Tacit Knowledge and Discretionary Judgment

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Abstract

The goal of this analysis is to define the individual and organizational parameters within which the ethical exercise of discretion may occur. The application of tacit knowledge is the introduction of judgment prior to deciding. Discretionary judgment is not an assignment or position. It is not the product of explicit knowledge. It cannot be delegated based upon explicit criteria. But it will emerge from the practices and activities of tacitly defined informal networks.

Many scholars have an attitude toward the exercise of discretion that must be described as ambiguous and even ambivalent. While there is no dispute about the necessity for exercising discretion, there is little agreement on the normative foundation for such decisions (Bryner 1987). Nor, for that matter, have the necessary individual and organizational elements by which to study the exercise of discretion been fully explored. Without a frame of reference for these elements, there is little basis upon which to judge the use of discretion.

Put most simply, discretion represents a judgment as to what activities in an agency are to receive priority. Exercising discretion presumes that both the need for judgment and the capacity to exercise it are not about simply implementing “routine” activities. Situations and circumstances drive the decision to exercise discretion. The fundamental question is how to ensure that discretionary decision-making by bureaucrats is done “rightly.” What will be argued here is that the capacity to exercise discretion well is not merely the result of thinking or wanting to do things well. Rather it is the result of judging events and circumstances at a moment in time and then acting on that judgment (Cox 2004).

A central concern of this paper is to examine the components of those a priori judgments. It will be asserted that they are informed by an understanding that emerges from the application of specific individual and organizational tacit knowledge. The term “understanding” speaks to the capacity to “judge particulars” and then act upon that judgment (Arendt 2003). Borrowing from Arendt (2003), Weick (2001), and Weber (1946), this exercise of discretion is preceded by three interrelated and
intertwined prerequisite activities: experiencing or sense-making (which involves thinking and knowing), judging, and acting. In other words, understanding (whether organizational or individual) is the result of these three activities.

First, sense-making in any situation comes about by thinking about it in the abstract, which leads to knowing by defining the situation. Second, a judgment (and therefore a decision) is made based upon that understanding, in order to take the third and most critical step—action. Information and knowledge serve as the foundation or basis for these activities, and exploring the influence of organizational knowledge and organizational learning is important here (Argyris 1999; Kikoski and Kikoski 2004; Weick 2001).

Organizational knowledge is viewed as being of two types—explicit and tacit. For the present analysis, tacit knowledge is the primary focus. Tacit knowledge affects the sense-making capacity (Polanyi 1962, 1966, 1997), but critically it constitutes the capacity to understand. To comprehend the exercise of discretion, we must more fully explore the role of tacit knowledge, which is “learning and unlearning through experience and knowledge in motion” (Baumard 1999). Knowledge in organizations moves from individually attained knowledge to organizationally attained (learned) knowledge. Stated another way, learning in organizations occurs at both the individual and the collective level. More precisely, knowledge shifts between tacit and explicit, and from individual to organizational knowledge.

The goal of the present analysis is to define the individual and organizational parameters within which ethical exercise of discretion may occur. To reach this goal, two elements of organizational decision-making must be explored: organizational knowledge and the framework for organizational decision-making or decision architecture (Price Waterhouse 1996). The first step is an examination of the two elements of organizational knowledge—tacit and explicit knowledge. This is followed by a discussion of the related notion of organizational learning. The third part examines the relationship among organizational ethics, decision-making, and tacit knowledge, and then pulls these concepts together to offer the implications for individual behavior and performance. The analysis concludes with an assessment of the organizational practices that address the negative implications and strengthen the positive implications of an ethically based tacit knowledge.

