

## **An Investigation of Organizational Learning Capabilities on Organizational Agility: The Case of Branches of Sepah Bank, District 7 and 8 of Tehran**

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### **Abstract:**

The necessity of flexibility and variability in organizational agility in one side, and importance of organizational learning as one of developments strategies in other side can make the influence of these two debates a significant topic. Thus, present article has been compiled for the purpose of examining impact of any organizational learning's components on organizational agility. First, a standard sample questionnaire consisted of 234 employees of bank Sepah, Tehran 7 and 8th district, distributed and then relationship of organizational learning capabilities (management commitment, personal mastery or capability, systems perspectives, teamwork, knowledge management, mental models and learning culture) and organizational agility has been measured. The research's results indicate one direct and meaningful relationship between all organizational learning capabilities and organizational agility. At the end, recommendations associated with results have been presented.

**Key words:** organizational agility, organizational learning, Bank Sepah, Tehran

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#### **1-introduction:**

Learning is the essence of life. World's organizations are complex. Continuity and survival are the most important needs of all organizations. It is only in the light of continuity and survival that attempts can be made for achieving objectives and performing missions. Surrounding environment is changing rapidly and the speed of changes is increasing and progressive. Some factors such as intense competition in global level, rapid and unbelievable changes and new requests for quality of services demand rapid responsiveness from organizations. In these conditions, previous solutions are not responsiveness to the today's problems. Thus, "learning with the intention of solving problem" and "learning with the purpose of development" have been added to the organization's agenda, in situations that utilizing predetermined principles and formula is not problem solving any more, in order to provide opportunities for meeting immediate needs through growth and learning. With increasing more organizational learning ability, organization can be better adjusted to the changing environment.

In past decades, many studies have been done about organizational changing and recently researchers pay a lot of attention to the learning-based changing. Learning capability is the

infrastructure of changing and is necessary for facilitating it and promoting level of organizational learning capabilities.

### **1-1. Problem description**

With development of knowledge and information technology as well as extension of business fields such as virtual or under-web organizations and abroad economic firms, business environment has been transformed to a competitive and challenging environment. Many paradigms have been developed that made survival difficult for many firms. In such an environment, it is natural that competitive privileges have been transformed. Learning is the greatest privilege in new business paradigms. Therefore, learning is the center of new paradigms. Consequently, organizations which learn better and more rapid than competitors are more successful (Behnami, 2005). Organizational learning is a determining factor in long term performance and survival of organization (Yukl, 2009, 50) and an effective factor in organizational success as well as a resource for acquiring competitive advantage (Bhatnagar, 2006, 424).

During recent years, researchers have examined organizational learning from different viewpoints. For example, Cyert, March, Daft, and Weick have examined this topic from psychological view. Nelson, Linter, March and Levitt have adopted social attitude toward organizational learning. In the second half of past decade, Cangelosi, Dill and Senge have approached organizational learning from strategic view and as a base for providing competitive advantage in organizations (Berson et al, 2006, 585). Recently, subjects associated with organizational learning have been studied from the view of knowledge acquisition and organizational learning capability (Armestrong, 2000, 582). Accordingly, Gomez et al have defined three main organizational learning processes: knowledge acquisition or creation, knowledge dissemination and knowledge integration (Gomez et al, 2005).

Gomez et al have introduced organizational learning capability as capability of creation, acquisition and dissemination of knowledge as well as modifying organization behavior for reflecting new situation with purpose of improving and developing organizational agility. Learning capability is the infrastructure and one reason of organizational agility forming and is necessary for facilitating changing and promoting level of learning capabilities. For this purpose, we need one instrument in order to measure this concept. Since no complete instrument has been developed so far, we try to review literatures associated with organizational learning capabilities comprehensively and then examine its impact on organizational agility of all branches of Bank Sepah of Shiraz. The extracted factors from literatures are: management commitment, personal mastery or capability, systems perspective, teamwork, knowledge management, mental models, and learning culture.

