning of 2010. From the personnel's viewpoint, the organisational shift towards the ELY-centres was executed in a short schedule during one government term and created a sense of political steering in the preparation phase.³ In 2011, the Ministry of Finance released an assessment of the reform in 2011, stating that from a customer perspective, the change had not been radical.

In 2014, the organisation was engaged in uniting the financial departments of three neighbouring centres to one administrative unit. The objective was to improve the efficiency of the functions and exploit the possibility to centralise operations into a single team cooperating across the different geographical regions. The focus was on exploring factors that contribute to good team work and to best practices for working as a team despite working in geographically dispersed locations. In the process, positive experiences that have occurred during the experiment will be emphasised and reinforced to improve efficiency and employees' well-being in the new way of operating. The piloting phase will continue through 2014 and the new administrative units will begin their operations in 2015.

At the time of the study, the employees were still experiencing post-merger challenges which included lack of communication across areas of responsibility, lack of shared identity, and lack of awareness of operations in different parts of the organisation. Even though it was three years after the merger, many issues related to the operations, communication and areas of responsibility were still topics of active discussions.

4 Methodology

An action research method, in which the researchers join the organisation as developers, was applied in this study (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Appreciative Intelligence[®] and appreciative inquiry approaches were used in the design of the study and in the organisational intervention (Lehtimäki et al., 2013; Thatchenkery and Metzker, 2006; Thatchenkery, 2005). First, a two-month appreciative inquiry process was conducted by students at a master's level course. The course provided the initiative and guidelines on how to conduct the appreciative inquiry project.

The project was conducted in close collaboration with the managers and employees of the case organisation. Employees from all units and the administration joined the project. The research process consisted of two workshops and interviews with the participants from the case organisation. The first workshop identified five core operational values based on the positive accounts of the participants. In pairs, the participants were asked to reflect on a positive event that had transpired in their own work recently. The team picked keywords representing each account and with the assistance of the participants, the keywords were formed under larger themes. The themes depict the operational values of the organisation.

Once the core values were identified and presented to the members of the organisation, the research team proceeded to interview employees who were not present in the first workshop. The fifteen interviews provided the majority of the data for the appreciative inquiry process. The team collected positive stories, recurring themes and

keywords from each interview. Based on the collected data the group created 20 possibility propositions for ELY-Centre.

The propositions constructed from the data acted as the foundation for the next workshop. The propositions made by the research group were discussed with the participants and adjusted to better suit the needs of the organisation. For example, one of the propositions was dropped altogether as it was discovered that it was against the regulations of the organisation. The participants were asked to rank the propositions by their current presence in the organisation, their importance and their urgency.

After the evaluation process, the research team chose seven final propositions that would be implemented based on their current presence in the organisation and their urgency. The propositions were based on the employees' accounts of positive experiences in their work as well as the data received from interviews and workshops. The results of the project were presented to the participants of the study with also the director of the ELY-Centre attending.

A follow-up discussion with two members of the management group was held after seven months. The discussion gave insight into which propositions were seen as viable and provided a managerial perspective on the project.

5 Results

Five core operational values based on the positive accounts of the participants were identified. These core values were customer centricity, appreciative interaction, communality, know-how and motivation. The values acted as the basis for the interviews together with the organisational factors provided by the theory of appreciative inquiry (Thatchenkery, 2005). The interviews combined these values and organisational factors. The combinations evoked the interviewees to consider what was positive and what could be enhanced in the future. For instance, the combination of the core value 'knowhow' and the organisational factor 'incentive' provided a positive aspect of how ELY has an abundant selection of training possibilities. Communication between the responsibility areas was also one of the themes that emerged from the interviews. In order to transform the communication between the experts to a quicker and effortless direction, the interviewees considered creating a network of professionals for the organisation. This theme was later made into a possibility proposition.

Other themes identified were performance reviews and giving feedback in the organisation. Positive feedback was considered as very important and was seen to create a chain reaction of positive feedback. The performance reviews were also seen as essential in terms of for example performance improvement, and their frequency was discussed. While communication across the organisation was seen as important, the need for communality was to some extent questioned as the ELY-Centre has such a large number of employees.

During the data analysis the group discussed the themes that were considered to be the most important. All together, the analysis amounted to 20 possibility propositions (Table 1).

Table 1 The possibility propositions

1	Customers will have an electronic system which enables effective communication with the employees and giving quick feedback.
2	The employees will use an electronic customer system where the on-going projects of other responsibility areas can be seen as well.
3	Decisions are made in the given time-frame and customers will be informed of the estimated time of processing.
4	Employees will give at least one positive feedback to a colleague and take into consideration the energy that they bring to the workplace.
5	Regular meetings, where employees provide constructive feedback to each other informally, are held.
6	Performance reviews are held twice a year. The other one is formal and the other one more informal.
7	Managers will encourage employees to give feedback on the manager's performance during the performance review.
8	Managers will schedule a "question hour" each week when employees and managers can discuss on-going projects.
9	HR representatives have regular meetings with the managers and discuss issues related to work welfare.
10	A meeting is held before and after a decision-making to discuss the conclusion and the reasons that lead to it, if needed.
11	There will be tours between the responsibility areas in order to familiarise with the employees and their different tasks.
12	The employees will have a network with appointed contact people from each responsibility area. These contacts will handle inquiries from other responsibility areas or forward them to a right person.
13	Employees have the opportunity for job rotation.
14	Possibilities of job rotation between ELY-centres are informed and moving from one position to another can be done in stages.
15	Training possibilities are grouped under different categories from which the employee can tailor a personalised training portfolio.
16	Opportunities for study leave are informed equally to all employees.
17	New employees will have an appointed tutor in each task area.
18	Objectives and their prioritisation are done by the employer and it is agreed upon in performance reviews.
19	The employees are rewarded from good results (with free hours etc.)
20	Each employee may use an hour of work time to use the gym located in the premises.