Knowledge in Organizations

Although much has been written about the importance of knowledge in organizational management and decision-making (Lindblom 1959; Pressman and Wildavsky 1973), relatively less attention has been paid to the role of one type of knowledge—tacit knowledge. As the work-related practical knowledge one learns informally on the job, tacit knowledge is intimately related to action such that it reflects understanding how, as contrasted with knowing what, and is acquired without direct instruction or help from others (Brockmann and Anthony 2002). Tacit knowledge is “proce-
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When decision-makers utilize tacit knowledge, they experience an automatic, nonconscious process that draws upon experientially established cognitive structures (Bennett 1998). Every organization, and every person in the organization, has a history. These histories are the lens through which each individual judges the organization. This interpretative system is the result of applying both forms of knowledge—tacit and explicit—to sense-making. Explicit knowledge emerges from “facts, knowledge codified, ‘ruled, archived and organized knowledge,’ that which can be expressed in words and numbers, whereas tacit knowledge represents learning and unlearning through experience, knowledge in motion—subjective, interpretive, equivocal and continuous” (Baumard 1999, 8). The weakness of tacit knowledge is that it is often “invisible”; it represents how people act unconsciously and intuitively. As Baumard explains, “Knowledge is [thus] a mutable and fragile organizational entity. Its sense is derived from its application, and is lost once it is removed from the context of its utility” (1999, 16).

People in organizations apply both tacit and explicit knowledge to understand the world around them (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2003; Stati, 2003). “It is in fact the interaction of explicit and tacit knowledge that allows organizations to make sense of their environment, by appealing to both . . . to control and modellization (explicit knowledge), and organizational memory, to their experience and that of others, and to intuition (tacit knowledge)” (Baumard 1999, 8). Figure 1 illustrates how knowledge in organizations moves from individually attained knowledge to organizationally attained (learned) knowledge.

The processes of internalization (explicit into tacit knowledge) and socialization (tacit to tacit) are now examined because it is internalized and socialized tacit knowledge that dominates the judging and acting under conditions and circumstances where discretion is required. Moreover, as Brockmann and Anthony (2002) state, tacit knowledge serves to fill the gaps of what can be seen, and provides a more

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**Figure 1. Organizational Learning**

*Source: Adapted from Baumard 1999, 25–29.*
The “problem” of exercising discretion is embedded in the dilemma that exercising discretion calls for individuals with the capacity for judging, not with the capacity for thinking.

A more advanced type of professional knowledge, which can be used with significant benefits for the benefit of public decision-making, is needed in today’s policy analysis process. There should be an extensive reliance on tacit understanding, Gestalt-images, qualitative models and qualitative methods (instead of main emphasis on explicit knowledge and quantitative models and tools). This involves imaginative thinking, systematic integration of trained intuition into policy analysis, development of qualitative tools and construction of broad qualitative models of complex issues in cooperation with social scientists and other professionals. (2004, 253)

Dror’s characterization of professional knowledge and the concept of tacit understanding presented here is illustrated in Figure 2.

Usually, decision-making is controlled by formal rules and regulations and is guided by organization preferences and practices. However, when a unique situation arises in an organization, it brings along new uncertainties as well as new alternatives; decision-making then selects courses of action that are expected to
perform well given the understanding of goals and the conditions of uncertainty (Choo 2002). This results in the capacity to develop new knowledge by a complex interplay between existing knowledge and sense-making, as shown on the left side of the model in Figure 3.

The capacity to judge, and therefore to understand and then act, is intertwined with tacit knowledge. This process is demonstrated on the right side of the model in Figure 3. While explicit knowledge can yield decisions (as an individual act or as an organizational mandate), it is more closely aligned with Arendt’s notion of thinking. Rules and regulations, hierarchical relationships, in fact the entire range of structural-functional understandings of modern organizations, emerge from thinking about organizational design and process. The decision is the result of the process of thinking. The classic model of policy analysis in which the optimal alternative is uncovered is an example of this form of decision-making. There can be only one decision; therefore, the analysis yields answers. Working, in contrast, emerges from an understanding of the circumstances and events that results in actions (Hummel 2005), which is close to the application of tacit knowledge. In this context, understanding informs us when the process (analysis) has not produced the right decision.

