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What does "Critical Thinking" represent? A Discussion

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Abstract:

Alvesson and Willmotts' statement within their 1996 book "Making Sense of Management" is widely discussed. The paper illustrates two different management approaches while focusing on Modernism and Rationality as well as Interpretivism and Subjectivity. Critical Management Theory is placed within the context of and a discussion about issues such as "Organisational Culture", "The Role of the Manager" and "Emancipation". Finally, the need for an appropriate open-minded thinking approach in order to deal and cope with upcoming future challenges due to an increasing complexity and fundamental changes within the management processes is emphasised.

Key words: Critical Management Theory, Modernism, Post-modernism, Rationality, Subjectivity, Organisational Culture, The Role of the Manager, Emancipation

Discussion

"*Critical thinking represents a methodology for creating a willingness to consider*

not only linear problems and solutions, bounded by pre-defined, power-based perimeters,

but also a wider problem-seeking, open-minded approach to life, production, work,

relationships and society"

Alvesson & Willmott (1996, "Making Sense of Management")

Frederick Winslow Taylor developed a first idea of how the output of a company could be raised. As a management consultant at the Bethlehem Steel Company he used the opportunity

to implement his theory, which concentrated mainly on an increase of work efficiency and eventually productivity. For this reason he separated "*the conception of work from its execution, to analyse systematically the skills, gestures and tasks of work, and ´scientifically´ plan ´the best way´ of performing any given task*" (Bahnisch, 2000:52). Though he faced enormous resistance from his workers and was finally fired in 1901 he believed in his approach, developed it further and hold a famous lecture on Scientific Management in 1907 – which finally provided the basis for his later discourse on Scientific Management (*ibid*).

The idea behind his theory was that management should use the huge amount of traditional knowledge to create rules and laws in order to construct on the one hand a legitimate function of labour process and on the other hand a control mechanism. Work was divided into minute (observed by a stopwatch) and movements were regularized to construct a disciplined body at work – aimed to cheapen labour costs and also to find the best worker for any job (*ibid*). To break jobs down into smaller and specialised pieces would separate workers from each other, loosen social relations and create a `safety man´ (Metzgar, 2004) – because Taylor saw the ideal worker as a disciplined body (without a mind!) that moves or is in stasis when told, but also earns a fair reward regarding to the amount of work done (Bahnisch, *ibid*). These processes are described as Taylorism or Scientific Management (v.Delinder, 2005). Strict rules and regulations at work should furthermore prevent management for undisciplined workers that might go on a strike or develop an own personality. This serves possibly a fear that workers could become so skilful that management is not needed anymore (Bahnisch, *ibid*).

It is also argued that Taylor was originally trying to achieve a win-win situation for labour and management efforts, but the execution of his theory in complete detail never worked out in the way he [Taylor] outlined and remained in some parts untried (Metzgar, 2004). Taylorism is still discussed today (though sometimes different words are used); labour and management are disagreeing about his idea (*ibid*), but fact is also that it has become a central role in management literature of the 20th century. Taylor's work influenced in particular the manufacturing industry, but spread into offices, the service sector and public education, too (Bahnisch, 2000: v.Delinder, 2005). He is also sometimes called `the Father of Scientific Management´ and seen as a pioneer in theorising principles of institutional economics (Wagner- Tsukamoto, 2007).

Fordism is another concrete example of clearly defined tasks for the labour force at assembly lines and substantial controls over work conditions. Through intensified industrial divisions of labour, increased mechanisation and a largely coordinated manufacturing process, Ford achieved a constant flow of production. Ford's success in increasing productivity was a leading example and the method was finally transferred to other capitalist countries. (Rupert, 1995)

These views are not a phenomenon of the past; another notion has recently become popular: the `McDonaldisation of Society´, a "*continuing rationalisation of modern society...*" where people would move into "*rationalized workplaces ... and rationalized homes*" (Ritzer, 1993, cited in Mok, 1999:121) – with emphasize on efficiency, calculability, predictability and control (Mok, 1999). In consequence of that, e.g. workers in a McDonald's restaurant are given a tight job description with clearly defined `movements´, which also includes guidelines what to say to customers.