## **2-Theoretical foundations**

### **2-1- Organizational learning**

The initiation of organizational learning is indebted to aggregate development in different theories of management such as Adam Smith, Taylor and learning curve (Templeton et al .2002). The concept of organizational learning dates back to 1900, when Taylor introduced learning dissemination to other employees in order to increase efficiency and improve performance of organization (Weinstein&Azoulay, 1992). But Richard Cyert and James March were first people that linked two words of learning and organization in 1963 and introduced learning as an organizational phenomenon in literature (Templeton et al, 2002). Although various researches have been done in the field of conceptualization, management, development and implementing organizational learning, there is still no general agreement

about concept, definition and theories of organizational learning. It could be due to three reasons. First, regarding multi-disciplinary nature of organizational learning, the specialists of fields like sociology, psychology, management and industrial economy have developed concepts and theories of organizational learning according to their majors. Second, implementing organizational learning in different fields like information process, product innovation, organizational changing, organizational culture and implementing strategies has lead to the variation of organizational learning concepts. Third, multi-level nature of learning concepts' analysis, from individual level to the organizational level, has caused this variation (Templeton, et al, 2000) .Thus; it is difficult to find a definition which can be widely accepted by everyone.

Crossan et al (1998) consider organizational learning as changing in common thought and action which is affected by organization. According to the 78 definitions presented in literatures, Templeton et al define organizational learning as a set of organizational actions such as knowledge acquisition, information distribution, information and memory interpretation which influence consciously or unconsciously on positive organizational changing.

Organizational learning analysis has been changed to an important empirical subject in recent years. Many works have been done from different viewpoints regarding this structure. Some studies have been done from psychological, social, theoretical and strategic view an as a base for competitive advantage (Gomez et al, 2005). Weinstein and Azoulay (1999) divided these viewpoints into two categories: strategic management and organizational theories which are described briefly as follow:

#### **1-1-2-strategic management approach (capabilities and advantages):**

Without any doubt, analysis of organizations according to the capabilities is adopted from strategic management's researches and defined as resource-based approach. This approach initiated in 1980s by Penrose and through studying organizations' growth and Chandler's famous works. The main objective of these activities is describing the way of acquiring competitive advantage and its stability by organization. In contrast to the present approaches like Porter which emphasize on condition of organization in market and the way of using its power, such analyses concentrate on organization features and examining internal components which influence on organization performance. This approach is formed according to this point that main differences among organizations are based on their resources and these differences lead to different performances. In other words, organization has special advantage because of its assets or has special success because of its special resources. The attitude of all studies about organization capabilities emphasizes on this point that activities and procedures which form organization and are parts of organization features have not market nature (Winsttein&Azoulay, 1999). This is described by Teece as follow:

"The nature of most capabilities is in such a manner that they can not be assembled by market."

#### **2-1-2-Theories of organizational learning**

The concept of organizational learning has been examined in many studies. These studies have lead to many theoretical foundations in this regard. Generally, the researches about organizational learning can be dividend into two main parts:

- 1- Cases which are provided by consultants and are prescriptive and practice-oriented. They are often devoid of key concepts.
- 2- Cases which are provided by researchers and are non-prescriptive, unbiased and dependent to their attitudes of learning in respect to efficient activity and desirable output( in contrast to viewpoints such as learning can be good or bad and related or unrelated ).

According to the classification of Nevis et al (1995), there are three different views about organizational learning:

- 1- Normative view: it states that organizational learning is met under special situations.
- 2-Development view: it considers learning organization as final stage of organizational development.
- 3-Capability view: it believes that this kind of learning is inherent part of all organization and there is no better way for learning (Gomez et al, 2005).

### **2-1-3- Organizational learning process**

The question that usually arises is: can organizations learn or only individuals can learn?

Douglas (1986) introduces organizational learning process as compacting belief of every member of organization in a common frame and disagrees with this theory that organizations can learn. In contrast to Douglas' claim, Daft and Weick consider organizations as possessing memory and cognition system. They accept this reality that information exchange and process of information interpretation are implemented by individuals; however, they believe that process of information interpretation is something more than actions done by individuals. It means that organizations, like individuals, create mental models.

According to Argrice (1999), although different types of learning (individual, team and organizational) are interrelated, organizational learning is more than sum of individual or team learning. Individuals and teams are agents through them organizational learning occurs but the process of learning is affected by many social, political, and structural variables. This process involves sharing knowledge, beliefs and assumptions among individuals and groups. According to Simonens (2003), four key components are in these three types of learning:

- 1-Objectives learning
- 2-Learning strategies
- 3-Learning measurement
- 4- Feedbacks (including rewards and judgments)

But different learning processes occur in individual, team and organizational levels. Key processes in individual, team and organizational level are acquisition, dissemination and integration respectively (Gomez et al, 2005).

