#### From the Horse’s Mouth: Intrepid Conversation with Phil Fersht | Season 1

### Episode 1.1: A Kernel of Truth - Laura Gassner Otting, Wall St Journal best-selling author of ‘Wonderhell’, a regular contributor to Good Morning America, the TODAY Show, and Oprah Daily.

00:47 Phil Fersht

Wonderful. So today I'm very honored to be joined by Laura Gassner Otting, who's got a wonderful background. And I'd like her herself to maybe introduce herself to our audience, because I think a lot of what she is doing is very relevant to the industry that we're in, particularly at a time when we're going through such change socially, economically and politically. So Laura, I'd love to hear a bit more about your background and what you're up to today.

01:21 Laura Gassner Otting

Sure. So I guess I make my living as an author and as a keynote speaker. I am the author of two books. I'm a Wall Street Journal best-selling author of ‘Wonderhell’, the book that was inspired by a TEDx that I gave that's got 2.5 million views, crazily enough, and ‘Limitless’, ah the book that was inspired by 20 years of working in executive search.

Everything that I think about is based around this question of why success doesn't always bring happiness and what actually engages us to do the very best work we can. How do we bring everything we are to everything we do? And so the intrepid conversation we're having today I think is about how do we engage ourselves, our people, how do we become limitless leaders to our companies, our our communities, our country, ourselves, and really do work that matters.

02:16.05 Phil Fersht

Fantastic. So you began your career as an appointee in Bill Clinton's White House, right? Can you talk a little bit about maybe that and how you evolved from that humble beginning?

02:29.68 Laura Gassner Otting

Yeah, I dropped out of law school because I heard this unknown governor from a tiny southern state talking about this idea that there's nothing that's wrong with America that can't be fixed with what's right with America. And even in our super divisive times that we have right now in our election season, I still believe that to be true. I do believe that there's more that unites us than divides us. And this governor, Bill Clinton, was talking about this idea of service, community service in exchange for college tuition. So you're improving your community while you're also improving yourself. And so it's this sort of collective growth and development and betterment while you're also giving yourself like a bootstraps up way to sort of get to the place that will change yourself and change, you know, generations to come.

When I heard him talk about that idea, I had been in law school because I thought I myself was going to run for office. I thought I was going to solve all the problems and I was going to do all the things. Then I heard him talking about this idea and I was like, that needs to happen. That needs to happen. So I literally started volunteering on the campaign. About three weeks later, all four principals, Bill and Hill and Al and Tipper Gore, all came to Gainesville, Florida, and we got 36,000 people to show up at this rally. The national office was like, who are those volunteers? We should employ them. By employ, they meant we should put them on payroll, making zero dollars, but all the ramen soup and cold pizza and idealism you could eat.

One thing led to another and I ended up putting my car on the auto train and, you know, going to Little Rock and then move into DC and working on the transition and eventually working in the office that actually created the National Service Program AmeriCorps as a political appointee.

04:19 Phil Fersht

Awesome, awesome. I actually met Bill Clinton a few years ago in a conference in Poland and he literally cornered me after the event and just chewed my ear off for like 15 minutes...

04:32 Laura Gassner Otting

He will do that. It's really funny because he’s, you know, he's a vegan now and he's this wizened little man with this gigantic head and these fiery blue eyes that still have so much intensity and passion behind them. And when he talks to you, it is like klieg lights. It is like you are the only person in the room and when he walks away you still feel seared by them in a way that even an elder statesman you can understand the idea that some leaders have charisma, some leaders have this “it factor”, this thing that others don't, right? It's like this thing that you're sort of born with and just the sort of fire and the light in his brain is still magnificent.

05:26 Phil Fersht

Yeah, no I mean he began his speech with, “We all thought social media at the time was a good thing.”

05:35 Laura Gassner Otting

Turns out not so much, right?

05:40 Phil Fersht

I mean when we look at what's happening in the state of the society we're in today, the tensions going on at the universities, the misinformation that is flying around the place, how much of this do you think is blamed on too much information available to people who don't have the maturity to digest it? Or is this a flip on, hey, when we were 20 years ago, we didn't have enough information! We sort of just relied on a couple of sources. I mean, what do you think is going on in the world today when it comes to social media?