The Importance of Understanding and Valuing

A variety of authors from Selznick (1957) to Burns (1978) have emphasized the importance of organizational learning that reinforces the values and mission of the organization. They see these as the key ingredients in organizational leadership. The importance of value statements, such as missions, goals, and codes of ethics, is part of the mantra of “best practice” modern management (Day 1999). However, unless the decision-making process is supported and reinforced by the individual’s attitudes, values, and behaviors, it is bound to fail. Day argues that leaders can use value statements to begin the process of defining an organizational ethic. True to the notion of the conversion of explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge (internalization), she warns that “to guarantee compliance with new policies, values should also be supported by coherent and congruent regulatory practices within the framework of the existing culture” (1999, 164). In other words, the value system of the organization (or of the government) must be reconciled with that of the organization members. But this need not be a reduction to the lowest common denominator of behavior. Rather, it can be a significant exercise in “cultural” renewal and the foundation for a collectively defined organizational ethic that can guide practice and thus the exercise of discretion.
But what is the source for the values that Day (1999) finds so powerful? The source of such a spirit is found in the ideas of Weber (1946) and Kohlberg (1971; Carlson 2002). Weber addresses the importance of vision, purpose, and a “future orientation.” He speaks to the ethical perspective necessary to be a policymaker. The key to this perspective is its emphasis on the consequences of actions, not merely their purpose. This is, as Weber describes it, the ethic of the “mature man”—an ethic fully conscious of the consequences of actions, yet grounded in principle. His conclusion to this work is both profound and apt in its depiction of the ethical individual.

Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion and perspective. Certainly, all historical experience confirms the truth that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he reached out for the impossible. But to do that a man must be a leader, and not only a leader but a hero as well, in a very sober sense of the word. And even those who are neither leaders nor heroes must arm themselves with that steadfastness of heart, which can brave even the crumbling of all hopes. This is necessary right now; or else men will not be able to attain even that which is possible today. Only he who has the calling of politics is sure that he shall not crumble when the world from his point of view is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer. Only he who in the face of all this can say “In spite of all!” has the calling for politics. (Weber 1946, 128)

Weber’s challenge to those in the public service is to recognize when to step outside the routine of day-to-day affairs and understand the long-term implications of decisions. His mature man does not shrink from the responsibility to “reach out for the impossible.” For Weber, ethical leadership lies in the willingness to steadfastly look to the future, even as the bureaucratic routine insists upon being grounded in the present. It is a quality of character that Weber expects to be rare. The decision to act outside the routine is never easy, but it is necessary and even vital.

Lawrence Kohlberg’s moral development theory (1971) stretches the Weberian notion of the “calling of politics.” “Public administrators must recognize that different levels of moral judgment exist, and that situational variables such as education, age, life experience, and degree of autonomy may affect an individual’s moral judgment” (White 1999, 130). Weber’s mature man and Kohlberg’s post-conventional man are quite similar. Each is fully conscious of the circumstances surrounding the decision and the consequences for others in the choices to be made. Similarly, each must have experience, autonomy, and accountability. Mature man, then, is one who “is aware of a responsibility with heart and soul. [He] . . . acts by following an ethic of responsibility and somewhere he reaches the point where he says: Here I stand; I can
do no other” (Weber 1946, 128). Therefore, grants of discretion are not the product of rank or title, but instead reflect a judgment of a person’s capacity and capability to act. Critically, both perspectives emphasize consciousness of the situation and the exercise of judgment based upon experience and the desire to do what is right. Stated another way, maturity comes with the acquisition of tacit knowledge. Such persons are the leaders that Gardner (1986) and Selznick (1957) define as necessary for successful organizations.

One final point is critical, and therefore worth reiterating. In emergencies, two phenomena are observed: (1) a tacit organization between individuals instinctively reappears; and (2) the social organization of individuals remains ever present (Baumard 1999). The tacit regains the upper hand over the explicit.

In any case, the speed of the phenomenon leaves neither space nor time for commentary or rationalization (Baumard 1999, 37).

Can Weber’s concept of maturity be linked to the possession of tacit knowledge? It is internalized and socialized tacit knowledge that dominates understanding, deciding and acting in emergencies (precisely when discretionary judgment is most needed). When ethical conduct is internalized, discretionary judgments will reflect some combination of ethical and moral precepts (see, for example, Audi 2004; Dubnick and O’Kelly 2005). The constant struggle is to balance the generalized demands of the normative with the specific requirements of making a decision in the present. As maturity is gained, the recognition of the need to balance these values and the capacity to do so is an indicator of having achieved tacit knowledge.