### **2-1-4- Organizational learning capabilities**

John Redding (1994) identified three aspects for creating learning capability:

- 1-Learning speed
- 2-Learning depth
- 3-learning scope

**Learning speed** refers to this point that how fast organization is able to traverse learning cycle (planning, implementation and evaluation) and complete repetition of this cycle.

**Learning depth** refers to the degree of learning acquired by organizations at the end of every cycle.

**Learning scope** refers to this point that how much extensive can organizations transfer insights and knowledge obtained by repetition of each cycle to other parts of organization.

### **2-2-Organizational agility**

The dictionary meanings of agility are fast movement, nimble, the ability of quick and easy movement and fast thinking in a sagacious manner (Horby, 2000). The root of organizational

agility term is agile manufacturing which is introduced as opportunity for reacting to changes of business environment and utilization of them. In this situation any organization should have the ability of concurrent manufacturing of different products with short longevity, redesigning of products, changing manufacturing procedure and efficient reaction to the changes. If an organization has the above-mentioned abilities, then it can be considered as an agile organization. Although there are many definitions for agility, none of them are in contrast with each other. Generally these definitions show the idea of speed and change in business environment (Gunasekaran&yusuf, 2002, 557). As the topic of agility is a new debate, there is no comprehensive definition confirmed by everyone. Below are some agility definitions:

Organization's ability to sense, understand and predict existing changes in the business environment. Such an organization must be able to detect environmental changes and see them as factors of prosperity and growth" (Sharifi and Zhank, 1999, 13). In other place, they defined organizational agility as the ability to overcome unexpected challenges for encountering threats of business environment and take advantage of these changes as opportunities of growth and development.

Maskell (2005) defined organizational agility as the ability of growth and development in an environment with constant and unpredictable changes. Thus, organizations shouldn't be afraid of business environment changes and avoid them, but they should view changes as opportunities for taking competitive advantage in market.

According to the results and consequences, agility means dynamic, position-oriented and bold changes which involve market's access to the large number of customers. In other words, agility means ability of one business unit for growth and survival in a competitive environment which its changes are continual and needs rapid reaction to the variable markets. Certainly, this objective will be met through value making in products and required customers' services (Goldman et.al, 1995).

According to Kidd (1994), in order to make agility paradigm operational, it can be considered as a combination of numerous organizations which each of them has several skills and key competence for joint activities and can help organization in preparing for rapid reaction to variable customers' needs. Kidd presents one of the most comprehensive definitions of agility as follow:

"Agile organization is a rapid, compatible and conscious business which has the ability of compatibility in reaction to the unexpected and unpredicted changes, market opportunities and customers' needs. There are processes and structures in such business which facilitate speed, conformity and stability and at the same time it has ordered and coordinated structure which can reach competitive performance in a completely dynamic and unpredictable commercial environment and of course is not disproportionate to the present functions of organization (Kidd, 2000).

### **3-Background**

Michael.J.Marquarat (2001) developed one book entitled "organizational creation of learners" in which learning organization by all its subsystems have been studied with a system perspective. He analyzes five subsystems including organization, learning, individuals, knowledge and technology directly.

According to Gah (2003), learning organization has five strategic criteria:unambiguity of objective, management ability, incentive and empirical culture, the ability of knowledge dissemination in organization and teamwork. By providing this model, he succeeded to present one clear conceptual framework accompanied with a suitable research instrument for learning organization.



Lopez&Pion&Ourdas (2005) present a four-component pattern for organizational learning measurement. This pattern studies organizational learning from other point of view.

In an article entitled "from implementing policies to management of commercial business processes", Gong& Janssen (2012) introduced principles for time flexibility and agility by which organization implement or modify new policies. These four principles are: 1- identifying and implementing commercial services, 2- integration and coordination of commercial services, 3-isolating processes, knowledge and resources,4- implementing policies integrally. Their study showed that this kind of flexibility and agility can lead to rapid implementation of policies as well as cost effectiveness.