06:20 Laura Gassner Otting

You know, it's such an interesting question because I could probably argue all sides of the coin all day long on this. I don't actually know if it's a question of maturity. People are getting misinformation that they aren't mature enough to handle. I just gave a keynote in Dallas, Texas two days ago to 1,200 people working in the staffing industry.

On the ride from the hotel to the airport, I had a driver who, during the 45 minutes, proceeded to tell me about 15 different self-researched ideas he'd had that I can best describe as conspiracy theories at best, right? It was everything from the sun doesn't cause skin cancer, it's sunscreen that causes skin cancer, and the FDA is in bed with the doctors. And he said something like, “Well, 50 years ago, our kids had 20 vaccines and now they have 72. So clearly the FDA is making some money.” I'm like, or maybe science has just advanced, right?

The problem with it is that every one of these conspiracy theories and the misinformation and all that starts with a kernel of truth, and then it gets blown out of proportion by people who feel like they're missing out on whatever is being given to the people who are part of that scene.

I have a different theory, and my theory is that it's all algorithm based. So, if you were somebody who was “doing the right thing” during the pandemic, “doing the right thing” during black lives matter, “doing the right thing” during any social upheaval over the course of the last seven or so years, you were filtered information through from the algorithm of just one side of the argument. And that side of the argument is the side of whoever the oppressed person is that you were following before.

And so it's not that you're not mature enough to deal with, it's that that's the only information you're actually getting, because the algorithm isn't giving you the other side of it for you to, in your mature brain, compare, “I see this with my own two eyes, I see this with my own two eyes, they seem to be at odds, so clearly there's something not true here, let me try to figure out more.” And I don't think we're giving people enough information so that they can learn about it.

I also think that social media has become the root of so much of our unhappiness as a culture, and so much of our unhappiness at work, because we're also fed these false ideals. I call them the four horsemen of the success apocalypse: passion, purpose, happiness, and balance. We should be following these things, and if we get them, we'll be super happy. We're given this idea that it's all about wealth, and it's all about money, and it's all about prestige, when in fact, really, each one of us defines what makes us happy very differently.

So as managers, if we're like, “Oh, my person's not happy, let me push the easy button and just pay them more money.” Maybe that makes them more happy for a short amount of time, because that's what they think is supposed to make them happy, but it doesn't fulfill them. So, they end up back in your office, three months later with that, what have you done for me lately face on. So, it's actually not allowing our people to be engaged in their work, because we don't actually know what engages our people in their work, because we're looking at social media and letting that define it for us.

09:43 Phil Fersht

What do you think about the fact that these social media platforms are owned by corporate entities or Elon Musk or the Chinese firms that own TikTok? I mean, do you think that there should be some type of change or regulation made because ultimately if information is free, but it's owned by people who have political biases like Musk, should something be done about this in your opinion?

10:18 Laura Gassner Otting

I think millionaires or go back a hundred years ago, multi-hundredaires, have always had political affiliations and political ideals. It's just that a hundred years ago, they built symphonies and parks and institutions, universities, right? The Rockefellers. There was just as much union busting and abuse of those who had less by those who had over 100 years ago. We didn't see as much of it. They masked it with more things that were better for the common good than social media.

I do think it's a problem that the vast majority of people get their news from one of six different outlets and those outlets are basically owned by three people. I think that is a little problematic. I don't have a solution for it though. It's like Churchill said that democracy is the worst form of all government except for all the rest.

I don't have a solution for it. If I were to wave a magic wand and create some solution for it, what I would do is I would actually not do anything about social media or the news. I would just put civic education back in our classrooms, teaching people what it means to be a citizen, why voting matters, why the person that you vote for for mayor has more to do with your life than the person who you vote for for president.

Why the electoral college is an interesting institution, why we need to pay attention to the Supreme Court, why you have to vote in primaries to send messages to the government, the parties, about who they should fund. Why ranked choice voting makes sense and math isn't actually scary. So, I think it starts much, much earlier. We are putting smartphones in the hands of 13-year-olds and we're taking civic education away from them at the same time and I think that combination is incredibly dangerous and the long tail on that is going to haunt us for… millennia.

12:21 Phil Fersht

Yeah, yeah, I mean I've obviously come from the UK and the situation of news media being owned by politicians or being driven by political agendas is unthinkable.