All these perceptions belong to rational approaches, i.e. a classical planned approach to organisations. Rationality is a very common used term and one of the most important concepts in the study of behaviour in organisations and there are ongoing debates about the extent to which rationality is possible (Jackson and Carter, 2000). Flyvbjerg (1998) described rationality as `context- dependent´ that has a strong relationship to power, i.e. "*... the possession of power unavoidable spoils the free use of reason*" (Kant, cited in Flyvbjerg, 1998:2) and further added that the greater the power, the less the rationality.

Taylorism (as well as McDonaldisation and Fordism) belongs to a classical view of objective rationality, i.e. things are seen as equal and the answer is always correct – no matter under what circumstances. This is also referred to as `The one best way´ i.e. the assumption to have `the correct´ knowledge and `the correct´ solution (Jackson and Carter, *op cit*), e.g. to organize the factors of production. In consequence there is a particular embodiment for every problem and the solution can be found in one of the management tools.

The above mentioned approaches belong also to the `capitalist approaches´ which give management power and control about `everything´. These perceptions attempt to structure and control processes in order to orient `worker's goals´ to that of the organisation (v.Delinder, 2005).

The worker is therefore seen as an object – some kind of a machine, which is also referred to as the `machine metaphor´, i.e. an objective view that interactions of elements are predictable and controllable. This view is based on an organisational management belief that effective management can only be realized if all components are managed (Odubiyi, 2008). Therefore a hierarchy, strict procedures, measures and rules are needed to achieve more productive and efficient workers. It is all about analysing, improving and forecasting the work and the labour force as well – besides control mechanism to make sure that everything works in the way it was planned – in order to become as efficient as possible.

A typical characterisation of a modern organisation and its principles of management is that the worker is seen as a cost and an assumption that planning leads to order. Furthermore centralized controls as well as fear-based controls are personified, theory X and Y is focused, workers are told what to do, and plans are oriented towards short- term- profit goals. Homogeneity is strength, the voice is located at the top and the superior has the authority (Boje and Dennehy, 1993, taken from O´Brian, 2007). This goes also along with the view of a `heroic manager´, who is personally responsible for an organisation's activities. He (!) creates the strategy and connects it with organisational purposes. He (!) is a synonym of moral correctness, effectiveness, reliability and efficiency – he (!) is simply the leader and represents what people believe in (Stahl, 2005).

This `Modernist-´ or `Managerialist view´ offers the `absolute truth´ through a methodology of collecting quantitative and contemporary data based on science. It can be seen as some kind of a mathematical, analytical and value-free view, i.e. an independent research without being affected by the subject of the research – also described as `positivism´ (Saunders [et al], 2007). It "*advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond*" (Bryman and Bell, 2007:16).

Besides Taylor, there is Weber for instance, who demonstrated in his work how (social, economic, political, cultural and religious) events long ago built a form of life and of knowledge – recognized as `Western´ (Hummel, 2006). "*Modernism had applied a universal philosophy to discern variations in a universal history that in turn permitted establishment of a universal science of culture*" (*ibid*:314). Weber strongly connects bureaucracy, order and obey with the survival of an organisation. Supportively, Immanuel Kant stated that it would be destructive if a worker questions the purposefulness of a task – he simply has to obey.

Weber agreed with this statement and added that the execution of a task is an honour and a demonstration that the sense of this duty stands above his personal preference (*ibid*).

Is that wrong? Take an army for instance – it can also be seen as an organisation. An army has a highly structured hierarchy, order and obey are an essential part of the daily routine. To achieve a common goal and to fulfil a common tasks every soldier has to be perfect in his/her field – whatever that is. There is neither space for discussions about an order nor for failures within a task. Imagine an army without clear structures and duties… as a consequence soldiers have to be treated as `objects´ – not to mention the word `material´.

Post-modernists have a different view about that. They question `modern models´ and furthermore the way how people are treated, i.e. in consequence they bring subjects in. It is in general a more political view with a focus on interpretivism of certain aspects, i.e. a critical thinking of business conditions and circumstances that takes differences among human beings in the area of organisational behaviour into account (Saunders [et al], 2007). The subjective meaning of social action has to be understood and finally considered in a strategy. Interpretivism is based on qualitative research, calls for attention to unintended consequences and can be seen as an alternative to positivism (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Becker (2004) summarised Post-modernism in the following way "*reality is not real, knowledge is impossible, and irrationality and stagnation are superior to reason and progress*" (*ibid*:785).