Mark Jacobs et.al (2011) studied the impact of modular state of product and process on manufacturing agility and performance of tires' suppliers in North America's car industry. They consider performance dependent variable only in financial standpoints like assets yield and stocks yield and came to this conclusion that modular state of products has direct impact on modular state of process and agility and finally on organization's performance. But the modular state of process has no relationship with manufacturing agility and, according to the model; manufacturing agility has no impact on organization's performance.

In an article entitled "agility and organization's design", Verli & lauler (2010) studied different aspects of agility and its impact on performance. They evaluate 161 commercial managers, 42 assistants and 98 managers of aerospace company (Acme) in their research and mentioned four aspects impacting on agility in their model( i.e., sustainable strategy, compatible designs, leadership and common identity and value making capabilities) and concluded that sustainable strategy, compatible designs, leadership and common identity have impact on value making capabilities and it consequently has impact on organization's performance.

Vinoid et.al (2010) evaluated organizational agility before and after implementing "Total agile design system" (TADS) and considered 20 indices for agility. The results of research show that, after implementing mentioned design, organization has improved in 15 indices and no changes are observed in other 5 indices and finally general condition of organization has improved 104%.

Linn et.al (2006) suggested that organizational agility abilities are responsiveness, competence, flexibility and speed. Using research literature and holding seminar sessions, they could provide 15 variables for agility. These variables are sensitivity to the market, speed, accuracy of data, introducing new products, cooperative planning, integrating process, use of information technology, reducing delay time, improving service level, minimizing costs, customers' satisfaction, improving quality, minimizing unreliability, development of reliability and reducing resistance to changes.

#### **4-Method**

Present research is descriptive from objective point of view. It means that research is seeking to find a definition and information about a special subject. From method point of view, it is correlative (correlation method). It seeks to find relationship between two variables. According to this definition, present research is also applied research.

##### **4-1-Statistical population**

Since questionnaire should be filled by people who are somewhat informed of organization's affairs and view events with a systematic attitude, research's statistical population consist of senior executive, assistants, and top employees (executive of fund and informatics department) of all branches of bank Sepah, Tehran 7 and 8th district, with total number of 600 men and women.

#### **4-2-Sample size**

Size of sample is a problem which most of researchers encounter with it. General rule in this case approves the largest possible size. In this study, sample size is determined by Morgan and Kergesi sample size determination table and is calculated 234 individuals for this research (Naderi & Seif Naraghi, 2011).

#### **4-3-Sampling method**

Considering statistical population features, clustering random sampling method was used in this research. This method is used when size of respected population is very large or unlimited or there is no list of population members.

#### **4-4-Validity of questionnaire**

For validating present research; articles, scientific interviews, and theorizers' books about organizational learning capabilities were first studied carefully. After examining resources, seven aspects were identified as aspects of organizational learning capabilities. These aspects are: management commitment, individual capabilities, systematic thought, teamwork, knowledge management, common mental models and learning culture. Then 6 to 19 questions were provided for each aspect proportionately. In the next stage, some consulting professors and management specialists were asked to declare their opinions about validity of questions. After introductory studying, the latest revisions were implemented in questionnaire text and final form of questionnaire was organized.

#### **4-5-reliability of questionnaire**

In present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used for measuring reliability. Instrument which its Cronbach's alpha coefficient is greater than minimum level has a good reliability level. This minimum level has been recommended by Nunnally (1987) and is .7. In present study, the reliability of questionnaire has been approximated by SPSS (statistical package for social science) software and Cronbach's alpha method equal to .94. Since this value is more than .7, it indicates that questionnaire has high reliability.

### **5-Analysis and conclusion of data collecting**

#### **The first main question: How much is the level of organizational agility based on organizational learning components?**

For approving or disapproving of first main question, first to seventh sub-questions should be examined. Thus, sub-hypotheses have been examined in following section.