**Ethics, Discretion, and Tacit Knowledge**

As stated, situation and circumstances drive the decision to exercise discretion, and it is important that discretionary decision-making by bureaucrats is done “rightly.” An important aspect of discretion is derived from the desire to behave ethically. In the words of the old saying, ethics is about doing what is right, not merely doing it the right way (Burke 1994). The ideal of ethical decision-making as an element of policy implementation may produce some unexpected results when combined with other values, such as democracy and representative government (Bowman 1991). The difficult or hard choice by any public servant (the most critical moment for the exercise of discretion) is not whether to help someone, but to define the limits of that help. There are inevitably more who seek help than can be served. The difficult choice is to determine, ethically, when to end assistance. One must remember that the longer an official spends on the special case (the nonroutine case), the lengthier the waiting list of those as yet not helped. Worse, this is precisely the situation for which neither bureaucratic routines, nor policies, nor court rulings can provide professional guidance.

**Implications**

This discussion has intertwined and linked knowledge at both the individual and organizational levels. Commentaries on organizational culture and learning often
treat individual and organizational learning as a feedback system in which learning is dynamic and synergistic (Argyris 1999; Weick 2001; Yanow 2003). While not everyone agrees with this comingling, it does permit examination of both the individual and the organization when looking at decision-making. What follows is a review of the implications, both negative and positive, that affect decision-making by individuals in organizations.

**Negative Implications**

A bureaucrat who lacks tacit knowledge has a severely restricted ability to exercise discretion. The true problem of discretion is having the wrong person exercise discretion. What are the sources of the mismatch between the capacity to judge and the responsibility to judge? The intertwining of tacit knowledge and ethical judgment suggests four causes:

- Inexperience
- Lack of knowledge
- Burnout (diminished capacity)
- Corruption

**Inexperience**

While inexperience is most obviously a problem endemic in newly hired (or newly promoted) workers, it also exists when workers have not been socialized into the organization. Weick’s (2001) notion of sense-making in the workplace is gained through experience. Work that is very narrowly defined (faculty vs. administrators in American universities) or done in isolation (the police officer on the street, or the worker in a field office) can also reflect a kind of inexperience. In both instances there is no opportunity (or the opportunity is not recognized) to combine or internalize knowledge. Inexperienced workers are not yet committed (Weick 2001). As such, they cannot act, and without that action they cannot make sense of the organization. They are hesitant and apparently indecisive because they do not recognize the cues that lead to acting.

**Lack of knowledge**

From one perspective, inexperience and lack of knowledge are related. But a lack of knowledge can occur at both the individual and the organizational level, and it has both explicit and tacit dimensions. There is also the question of the individual worker’s capacity to learn and gain knowledge. Some have a good “feel” for a job and learn quickly. For others learning is a struggle. The inability to comprehend and acquire tacit knowledge plays a significant role in halting learning.

Again, the above commentary has both an individual and an organizational dimension—individuals may be knowledgeable, but the organization may not listen. While explicit knowledge is articulable knowledge, tacit knowledge often is “inarticulate” (Baumard 1999). Unless there is a conscious effort to transform and
translate individual knowledge into tacit organizational knowledge, this problem will continue (Gherardi and Nicolini 2003). The “tragedy” of the failure to internalize and socialize tacit knowledge is in the inability of managers to comprehend and appreciate the importance of the “feel” for things that people close to the work may possess. The shuttle tragedies at NASA, nearly two decades apart, both had their roots in the requirement of senior managers that people on-site express their concerns in explicit language (because that was the only language the managers recognized as valid).³

Burnout

In the United States the problem of burnout has been noted for many years. This problem is often associated with role conflict, where the professional expectations of the worker and the organizational work rules conflict (see, among others, Hummel, 2007; Selden, Brewer, and Brudney 1999). Here burnout becomes a problem of diminished capacity. The knowledge may still exist within the individual (and potentially within the organization), but the role conflict leaves the worker without the will to act. Organizations under threat of dissolution (a common problem in American government) often display the same ennui that Hummel sees in individual cases of burnout. These organizations (much like the individuals) just go through the motions. Framed differently, these are institutions in which the informal organization is not performing properly and organizational learning has ceased.