An import aspect is therefore the management of uncertainty; e.g. de Burgundy (1995) argued that managers experienced some degree of dislocation due to a constantly changing environment and several economic shocks in capitalist economies. Complex situations, difficult decisions, crises and on top high competition among managers makes it more difficult to establish one's heroic leadership (Stahl, 2005) and finally be the `hero´.A modern response could conclude that `everything is in the book´ to cope with this different situation – `just read and apply your model, because you have the power to do it´.

But on the other hand … if everything changes constantly is it possible to find always the same (`fixed´) right answer? Can every situation and/or problem fit into a `perfectly prepared solution´ and finally solved with one of the `well-proven tools´?

Post-modernists argue against this limited view of modernists and their embodiment of organisations and management (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). They critically re-think management and also the way how to look at organisations – which is known as `Critical

(Management) Theory´ – and it is seen as an intellectually open and fashion- minded field in organisation theory (Alvesson, 1995).

Alvesson and Willmott (1996) questioned the "pre-defined, power-based perimeters" namely power and control in their statement. Willmott and Knights (1989) early suggested e.g. efforts regarding to the absence of the connectedness of power and subjectivity in theory. Oliga (1996) linked power to both organisational and social levels and distinguished three different perspectives, i.e. objective (capacities located in social structures), subjective (possessed by agents) and relational (seen as a property among social forces). Traditional organizational structures and managerial techniques along with traditional bureaucratic models of managerial control to professionalize the worker are archaic and inefficient (Alvesson [et al], 2002: Alvesson and Lindkvist, 1993). Scarnati (2002) mentioned that leadership could easily become dictatorship, because "*the taste of power may be overwhelming and power itself becomes an addictive motivator*" (*ibid*:841).

To illustrate, organisations oriented towards a post-modern perspective are differently characterised. "Post" in this case describes the area after hierarchy and bureaucracy according to Boje and Prieto (2000, taken from O'Brian, 2007). In consequence, the role of planning in management is questioned which automatically leads to new and different roles of managers. They are more seen as facilitators who have to be able to articulate their vision within short lines of communication to their workers. Closeness to and the involvement of employees are emphasised in order to support the development of a shared mission among all members of the organisation.

The principles of post-modern management are rooted in the idea of a labour- management cooperation that is people centred, visionary and counts on multi-skilled workers to achieve long- term- profit goals (Boje and Dennehy, 1993, taken from O'Brian, 2007). Boje and Dennehy (2000, taken from O'Brian, 2007) furthermore described the post-modern organisation as marked by self-managed and self-controlled, highly empowered teams organized in a flat design who are co-ordinated by poly-centres. It therefore empowers and involves the employee; they are seen as an investment and a part of the organisation. Job descriptions are not considered as urgently needed; it is about selecting and training the `right´ people for small units and reducing control-mechanism. Hierarchies are not evaluated as of significant importance; `voices´ are accounted, i.e. a higher degree of involvement of people within the organisation, e.g. they are listened to, their opinions appreciated. It can therefore be said that diversity is seen as an asset and strength (Boje and Dennehy, 1993, taken from

O'Brian, 2007) – which represents obviously a different view compared to the `modern´ idea because of a strong focus on the subject itself. Alvesson (1995) described post-modern organisations as the opposite to bureaucracy and Fordism and refers them more towards Japanese companies. Clegg (1990, cited in Alvesson, 1995) added the organisational dimensions of modernity and post-modernity can be pictured e.g. as bureaucracy vs. democracy and/ or individualised vs. collectivised.

Alvesson and Willmott (1996) mentioned the consideration of "not only linear problems and solutions", which automatically leads back to rationality again. Besides objective rationality, subjective rationality exists, which is a subjective phenomenon that outlines the characteristics of an individual human being. Jackson and Carter (2000) argued that perfectly rational behaviour cannot be achieved where people are involved, because of "*cognitive limits on the ability to gather and process information and to rank it in order of significance*" (*ibid*:97). Supplementary, a particular situation completely identical to a former one is also highly unlikely. In addition, `full´ knowledge about a situation and all surrounding and influencing factors can never be achieved, which in consequence has an impact on the evaluation of the situation. This phenomenon is also described as `bounded rationality´ in the context of Organisational Studies (*ibid*). Moreover, Flyvbjerg (1998) argued that a basic weakness of modernity seems to be the complete ignorance of the `real´ rationalities at work. As a consequence, it can be argued that `management´ and `managers´ are affected by those aspects.