12:36 Laura Gassner Otting

I would love to do what you do in the UK and have question time. To have the president, like the MP, stand in front of Congress once a month and just have people barrage them with questions on live television.

I think that we would get a much more intelligent class of politicians if we actually did that. We also might just get more showboating, I don't know. But I do think there are things that we could learn.

13:02 Phil Fersht

Yeah, definitely. It's been an interesting four or five years in the world. Obviously, the impact of the pandemic. I operate largely in the technology industry and that's had a lasting effect on the work culture in this business. You probably saw that Amazon is now pulling everyone back to the work week from January and,

13:23 Laura Gassner Otting

Mm hmm.

13:25 Phil Fersht

It's interesting, I've been interviewing Gen Z's now, and a lot of them want to go back to the office. A lot of the younger folks, they're like, “I've got to go back to the office, I'm a mammal. I need people.” They've realized they're not going to learn about their careers if they're sitting at home. A lot of them also realize they need money. Mom and dad ain't going to fund them forever, right?

13:45 Laura Gassner Otting

Mm hmm.

13:47 Phil Fersht

So do you see a rebound back to a world before the pandemic that's happening? Or do you think something else is occurring in society?

13:59 Laura Gassner Otting

Phil, what's very interesting about this is that my company has run a global online assessment with 56 different questions and a whole demographic data set since January of 2019. We have almost 7,000 responses from 74 different countries, every possible demographic, every possible industry, all ages, all races, everything.

What we found was that even though over the course of the last few years, we've seen a lot of headlines about the quiet quitting and the great resignation and all of that, it turns out that worker engagement attitudes really haven't changed that much. So, we have 7,000 responses from before, during, and as we've come out of the pandemic. We actually haven't found that much has changed, except for in one particular area. That one particular area is control.

How much control do people feel like they have over their work? Because the amount of control that you feel like you have gives you safety and security and makes you feel like you have options. Even though it looked like we had a ton of control, March 2020, all hell breaks loose, and the managers are like, just do what you need to do, do whatever you need to do, keep the place afloat, like mission critical, work when, work how, work where you want.

It turns out that that gave us the appearance of control, but it actually didn't give us true control. What workers are telling us that they want is that they want control over the work environment. They want to be able to impact the work environment where they work. They want to be able to have control over the teams and the projects in which they're assigned. And they want to be able to have some kind of control over the amount of hours they work and how much money they earn for those hours. That's what they're looking for.

What we also further found was that, and this isn't rocket science, bad leaders bleed out team members. Big shocker. All of you listening to this podcast are like, I didn't need to listen to the podcast for that. But here's what we did. We focused our research specifically on people who say, I work for a “good leader.” A “good leader” is somebody who has a good reputation. They deliver good results. They've been with the firm for a while, they are known as a good leader. People who say, I work for a “good leader,” but I have no relationship with that leader are just as likely to leave as somebody who says, I work for a “bad leader.”

So if you're a good leader and you've done all the training, you've done all the courses and you watch masterminds and all the master classes and all that stuff, and yet your people are saying you don't know what actually makes them tick. They know you don't know what they care about, why they're at that company, why they care about the work they're doing, what they're up to every single day. They will leave. So It makes sense that workers want to come back to the office because they feel so disconnected from the people who are actually allowing them to have some control over their work environment, over the projects and the people, over the money and the hours.

Even though we know as managers, they're not going to learn, they're not going to grow unless they're in the office, they're actually feeling the same thing. It isn't just because of the pandemic. They've wanted this all along. They're just feeling it in a much more increased way in this one particular area.

17:05 Phil Fersht

Yeah, it's interesting. I mean, I put it to get people back to office and some people just say, “yeah, I'll come back to the office, but make it worth my while.” Yeah. I say, “Great. I'll have some ideation sessions. We're going to go to lunch. We're going to make it fun.” Right? That's okay. I don't mind. I had staff complaining about the commute time and I'm like, “What do you mean having 30 minutes to your own thoughts every day is bad?” Someone else literally said, “My employer doesn't dictate who I socially interact with anymore,” literally said, “It's not up to my boss to tell me to hang out with my co-workers, I hang out with who I choose to hang out with.” I'm getting to the point of, “Yeah, but I choose who I want to work in this company. I don't know if I like your attitude.”