The final propositions to be implemented in the organisation were selected by the members of the organisation. Each proposition was evaluated based on the importance and urgency of the issue. Four propositions to be immediately implemented were: (18) objectives and prioritisation done by the employer, (17) tutor for all new employees, (10) a meeting before and after decision-making, and (11) tours between responsibility areas. Three propositions were selected to be implemented within a year: (6) performance reviews held twice a year, (19) rewards for good results, (14) rotation between ELY-Centres.

After seven months, none of the recommended propositions had been fully implemented in the organisation. However, the proposition concerning the induction of a new employee had been discussed with the director of the centre. The managers saw that most of the propositions already existed in the organisation, such as the possibility for job rotation. On the other hand, having two performance reviews per year was seen as difficult to implement as the regulations for the reviews came from the ministry.

The overall impact of the appreciative inquiry – project was considered to be meaningful to the participants of the project. It was estimated that those members of the organisation who only read the results of the study were not influenced by it.

“I believe that for those who were involved in this process has been meaningful. For those who have not been involved and have only read the reports, this project has not had much impact.” (Interview, June 2014)

The feedback from the project concerned the performance of the group of students carrying out the study. The scheduling of the interviews was accommodated to fit the timetables of the participants and the overall flow of discussion received positive feedback. The students were described as active and smart and the collaboration with the university was considered positive.

Regarding the integration process in the organisation, the managers emphasised the new premises as a positive change that had followed the merger. The new office space is seen to enhance communication and enable socialising with colleagues now that all the responsibility areas are operating in the same address. Other benefits of the office were the advanced technological devices that were timesaving and decreased the need to travel. Familiarisation with the tasks of other responsibility areas and the administrative unit were seen to result from the new premises, the intranet and collective briefing sessions that are arranged regularly.

“People know the substance of each other’s work better now that we are in the same premises. Different work assignments have been presented in the intranet and you can obtain useful tips from them.” (Interview, June 2014)

The effect of the new building was also seen to benefit the customers. Considering the on-going integration of the administrative units, the managers saw that the previous integration had equipped people to cope with it and the new project would overall be easier as it concerns a smaller group of people. Also, the fact that there will not be changes in job descriptions or locations has a calming effect on this integration process.

6 Conclusions

The appreciative inquiry project discovered five operational core values and seven propositions for activities to be implemented immediately or within a year. Both the values and the propositions were identified by the members of the organisation and they built on the strengths of the organisation. The propositions provided the organisation with a set of clear guidelines for fortifying the identified core values in the post merger integration.

As a merger, the case of the ELY-Centre is unique because the cause behind the merger was a new legislation, leaving an actual financial agenda out of the picture. The formerly independent government units merged into a large organisation forming three responsibility areas and units for administration, EU-funding, strategy and finance. It was

perceived from the very beginning of the process that concentrating on the strengths and positive aspects of the company was not part of the everyday routine. This was one of the reasons appreciative inquiry was seen as a proper tool in bringing in added value for the organisation.

The call for communication was strongly expressed in the possibility propositions and the core values. The results show that the members of the organisation valued communication, be it a meeting, performance review or a tour between the responsibility areas. Almost all propositions are related to communication in the workplace, either with a colleague or a superior. This indicates that even if the propositions were not implemented fully, there was a strong need and willingness to pay particular attention to communication within the organisation.

Some measures of supporting communication had already been taken at the start of the merger. A shared intranet in addition to intra-organisational newsletters has features where employees and their tasks are showcased. Also, shared briefings provide information for the whole organisation and bring the employees together. The possibility propositions were well aligned with these measures and encouraged the organisation to arrange tours between the responsibility areas to familiarise with colleagues and their tasks.

The propositions for an informal performance review and the organisational tours also demonstrate the importance of informal communication in shaping the perceptions towards working as a merged organisation. Appreciative inquiry can help to fasten the pace of the evolution of communication patterns. A focus on the positive potential can reinforce positive behaviour towards colleagues and improve the overall results of the integration process.

7 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine post-merger integration in a public organisation using appreciative inquiry and Appreciative Intelligence[®] methods. Both the literature on appreciative approaches and research on post-merger integration point out the importance of communication and social interaction. The contribution from the appreciative approach to the post-merger management stems from the intentional focus on the strengths and possibilities involved in the process.

The case study presented in this paper provides insight on how the appreciative approach in post-merger management can enhance social interaction in the organisation through a systematic focus on the positive potential identified by the members of the organisation. Even though the possibility propositions formulated in the appreciative inquiry process were not implemented completely, the managers in the organisation considered the process successful. This results point to the value of increased communication and dialogue among the members of the merged organisation. The process allowed for sharing collective successes and supported the creation of shared organisational identity. Also, as the discussions were held with the focus on positive, the members of the organisation were encouraged to relate to each other with respect and trust.

The study shows the importance of informal communication in shaping the perceptions towards working as a merged organisation. Engaging managers and

employees in defining the positive potential of the organisation increased social interaction and supported building the post-merger integration on the positive potential. The positive outcomes of the process were getting to know each other, sharing success stories to build an understanding of a collective success, and willingness to learn from each other.

The study contributes to the existing literature on post merger integration by presenting a case where attention was paid to the human aspect of a merger. The appreciative approach is beneficial in increasing the informal communication and the day-to-day interaction. These are aspects that are often neglected in post-merger management.

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Notes

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