Shenhar and Renier (1996) discussed several models of what management is and how managers work, e.g. Fayol's classical model which is divided into five traditional components namely planning, organising, leading, `staffing´ (the development of workers that they are able to fulfil organisational `roles´ effectively!) and controlling (`correcting´ worker's activities that organisational purposes can be achieved!). Managers have a responsibility to their organisation concerning preservation and protection; therefore an ability of e.g. problem solving is needed which requires making rational decisions. But managers have a responsibility to people within the organisation as well regarding to working conditions, rewards and motivation. S/he has to know how to work and communicate with the workers in order to achieve a co-operation of all involved, because s/he can be seen as a part of a team that shares mutual responsibility (*ibid*). Mintzberg (cited in Shenhar and Renier, 1996) explained that a manager has to play at least three different roles. Firstly, the `information´

role – information displays an important ingredient in managerial work and a connection to formal and informal resources is essentially needed (Shenhar and Renier, *ibid*). This includes passing all relevant information to workers as well, e.g. concerning an organisation's strategy because it could be dangerous to separate workers from it or to provide only inadequate information. Secondly, there would be the `decision-making´ role (e.g. setting objectives, planning and problem-soving is involved) and finally an `inter-personal´ role which displays a `people handling´, e.g. directing, motivation and social duties (*ibid*).

Hummel (2006) questioned if ideas of the "post-modern- bandits" are really new and stated in particular the theory of enlightenment – which is connected with knowledge and therefore linked to power as well (Jackson and Carter, 2000) – "*could have come out of a gardening book*" (*ibid*:314). Hummel (2006) also discussed if a modernist really has to respond to the post- modern challenges and McKinley (cited in Becker, 2004) went a step further and compared post-modernists "*to the radical student movement of the 1960´s*" (*ibid*:785), i.e. tearing down established structures. "*Change is only good if it´s an improvement, and the leading postmodernists don´t even offer an alternative to the status quo*" (Becker, 2004:785).

Wagner- Tsukamoto (2007) questioned widespread views on Scientific Management, e.g. regarding to its lack of theoretical foundations and the idea of a physiological organisation theory that aimed exploitation and deskilling of workers and explained why scientific management ran into implementation problems in arguing that conflicting interests were reason for that, e.g. organisation members are looking for their own advantages on the cost of other members. He [Wagner- Tsukamoto] referred to Taylor who described two dilemmas – on the one hand the worker- condition (job performance and payment) and the managerial- condition (opportunistic rule setting) and argued that a decrease of payment of the harder working labour force would automatically lead to a decrease of performance. Worker- opportunism and managerial- opportunism hold potential of conflicts in it that would eventually lead to a loss for both parties (*ibid*). "*Taylor conceptualized organisational behaviour as a conflict-laden interaction process...*" (*ibid*:113) and his study was designed to achieve a change of the management system so that a win-win situation can be realized, i.e. the interests should be the same among workers and management. Taylor's idea can therefore be seen as `skill formation´, but his critics in scientific management as a physiological organization theory simply undervalue his interests. Moreover, Taylor had not only interests

in financial incentives, but discussed non-financial benefits for workers as well, e.g. shorter working hours, sport-facilities etc. (*ibid*).

By contrast, a worker at Ford´s production plant said: "*You have to work like hell in Ford's. ... You can't let up. You've got to get out the production ... and if you can't get it out, you get out*" (Rupert, 1995).

Taylorism left such an everlasting designation on how management is theorized and practised that thinking in another way seems to be impossible (Hawes, 1992). Alvesson and Willmott (1996) called for an "open- minded approach" in critical thinking. `Open- minded´ can in general be defined as the willingness to listen, to think about and be interested in something, but also to accept different ideas. Menssen (1993) asked for the characterizations of a critical thinker and described that within the critical thinking movement him or her is seen as a "`*constructive knower´, who integrates objective and critical ways of knowing with subjective and creative ways of knowing*" (*ibid*:85) and furthermore shows tolerance to contradictions and ambiguities. Knowledge is not objective and can never be detached from power (Jackson and Carter, *op cit*) and Scarnati (2002) mentioned knowledge is power.