Corruption

Corruption is not the simple problem of individual bad behavior. Even where corruption is common, there is a tendency to focus on individual transgressors as if to say that the problem only pertains to a few “bad apples” (Johnson and Cox 2004–2005). The present analysis would suggest that corruption is more ingrained. It is learned behavior. It survives because the organization has learned that such behavior is justified (i.e., it has become internalized tacit knowledge). While those on the outside may find the behavior incomprehensible (Bok 1978; Hope 1999), those on the inside have successfully rationalized the behavior and incorporated it into the organizational customs. As Arendt noted, corrupt people have a seemingly infinite capacity to excuse their own behavior (“Everyone does it, but I am different”).

As far as the criminals themselves are concerned, the chief common weakness in their character seems to be the rather naive assumption that all people are actually like them, that their own flawed character is part and parcel of the human condition stripped of hypocrisy and conventional clichés. (2003, 268)

Stopping corruption does not begin or end with identifying the criminal act of the individual, but in uncovering the organizational cultural behaviors that make the criminal act attractive. How might these failures be addressed?
Positive Implications

Those who possess tacit knowledge often have difficulty articulating it. But the barrier is often that the knowledge may be neither internalized nor socialized. The implication of this reality is that new ways of mentoring and socializing people may accelerate both individual and organizational learning, and that strong informal organizations may be formed in the process of sharing knowledge.

Informal Organizations

Informal organizations play a vital role in establishing values in any organization. Such groupings greatly influence the ideas that are considered to have intrinsic worth or desirability, and the basic standards and principles that guide action. Individuals do not create their values in a vacuum; instead values are created in a group context (Gortner, Mahler, and Nicholson 1987). The creation of group values is similar to the formation of group norms or “informal rules” (Feldman 1984). Although these rules are “infrequently written down or openly discussed, they often have a powerful, and consistent, influence on group members’ behavior” (Feldman 1984, 288). These values and unwritten rules stem from tacit knowledge within the organization.

Workers often consider peer evaluations of their work performance that take place in an informal structure within an organization to be just as important, if not more so, as the opinions of their supervisor. The informal organization’s communications network is the operational side of peer evaluation. Peer evaluations play a dominant role in such matters as job satisfaction, morale, efficiency, and the firm’s productivity. They help to counter, or “check,” the negative implications: lack of knowledge, inexperience, burnout, and organizational corruption. This does not mean that peer evaluations will eliminate these implications, only that they may help to control their effects.

Formal Organizations

An important aspect of formal organization is a self-conscious selection of mentors. What is meant here is not the kind of mentor who becomes a worker’s advocate and cheerleader, providing introductions to the important personages in the organization, but rather one who understands that the primary role of mentoring is to utilize both explicit knowledge (articulated, rational, technical knowledge) and tacit knowledge (inarticulate, intuitive, sensing, feeling knowledge). Such mentoring is found more frequently in organizations than may at first be apparent. Often the most skilled workers (i.e., those with the highest level of tacit knowledge) are selected to be the supervisors of work teams. A supervisor selected in this way is the “puzzle solver” who teaches others how to uncover and then address problems. Military organizations, although not generally thought of as using tacit knowledge (commands, after all, are the ultimate in learned, articulated, explicit knowledge), have created positions (e.g., squad or platoon sergeant) in which a major responsibility is the conveyance of tacit knowledge both up and down the organization.

The preceding analysis suggests that tacit knowledge (including tacitly learned ethical knowledge) influences individual and collective (organizational) behavior and learning. It is a key ingredient in the development of an organizational culture.
This is not to suggest that tacit knowledge yields only positive learning. Tacitly learned behavior may have decidedly negative consequences. But from this reality, it is possible to develop organizational strategies that reinforce the positive elements of tacitly learned knowledge and identify those persons who should exercise discretionary judgment.

Conclusion

Aristotle noted more than two millennia ago that ethics is not a skill to be taught, but something observed and experienced. Ethics relates to tacit knowledge in that both begin from a definition of “good” and then attempt to take action. The application of tacit knowledge is the introduction of “judgment” before deciding. Science (and bureaucracy) seeks the routinization of knowledge — there is no judgment. In effect, the individuals and the organization go from knowing to deciding because the routine replaces the judging aspect of decision-making. In this process there is no organizational learning, only rule compliance. The concern here, however, is with the need for discretionary judgment when the situation is outside the routine. Under such circumstances there is a need either for new rules or for amended rules. This requires the creativity that comes from maturity (postconventional wisdom); in other words, tacit knowledge.