17:53 Laura Gassner Otting

Yeah. It's interesting because I think in the tech world, especially, for years, they were like, “We've got ping pong tables and beer on tap and kombucha and the break room.” And that doesn't actually actually bring happiness at work. The free dry cleaning and the bring your puppy to work and the best friend in the next cubicle, that is a stand-in for happiness. It is an ephemeral thing, frankly, it can be replaced by the person next door who doesn't have the ping pong tables, they have axe throwing or whatever the next thing is that's more exciting. So we put our HR officers in this position of constantly having to find the next big flashy thing, when the next big flashy thing is temporary. It's not actually true deep fulfillment in work.

What brings true deep fulfillment and work is not success and the fastest, most expedient path to the corner office and this one myopic view of what people want, it's actually this fulfillment, this harmony, this alignment, this consonance where what you do matches who you are. After the White House, I went from the White House to go work in executive search. I spent 20 years in executive search world finding C-suite leaders for some of the largest organizations in the world.

I spent five years doing that for a big firm and then I had a certain moment of rage where I realized I can do it better, smarter, faster and with more authenticity, more integrity on my own. Started my own firm, ran it for fifteen years and eventually sold it to the people who helped me build it.

So I spent twenty years in the executive search world. In executive search, we used to say there are about eight motivating factors that will get anybody excited at any time for a new job. There are things like: What's the mission of the organization? Am I inspired by the leader? Will it look prestigious on my resume? How many skills will I learn? How deep is the impact? Where is the job located? How broad is the challenge? How much money will I make? We've all been told money, money is number one. But in this research that we did, we found that less than 37% of all employees actually said money is the most important factor that determines your happiness at work.

And by the way, for the contingent workforce, which is a huge amount of the tech world, that number goes down to 32%. So less than a third of contingent workers are saying that money is the most important factor. So what actually gets them excited? What gets them excited is this ability to control where they are and what they're doing. They also want to have some sort of alignment between who they are at home and what they're doing at work.

So all of the exhaustion from the busyness, it's not because they're too busy. It's that they're too busy doing things that they don't care about. They don't want to have costume changes and code shifting from home to work. They actually want not work life balance, but work-life alignment. They want to be able to talk about what they do with their friends and be proud of the company, the work, the leader they serve, the cause that they're helping, the business that they're building. They actually also care about, even if they don't want to socialize with people around them, they want to respect and and and admire and want to emulate the people with whom they work as well. So there are a lot of other things that people are looking for that are not just this sort of old one-size-fits-all definition with these old eight motivating factors all in one specific definition.

It's important for leaders to talk to their people and say, “Well, which of these matter to you?” It's not just like the value of the job. It's the value of the job to you in particular, because otherwise you get workers who are interested, but they're not invested and you can't really go through chaotic times like we're in now and major moments of change and transformation if your people are just interested but not invested.

21:32 Phil Fersht

That's fantastic. We do so much on work-life alignment. It means a lot in terms of getting people truly passionate about what they do. I mean, you've run a company, I've run a company and nothing substitutes passion. Once you're passionate about something, you never think, “Am I too busy?” It's, “Do I have enough hours in the day to do the stuff I'm really passionate about and what's my opportunity cost?”

21:57 Laura Gassner Otting

But we get passion wrong also. Everyone's like, “Follow your passion!” As if all you need to do is find your passion and then follow it and everything's going to be great. What that tells our young people who are getting their life advice from social media is that all you have to do is find your passion and follow it and everything's going to be perfect. That means the first time the project goes wrong, the first time you lose funding, the first time the customer says no, the first time your favorite client leaves, but your worst employee stays, you’re like, “I guess this must not be my passion. I should do something else.” Everyone's like, “Oh, tell me what you would do if you knew you couldn't fail. That's your passion.” I'm like, “No, tell me what you would do if you knew for sure you would fail. And yet you would do it over and over and over and over until you got it right.” Because our passion is going to pick us up and throw us down and gut us. Our passion is going to teach us lessons. Our passion is going to make us work for it. But isn't your passion worth that?

So I think we shouldn't just follow our passion. We need to invest in our passion. But when we use social media to get our life advice, it seems really simple and really easy and really one dimensional, when in fact, it's a whole lot harder than that.

23:08 Phil Fersht

Yeah. Oh yes, I'm really on that.

