

Managing the Public Relations Crisis: A Case Study of Conflicting Agendas

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At some point, every organization undergoes the sort of crisis that demands a response to the public. Specifically, the organization must defend its reputation through both communication and behavior. Thomsen and Rawson explain that, “A crisis situation, an attack on credibility, or involvement in an allegedly illegal act threatens an organization's ability to prevent social sanction and forces that organization to engage in reparative behavior and communication” (1998, p. 35). Schuetz (1990) notes that in a crisis situation, the organization’s primary goal is to provide accurate information to audiences influenced by the crisis as quickly as possible. Benoit and Brinson (1994) echo Schuetz’ perspective, noting the specific type of communication required: “Thus, corporations face threats to their reputations, and often resort to image restoration discourse in such cases” (p. 76). Metzler (2001) reveals that protecting the organizations reputation is of vital importance because reputation is the key to legitimacy. Sellnow, Ulmer, and Snider (1998) extend Metzler’s line of reasoning, proposing that, “If organizations are to recover from crises, they must regain or maintain their social legitimacy” (p. 61).

Frequently when the literature refers to organizational crises, the analysis focuses on traditional business setting. However, many organizations do not quite fit that “traditional” category—for instance, institutions of higher education and the other businesses intimately associated with them, such as the Greek system, which are corporate entities; athletics, a business by any other name; and other parties, such as vendors. Such university institutions are not immune from the harsh spotlight resulting from a controversial campus event turning into a national media story. And in the instance of these bodies, legitimacy is just as much a concern as with more traditional businesses. The university lives or dies by its reputation. As well, Greek houses find themselves equally dependent upon their reputations in order to recruit new students, thus creating a positive cash flow.

This essay examines the 2007 crisis on the DePauw University campus involving the University administration and members of the Delta Zeta (DZ) sorority Delta chapter on the DePauw campus and the DZ National (DZN) office (the national office is the corporate entity owning the Delta Zeta name and controlling campus chapters nationwide). Briefly, the DZ chapter at DePauw experienced a steady decline in membership and interest on campus. The chapter submitted plans to close the chapter, which the University rejected. Officers at DZN investigated, they claim, at the insistence of DePauw administration. The result was a plan by DZN, not in consultation with DePauw administrators, that effectively started the chapter over with new “attractive” recruits and dismissing the majority of the current members who DZN deemed

insufficiently attractive to recruit new members or represent the sorority on campus. Needless to say, when these plans were exposed, a media firestorm erupted. DePauw and DZN were both attacked in various quarters for their own actions or inactions in the incident.

Our purpose is to explain the strategies and tactics used for image repair/restoration by both DePauw University and DZN, concluding that the University engaged in successful public relations practices, while DZN's efforts were largely ineffective, leading to a negative outcome. The analysis centers on Benoit et al.'s theory of image repair/restoration, supplemented with analysis of other scholars utilizing Benoit's typology. Benoit finds the term repair more descriptive than restoration: "Indeed, I now tend to prefer image "repair" to image "restoration" because "restoration" might imply that one's image has been restored to its prior state. Sometimes one has to settle for repairs (or "patches;" and of course image restoration/repair may not work at all)" (p. 40). As the literature contains both terms, we chose to use both terms, repair and restoration. Both organizations desired a positive image arising from their image strategies—the University requires legitimacy in order to attract quality students. DZ and DZN must have a positive reputation to attract women to the organization. Each side of the controversy presents an agenda conflicting with the other, making a win-win solution highly unlikely. Before getting to the analysis and conclusions, a more detailed background of the situation is in order. The analysis of the situation follows.

Conflict Antecedents

The problems between DZ, DZN, and DePauw started in August 2006. At that time, according to Delta Zeta headquarters, the DePauw University Delta chapter women voted to cease recruitment activities and to close the chapter at the end of the year. DZN approached the university administration asking to close the chapter but to be allowed to return at a later date. According to DZN, university officials denied this proposal. Instead, DZN representatives undertook an extensive membership review on the DePauw campus in late October 2006 and concluded the review in November 2006. DZN claimed that they followed the advice and guidance of university officials given to their representatives during a meeting in September. They also claim that the university guided the membership review (Delta Zeta Sorority, 2007, March 12). What, then, led up to a situation where the sorority national office investigated a chapter's membership practices?

Delta Zeta Delta chapter

The Delta chapter sorority house was two-thirds empty in September 2006 and according to former sorority members the chapter was known on campus as "The Dog House," a reference to what was perceived to be the unattractiveness of the members of DZ. This was reinforced by a psychology professor's survey of students described the sorority members as "socially awkward," confirming anecdotal evidence from individual students on the DePauw campus. Many of the members agreed that it might be in their best interests to close the Delta chapter without recruiting new members.

Delta Zeta National

DZN would be celebrating its centennial in 2009. In anticipation of this event, Executive Director Cynthia Menges had already been planning to close the Delta chapter temporarily in 2007, then to reopen it after a year and a half after recruiting an entirely new group of women. In September 2006, DePauw University administration informed Delta Zeta headquarters that if the chapter were closed, it would not be allowed to reopen on the sorority's chosen timetable. DePauw's decision would effectively preclude the DZ Delta chapter from participating in the sorority's centennial.