Where do we go from here? The challenge for organizational leaders is to find a way of synthesizing tacit and explicit knowledge in a manner that fosters sound judgment at every level of the organization. One way to accomplish this is through the use of informal organizations that initiate mentoring and peer evaluations within the organization. These attributes of informal organizations are instrumental in passing tacit knowledge from senior employees down to inexperienced junior-level employees (and back up from junior levels to isolated senior levels). The use of mentoring teams in conjunction with peer evaluation can counteract the lack of knowledge or inexperience at the junior level, and at the same time reduce the effects of burnout on senior employees by involving them in the continued development of the organization. In addition, mentoring and peer review place an inner check on organizational corruption. Finally, the use of mentoring teams and peer review put the emphasis on the collective or organization-wide aspects of decision-making, thereby creating conditions in which individual responsibility and collective accountability can both be achieved.

Whereas explicit knowledge allows organizations to react to events after the fact by using bureaucratic rules or SOPs, tacit knowledge frees organizations from these confines. Because it is cumulative, it enables organizations to see past the specific event and instead focus on the big picture, thereby facilitating greater understanding. The first step in valuing tacit knowledge is to ease the processes of individual and organizational learning. It is easy to recognize and appreciate the skill of the professional athlete or the master artisan, but we do not translate the capacity to appreciate or identify those skills with organizational learning in other settings. If the genius of a master painter or carpenter can be recognized, why cannot the genius of a coworker with tacit knowledge be recognized and utilized for the benefit of the organization? In truth, that is exactly what successful organizations do. Directing the initial choices to those capable of applying tacit knowledge is a way of working to convert the decisions exercised into institutional norms or habits. In organiza-
tional settings, habit is most often presumed to be a routine, something structured. Aristotle placed great emphasis on the formation of good habits. In his view, habit is a consistency of good behavior or judgments in the face of the nonroutine. Therefore it is not the values or laid-out written rules (explicit knowledge) but the tacit knowledge that leads to good, consistent decision-making (actions). This end result is what matters most in organizations.

This analysis began by seeking a framework within which to understand discretionary judgment. For all intents and purposes, it suggests that those who should exercise discretion are those with tacit knowledge. The capacity for judgment—that is, the skill to fully understand and decide before acting—is embedded in the ability to internalize and socialize knowledge. More important, from this ability comes the informally assigned authority to judge. The reality is that most organizations are driven by and succeed through their informal networks, not the formal organization. Discretionary judgment is not an assignment or position. It is not the product of explicit knowledge. It cannot be delegated based upon explicit criteria. But it will emerge from the practices and activities of tacitly defined informal networks. As noted earlier, the problem of exercising discretion is embedded in the dilemma that the exercise of discretion needs people who have a capacity for judging, not a capacity for thinking. The determination of who belongs in the realm where discretion is exercised should be based on whether they have a place of authority in the informal organization and possess the demonstrable capacity for judgment that is variously labeled maturity, instinct, or skill.

NOTES

1. The analogies and metaphors used to explain tacit knowledge often come from sports (e.g., someone has a “feel” for the game). Thus there is a tendency to view tacit knowledge as natural and instinctive. This is not the case. The capacity to acquire tacit knowledge is what separates people, but this is beyond instinct. Tacit knowledge is learned, even if the capacity for learning differs among people. Two individuals may learn the same lessons from explicit sources (education and training), but their applications of that knowledge may differ. It is the ability to learn “tacitly” that produces the differences in performance.

The difference between management and leadership can be explained similarly. Weber’s distinction between the bureaucratic ethic and the ethic of the politician also has a connection to tacit knowledge. Both of these discussions are topics for another study.

2. The similarity between the notion of tacit knowledge as invisible and Kant’s assessment of thinking as invisible is worthy of exploration but is beyond the scope of this paper. Kant had quite different ideas in mind when he declared that thinking is invisible, and ultimately not productive (see Arendt 2003).

3. Ralph Hummel (2005) has done some quite interesting work around the barriers of language in organizations. It is suggested here that the problem of language is a problem of knowledge. Those committed to traditional forms of organization believe only in explicit knowledge and communicate within that framework. Using the language of tacit knowledge, and the type of learning gained from it, is deemed unacceptable.

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