23:09 Laura Gassner Otting

Sorry, I got a little bee in my bonnet about follow your passion. You caught me on a day.

23:17 Phil Fersht

Thank you. I'm someone who did follow his passion and I know how much pain it took to get there. When I finally leave the company I've built, I'll write a book all about it, but I can't write it now while I run it.

23:28 Laura Gassner Otting

Right. And here's the thing, people only see the success. So they're like, “Oh, he's doing this thing that he's passionate about. He's a natural.” And you're like, “I'm not a natural! You just don't see all of the work I do in the dark at three in the morning. When I wake up early, when I stay late, when I'm thinking about on the weekends, all the things I did wrong, all you're seeing is the stuff that bubbled up to the to to your to your view, which is the view of success.”

But they don't see everything else that's behind it. I think by not having people in the office, they don't see the hard work that goes into it. They just see the success. I was raised by boomers and my parents grew up at a time where you didn't show emotion to your children, right? I never saw my parents fight. I never saw my parents argue. I never saw them cry. I barely saw them sneeze. Then I made it to the workforce and I was like, “Why am I failing left and right?” My parents never failed. It was never hard for them. They were just like, “Make it happen.” They only talked about success at the dinner table.

It turns out like we actually have to show people all of the hard work. We have to show them the learning and the lessons and the doing hard things. I run marathons and my kids see me come home and I'm like, “Yep, I ran 18 miles today. Well, really, I ran five miles and I ran/walk the other 13,” right? I make sure that I bring them into the process because if we don't bring people into the process, it's a problem. To go back to the research that we did, we found that less than half of all employees understood how their work impacted the weekly, monthly, or quarterly goals of the company. We found that less than half of employees understood what those goals even were and we found that less than half of all workers under understood what they need to do every day to get to those goals because we're just not showing our workers our teams the process behind the what has to be done and then why their work actually matters.

I know I sound like an old fogie when I'm like, “People have to go back to the office!” But they have to at least be in the office enough at times that are important in that matter so they can build those relationships in the in-between moments between the let's just show the success points.

25:38 Phil Fersht

And the personal sacrifice that people have to put in to achieve their passion.

25:45 Laura Gassner Otting

This goes back to that question of getting all of our definitions of success from one place, because you can't be insatiably hungry for someone else's goals. So if somebody is like, “You need to go do this thing,” but you don't really care about it, then push comes to shove, you're just not going to make that personal sacrifice. So all that work will be for nothing. You will have wasted capital, you'll have wasted people, you’ll have wasted time.

So we really have to figure out what we actually really care about because it takes a lot to be successful and you won't do it if you don't actually want it. People are like, “I'm so busy.” I'm like, “You're not so busy. You just don't care, and that's fine.” It's fine if you are too busy to start that business. It's fine if you're too busy to go back to school. It's fine if you're too busy to train for that marathon. Maybe you just don't care about it. Because if you cared about it, you would do it. It's totally fine to say, “I don't care about this thing.” Go find the thing you actually care about and dedicate your work and your life to that and be amazing at it. Stop trying to shoehorn yourself into someone else's definition of success because you're not going to be as good at it as you could be somewhere else.

26:54 Phil Fersht

Absolutely. That's wonderful. I have one final question, particularly because of your political background. I made the choice a few days ago to openly back Kamala for president, put it on my LinkedIn in front of my 70,000 followers, knowing this is gonna create a shitstorm.

27:12.88 Laura Gassner Otting

Did you get a lot of heat?

27:17 Phil Fersht

I said, these are the four reasons why she's my bet. I didn't say anything about Trump or anything like that. I just literally said, “I love what she's doing with small business. She's supporting the middle class. And we need a woman as a fricking president.” I'm sorry.

27:34 Laura Gassner Otting

Yes, hear hear!

27:34 Phil Fersht

And I just literally hit those three things. I put it out there. I think I lost two followers out of 70,000. I only got about three nasty-grams, so I just blocked anyone who was rude and abusive. There was a couple of Republican friends who actually were pretty nice. They said, “Gee, this guy shows some cojones.”

27:53 Laura Gassner Otting

Yeah.

27:55 Phil Fersht

And he actually got respect for someone to say, this person actually got up and took a side and said, “I'm voting for this person, and this is why:” I'm so tired of the divide right now. It's almost soul destroying what's happening in this country. I'm like, “Look, I'm voting for so and so, and this is why.” I've got a friend of mine voting for Trump because he's a Jewish guy and he thinks Trump's better for Isreal.