Schlick (1992) argued that critical thinking skills are important to critically analyse gathered information and that they will play a significant role for quality and productivity improvements in future. For instance marketing managers will need critical thinking skills to adapt quicker and more effective to changes within their business environment, because e.g. marketing strategy is too often flagged "*as the outcome of technical application of traditional analytical frameworks...*" such as the SWOT- analysis "*... to highly standardised situations*" (Fodness, 2005:20). Furthermore they will become in general more essential where people are involved e.g. concerning decision- making, problem- solving and problem- prevention (Schlick, *ibid*). Supplementary, Shenhar and Renier (*op cit*) stated that the manager of the future will serve as a team leader and developer of human skills who empowers team members, deals with cultural issues and is aware of values and worker beliefs. The establishment and preservation of relationships among employees and managers will in consequence become an important issue with emphasise on empowerment, integration, commitment as well as social activities (*ibid*) – but this requires to be open- minded.

On the contrary Managerialism supports social and economic inequalities and significantly undermine social solidarity and integration that could finally lead e.g. to insecurity, stress and a loss of moral among employees (Mok, 1999), because the `modern ideal of efficiency´ emphasizes on routine and mechanical habit. For instance v.Delinder (2005) described anxiety and panic among the dancers in Stravinsky's ballet (who practised Taylorism to achieve the `best´ performance) and eventually their movements represented only their physicality - without their individual expression of the `role´. V.Delinder (*ibid*:1449) concluded: "*Stravinsky and Balanchine sought to instill a new "realism" into the performing arts: to collapse the barriers between the performers and their audience, but by creating one between choreographer/ composer and the dancer themselves*". Alvesson (1987) interpreted Gardell that a monotonous task without the chance of individual performance could lead to the avoidance of initiative. Mok (*ibid*) put the worst on top – a permanent feeling of powerlessness and illness which might lead to premature death. According to Westlander (1976, cited in Alvesson, 1987) job- satisfaction can make up to 25% of `mental well-being´.

Furthermore connections between work situations and family problems could be found; consequently frustrations at work have the ability to finally lead to frustrations within the family (Kornhauser, 1965 cited in Alvesson, 1987). Alvesson (*ibid*) summarized these findings to work satisfaction as of great importance to the individual and to the community.

These arguments lead finally back to the subject itself, emotions and feelings come to the fore. Every social activity involves emotions and feelings rather than logic or rationale (Shenhar and Renier, *op cit*). In consequence subjectivity is the key in Critical Theory.

Every human being is different and everyone constructs during his/ her life an own character, own ideas, views, values and beliefs, i.e. simply their own identity. The way of seeing and feeling `something´ depends on experiences within their individual surroundings, e.g. social factors (childhood, education, status and many more). As earlier mentioned, voices are considered in a post-modern view and they play a significant role in one's `construction´, too. There is not only `one voice´, there are more voices, i.e. polyvocal. Voice is connected to power and it is important to whom we listen, because it can have an impact on one´s identity.

In Critical Theory the local (individual – I and you and he/she etc.) voice is emphasised and not an overarching (meta) voice (O'Brian, 2007).

In consequence it can be said that these points are about a social construction of reality which leads to the question of `Truth´ (truth is also related to power). Firstly there are different (narrative) interpretations due to subjectivity that eventually brings more than one way and one answer with it – consequently it is impossible to say `This is how it is!´ – and secondly `What is truth?´ / `Who determines truth?´ / `Who tells the truth?´ Alvesson (cited in Becker, 2004:784) stated "*rhetorical tricks should be exposed ... not in order to reach the `truth´, but in order to understand that there is no `truth´*".