#### **The first main sub-question: is there relationship between management commitment and organizational agility?**

Statistical hypothesis is explained as follow:

H0:  $P=0$

H1:  $p \neq 0$

The H0 indicates that there is no relationship between management commitment and organizational agility. H1 indicates that there is relationship between management commitment and organizational agility. According to table 1-1, the meaningful level smaller than 0.05 of error level is desired. So it can be stated that statistics of test is in rejection field of H0 and acceptance field of H1. Since the correlation coefficient is equal to 0.612, it can be stated that there is a meaningful and direct relationship between management commitment and organizational agility. According to the calculated determination coefficient, it can be

claimed that 37.4% of changes between management commitment and organizational agility is justifiable.

Table 1-1

	<i>Correlation coefficient</i>	<i>Coefficient of determination</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>The number</i>
Management commitment	0.612	0.374	0.000	214

**The second main sub-question: is there relationship between personal mastery and organizational agility?**

Statistical hypothesis is explained as follow:

H0:  $P=0$

H1:  $p \neq 0$

The H0 indicates that there is no relationship between personal mastery and organizational agility. H1 indicates that there is relationship between personal mastery and organizational agility. According to table 1-2, the meaningful level smaller than 0.05 of error level is desired. So it can be stated that statistics of test is in rejection field of H0 and acceptance field of H1. Since the correlation coefficient is equal to 0.621, it can be stated that there is a meaningful and direct relationship between personal mastery and organizational agility. According to the calculated determination coefficient, it can be claimed that 38.5% of changes between personal mastery and organizational agility is justifiable.

Table 1-2

	<i>Correlation coefficient</i>	<i>Coefficient of determination</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>The number</i>
Personal mastery	0.621	0.385	0.000	214

**The third main sub-question: is there relationship between systems perspective and organizational agility?**

Statistical hypothesis is explained as follow:

H0:  $P=0$

H1:  $p \neq 0$

The H0 indicates that there is no relationship between systems perspective and organizational agility. H1 indicates that there is relationship between personal mastery and organizational agility. According to table 1-3, the meaningful level smaller than 0.05 of error level is desired. So it can be stated that statistics of test is in rejection field of H0 and acceptance field of H1. Since the correlation coefficient is equal to 0.40, it can be stated that there is a meaningful and direct relationship between systems perspective and organizational agility. According to the calculated determination coefficient, it can be claimed that 16% of changes between systems perspective and organizational agility is justifiable.

Table 1-3

	<i>Correlation coefficient</i>	<i>Coefficient of determination</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>The number</i>
Systems perspective	0.40	0.16	0.000	214



**The forth main sub-question: is there relationship between teamwork and organizational agility?**

Statistical hypothesis is explained as follow:

H0:  $P=0$

H1:  $p \neq 0$

The H0 indicates that there is no relationship between teamwork and organizational agility. H1 indicates that there is relationship between teamwork and organizational agility. According to table 1-4, the meaningful level smaller than 0.05 of error level is desired. So it can be stated that statistics of test is in rejection field of H0 and acceptance field of H1. Since the correlation coefficient is equal to 0.515, it can be stated that there is a meaningful and direct relationship between teamwork and organizational agility. According to the calculated determination coefficient, it can be claimed that 26.5% of changes between teamwork and organizational agility is justifiable.

Table 1-4

	<i>Correlation coefficient</i>	<i>Coefficient of determination</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>The number</i>
Teamwork	0.515	0.265	0.000	214

**The fifth main sub-question: is there relationship between knowledge management and organizational agility?**

Statistical hypothesis is explained as follow:

H0:  $P=0$

H1:  $p \neq 0$

The H0 indicates that there is no relationship between knowledge management and organizational agility. H1 indicates that there is relationship between knowledge management and organizational agility. According to table 1-5, the meaningful level smaller than 0.05 of error level is desired. So it can be stated that statistics of test is in rejection field of H0 and acceptance field of H1. Since the correlation coefficient is equal to 0.515, it can be stated that there is a meaningful and direct relationship between knowledge management and organizational agility. According to the calculated determination coefficient, it can be claimed that 26.5% of changes between knowledge management and organizational agility is justifiable.