28:17 Phil Fersht

I go, “You're a single issue voter. I have an issue with that, but thank you for sharing your opinion.”

28:23 Laura Gassner Otting

Yes, yes.

28:23 Laura Gassner Otting

Well, I'm Jewish and I'm not voting for Trump.

28:25 Phil Fersht

So am I, I’m Jewish.

28:33 Laura Gassner Otting

I put up a post on LinkedIn called, “Lessons that we can take from the debate to propel all of our careers forward.” I wrote about how Kamala seemed nervous in the first question, her mouth was a little bit dry, but even then hit her stride. She tried to talk about issues, he didn't. I tried to be very even keel. There were some things he did well. There were some things she did well. But I did get a few people who responded who went a little like, “You talk about how he was rude, but you don't talk about how she was making all these faces.” I was like, “This is not a political post. I appreciate your opinion, but this is really more about what we can learn from these moments.” But no, I'm the same. I'm obviously by resume and by just the things that I said today, a fairly progressive Democrat. But when I was in high school in the 80s, I'd skipped kindergarten, so I was a year younger than the rest of my classmates. I remember walking around with voter registration forms when they were all turning 18 and I was still 17, encouraging them to register as a Republican to vote for Ronald Reagan. I was a tried and true Reagan Republican.

I remember that Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill would fight all day long about issues, but then they would get together in the Oval Office and have a scotch at the end of the day. I would like to get back to a time where we have statesmen and stateswomen who actually put country before party. I'm a big fan of veterans in office, whether they're veterans of the military or the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps or public service. I think people who have a track record of putting the country before themselves and their party would be better for our country.

But I do think it's brave. I have a lot of friends that are like, “I would never talk about politics publicly. You’ll lose clients.” I'm like, “Anybody who doesn't want to hire me sees Bill Clinton in the first line of my resume. So they're already not going to hire me.” It’s like, what can I do? But that's good to hear that you only lost two followers. It's surprising, actually. I'm happy about that.

30:45 Phil Fersht

Yeah I took the attitude of, I'm predominantly in tech and operations and most people I deal with tend to be fairly reasonable, intelligent individuals.

30:55 Laura Gassner Otting

And you have a platform, and with a platform comes responsibility, I think. I don't think you have to talk openly about where you stand about a candidate, but I think talking openly about what are the issues that are actually important. I think people who have platforms do have a responsibility to do that. So, well done, you.

31:12 Phil Fersht

Thank you. Wonderful. Do you think it's going to get better? Do you think this is just the one dark period in our political history that will heal eventually?

31:25 Laura Gassner Otting

I do. I think our country survived the 60s and the early 70s. I think our country will survive this. I think 4 million young people turn 18 every single year and the country is going to get younger and blacker and browner and gayer and with more women in office. That can't be a bad thing. I think that the Boomers did a lot of wonderful things for the country. I think they've also held on to power for a very long time. It would be nice to have some Gen X leadership. It'd be nice to have a Gen Xer on the Supreme Court, right? You may not even have one of those. But I think balance is always better. I think conversation is always better. I think listening is always better. I think that it’s time for better and different voices to become heard.

I mentioned ranked choice voting earlier is something that I think we would get if we had civics education back in our schools. Ranked choice voting is incredible because it means you can go into the voting booth and you can vote for your candidate of choice, even if your candidate of choice has no shot ever of winning, just to send a message to the parties that you want to see more candidates like that.

And then whoever you vote for second as your safe choice is still going to have your support. So you're still going to get the person on your side of the aisle to win. But you also can send a message about the kinds of candidates you want to see more of in the future. I think it's the best antidote to our two party system rather than running these third party candidates that never get any traction and just end up being spoilers. We could actually do it in a way that allows people to feel much more secure and comfortable in voicing the direction they want the country to go.

33:04 Phil Fersht

Wonderful. Well, this has been a fantastic conversation Laura Gassner Otting . I really look forward to sharing this with our community and I hope we hear a lot more from you in the future and hear more about some of your books that you're putting out and some of your views on the future of the workplace. It's been very interesting.

33:27 Laura Gassner Otting

Well, thank you so much. It's been great fun.

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