Additionally there is an impact on organisational culture, which is seen in a `modern view´ as objective. Alvesson (1987 and 2002, cited in O'Brian, 2007) criticised e.g. Schein in arguing that "*culture should be seen as part of the organisation but an embodiment what it is*" (*ibid*). Furthermore the development of a strong organisational culture would lead to higher job satisfaction and finally give workers an identity in their work (Alvesson, 1987). In addition, Willmott and Knights (1987) focused on the deep connection of human interests and knowledge as a basis for a critical study of organisational reality and Bowles (1994) examined the confrontation of organisational forces through maturation of individuals' life processes. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) defined identity as an important aspect in organisational control and added it would be better to manage the workers `insights´ rather than their behaviour. Supplementary to question values and beliefs would bring critical thinking forward and may detach the individual from the tradition (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992).

Within this context Alvesson and Willmott (*ibid*) connected `open- minded´ with emancipation, which can in general be defined as setting free from legal, social and political restrictions. In the meaning of Critical Theory it covers the transformation of e.g. gender relations and the development of a democracy at the workplace – which involves an active process of individual and collective self- determination in order to overcome unnecessary social restrictions, e.g. sexual discrimination (*ibid*). Primecz (2000) stated that Alvesson and Due Billing gave valuable insights into the topic of gender and organisations through different perspectives, e.g. from a feminist standpoint. They put gender in a cultural context and argued that this is one important view how to look at an organisation. Additionally Lang (1999) mentioned that Northouse also discussed several perspectives on leadership, e.g. the role of women in leadership in a feminist view.

Further central points regarding to emancipation are on the one hand a critical reflection of the reality of the social world and on the other hand rising awareness to established methods in management and organisations through a combination of philosophy and social science. Critical Management Theory "*can make a contribution to a broader movement of emancipatory transformation*" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996:190) Control for instance can be seen as a restriction of space for activity as well as creativity, because control has the ability to foster e.g. suspicion and resistance (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992) – even Weber had reservations about control-mechanism and restrictions on creativity (O'Brian, 2007). Additionally hierarchies, the fragmented division of labour and certain leadership styles are challenged to question established methods of typical modern organisations – in fact what is taken for granted (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992: Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). Alvesson and Willmott (1992) warned for certain gains and certain losses in the end, but introduced possible solutions, e.g. the listening to people.

The `open- minded´ approach (the emancipatory thinking) will have its contribution to a change in organisational behaviour, and additionally to a differentiated view about life, production, work, relationship and society. Lundberg (2005) outlined that leadership will require more strategic thinking and making sense to more dilemmatic situations in future. Fodness (2005) suggested several methods how critical thinking skills can be developed (e.g. through learning and practising new approaches, reframing `old´ approaches) in order to notice different alternatives better. Strategic thinking offers the opportunity to move beyond existing structures and could e.g. in marketing strategy lead to breakthrough results (*ibid*). In the end managers will have to be able to find the right balance e.g. between stability and flexibility, top- down- mission and bottom- up- involvement, control and learning (Lundberg, *ibid*).

However management will change and however managers manage in future, fact is that organisations are going through an enormous change and are challenged due to a more dynamic, global and `open´ world; therefore team leadership and a more participative management will be required. The manager's abilities of the future will be marked by vision, creativity and inspiration (Shenhar and Renier, 1996). Leaders should empower their employees; provide resources, guidance and evaluation tools that measure success and … "*then get out of the way and let their people shine like diamonds*" (Scarnati, 2002:841).

But some facts will always remain the same – managing itself will never be a value- neutral process, mangers who manage with a particular end in mind will finally always serve capitalism (Jackson, 1999), results will always count and people will always be the most important part in management (Shenhar and Renier, *op cit*).

Finally, the author served in the army and experienced different types of leadership. After several promotions he had to find his style and finally lead as well. Two things are worth to mention. Firstly, no-one can be seen as an object. Even within the tight structures of hierarchy, order and obey there was space for feelings and emotions – and everybody within this `organisation´ attached great importance to it. There was emphasise on solidarity, relationships, social activities and (where possible) team work among all ranks. And secondly, leadership is dependent on and varies with individual identities.

For this reason, the author agrees completely with a statement by Dale Fodness (2005:23):
"*The trick is to consciously choose the appropriate style of thinking based on the circumstances and not to mindlessly apply one or the other to all situations*" and connects this in consequence with being `open-minded´. Though modernism contains some good points; it is still insensitive and therefore rightly discussed.

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