Table 1-5

	<i>Correlation coefficient</i>	<i>Coefficient of determination</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>The number</i>
knowledge management	0.515	0.265	0.000	214

**The sixth main sub-question: is there relationship between mental models and organizational agility?**

Statistical hypothesis is explained as follow:

H0:  $P=0$

H1:  $p \neq 0$

The H0 indicates that there is no relationship between mental models and organizational agility. H1 indicates that there is relationship between mental models and organizational agility. According to table 1-6, the meaningful level smaller than 0.05 of error level is desired. So it can be stated that statistics of test is in rejection field of H0 and acceptance field of H1. Since the correlation coefficient is equal to 0.586, it can be stated that there is a

meaningful and direct relationship between mental models and organizational agility. According to the calculated determination coefficient, it can be claimed that 34.3% of changes between mental models and organizational agility is justifiable.

Table 1-6

	<i>Correlation coefficient</i>	<i>Coefficient of determination</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>The number</i>
Mental models	0.586	0.343	0.000	214

**The seventh main sub-question: is there relationship between learning culture and organizational agility?**

Statistical hypothesis is explained as follow:

H0:  $P=0$

H1:  $p \neq 0$

The H0 indicates that there is no relationship between learning culture and organizational agility. H1 indicates that there is relationship between learning culture and organizational agility. According to table 1-7, the meaningful level smaller than 0.05 of error level is desired. So it can be stated that statistics of test is in rejection field of H0 and acceptance field of H1. Since the correlation coefficient is equal to 0.628, it can be stated that there is a meaningful and direct relationship between learning culture and organizational agility. According to the calculated determination coefficient, it can be claimed that 39.4% of changes between learning culture and organizational agility is justifiable.

Table 1-7

	<i>Correlation coefficient</i>	<i>Coefficient of determination</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>The number</i>
Learning culture	0.628	0.394	0.000	214

**limitations:**

Each empirical work has its own problem and obstacles. Present study has also limitations because of its situation in human science, psychology and human resources:

- 1) Management entrenchment and unwillingness to cooperate
- 2) Time and space and financial constraints
- 3) Lack of similar understanding of posed questions
- 4) Inaccuracy of the subjects' responses to answer questions and sometime taking into account the considerations in responsiveness.
- 5) The sample is selected from the areas of Bank Sepah. Thus it is not possible to generalize the findings to other regions and organizations.

**6-Conclusion and recommendations**

Quality and high level of organizational agility are important factors of organizations' survival. Growth and survival of organizations in present changing world involve ability of on time and suitable reaction to repeated environmental changes. Organizations that are able to predict necessities and environmental changes on time and continue their survival in changing environment are those organizations that their present behaviors are based on past experiences, understanding present situation and future objectives. Organizational learning is a process that makes it possible to learn from experiences and guarantees survival of

organization. In this regard, following recommendations are made in order to promote organizational learning and organizational agility:

1- Considering this fact that employees have been strong in two aspects of management commitment and systematic thought and have been relatively strong in organizational learning, it suggests that although employees have strong management commitment and there is an extensive support obtained by management commitment and at the same time systematic thought is also highly encouraged, they feel their new ideas are not considered seriously and organization managers don't accept new ideas warmly and take defensive position against employees criticisms. They also feel cannot use their ability and skills completely. In this regard, it is recommended to all aspects of organizational learning be considered. Since leaders and managers have very effective role in this regard, they can provide necessary conditions for organizational learning and create a learning atmosphere through development of employees' cooperation in important decision making, utilizing employees' new ideas, providing enough opportunities for doing challenging tasks and rewarding innovative ideas.

2-Considering this fact that employees have been strong in learning culture and mental models and have been relatively strong in other aspects, it suggests implicitly that although employees have necessary and continual learning culture for successful performance of tasks and feel their tasks and internal suppositions are important, they suppose that have less control on results and consequences of their activities and have little effect on operational and administrative strategies. They feel that cannot make changes or obtain results by influencing environment. On the other hand, they believe that they are not treated fairly and sincerely. In this regard, it is recommended that all aspects of organizational learning and agility be considered. Because concept of agility and learning acts as a reflection of personal belief and personal orientation toward its role in job and organization. By acknowledging feelings, beliefs and mentality of employees, organization manager provide necessary conditions for agility. Employees should feel that are free and have latitude, have power in decision making, have power of influencing on activities, consider working objectives valuable and feel secure at the end and be sure that they are treated fairly and unbiased. Thus, meaningful, interesting and challenging job is the essence of stimulation of learning and sophisticated employees. They want to know organizational objectives and duty and believe in them.

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