DePauw University

The Delta Zeta controversy occurred in the midst of the university's major effort to improve the Greek System. Involving trustees, students, the housing corporation, officers, chapter advisers, faculty, alumni, and parents in a Greek Fact-Finding Commission, a decision to improve multiple aspects of the system was in progress. DePauw officials instituted improvements to the physical structures and health and safety standards of the Greek houses. They also introduced the examination of new member recruitment and new member education, a refinement of the judicial system, an expansion of the staff support and other resources for fraternities and sororities, and they made efforts to curb high-risk drinking, in hopes of improving the reputation and safety of the campus Greek system (DePauw, 2007, March 12).

Escalation from Conflict to Crisis

After being rebuffed by DePauw administration, DZN sent a team of national officers to the university in November 2006 to conduct a membership review and to interview sorority members individually about their dedication to the sorority. DZN described this action as representing an attempt to salvage the Delta chapter. DZN proffered that this review take place on the advice of the university. DePauw University administrators "vehemently" denied this claim (Marklein, 2007, March 28).

Out of the "Dog House"

A few days after the review interviews, Delta Zeta representatives, with women from Indiana University's Epsilon chapter, held a recruiting event at the Delta chapter house. DZN asked 25 Delta chapter members not to participate and told them to remain out of sight. One Delta sorority member said, "They had these unassuming freshman girls downstairs with these plastic women from Indiana University, and 25 of my sisters hiding upstairs. It was so fake, so completely dehumanizing" (Dillon, 2007, February 25). Not long after this event, 23 out of the 35 active members of the Delta chapter sorority were sent form letters informing them that they had been assigned early alumna status and they were told to vacate the house. (Of the 12 women who received letters recommending "active" status, six decided to leave in the sorority in support of their evicted sisters). Some of the DZ women told university officials that when they first learned about the review, DZN led them to believe that they would be allowed to decide for themselves whether to continue their involvement in the sorority. Instead, the December 2006 letters that were sent informed the members whether they were still active or had been recommended for alumnae status and they were instructed to move out of the house by the end of January 2007.

As compensation, the “new alumni” were informed that they would receive \$300 to cover the difference between sorority housing and campus housing.

Why expulsion?

In the following months, different reports appeared on the Internet describing threats to the evicted women (expulsions if they refused alumnae status) and accusations that Delta Zeta national had chosen women to stay active who conformed to a specific code of attractiveness. DZN argued that the women asked to leave lacked commitment to the chapter. Sam Dillon of the *New York Times* interviewed the Delta sorority members. His report appeared on February 25 and helped to stimulate the national discussion over the issues involved in the conflict. Suddenly, a local problem became the topic of national interest. Dillon observed that the 23 evicted members included all of the overweight women as well as 3 of the 4 minorities (the 4th minority member reported that she did not receive a letter and assumed that she was recommended for alumnae status). Out of the 12 members invited to remain active, the six DZ sisters who chose to stay were a close group of women, all of whom were described as slender and popular with the fraternity men. In addition to DZN’s focus on physical attractiveness, according to Dillon’s interview, the sorority women claimed that the women forced to take alumnae status were majoring in “geeky” subjects such as theater and the sciences (Dillon, 2007, February 25). In the days following the *New York Times*’ article other media outlets picked up the story, including CNN, CBS News, *Good Morning America*, MSNBC, *Newsweek*, and *People*.

Quid pro quo

In response, on February 19, 2007, DePauw University President Robert Bottoms sent a letter to DZN formally reprimanding them. He also instituted a new rule requiring all on campus fraternities and sororities to provide housing for their members throughout the school year (DePauw, 2007, February 19). On March 1, DZN announced a freeze on responding to the media on the DePauw issue. As of March 6th, the national headquarters web site featured an apology to the evicted students and included a letter calling into question the loyalty of the women of the Delta chapter and blaming them for the recent struggles. They also criticized faculty who had defended the sorority women (Delta Zeta, 2007, March 6).

A resolution

On March 12, President Bottoms responded to Delta Zeta by formally withdrawing the sorority’s status as a recognized campus organization and instructed Delta Zeta national that the sorority must leave the campus at the end of the 2006-2007 academic year (DePauw, 2007, March 12). On March 29th, Delta Zeta national filed suit in U.S. Federal District Court in Indianapolis against DePauw University for expelling the sorority from campus. By November 2007, both Delta Zeta and DePauw University reached a resolution terminating the litigation. DePauw University posted the following on its internet web site:

Delta Zeta National Sorority and DePauw University have reached a resolution terminating the litigation between them. Although Delta Zeta does not have a chapter on campus, the parties have agreed that with support of a group of DePauw Delta Zeta alumnae, Delta Zeta National Sorority will have the opportunity to seek a return to

campus beginning in academic year 2010/11. DePauw values its relationship with its alumnae who are members of Delta Zeta and recognizes that like DePauw, Delta Zeta has an objective to develop college students. (DePauw University, 2007, November 15) The conflict appeared to be over. Only the damaged reputations of DZN and DePauw remained.

Image Restoration Strategies

Image restoration becomes important when an institution has passed the point of acting proactively to protect the organization’s image and its members. The goal is to regain the confidence of all relevant publics, to minimize negative publicity, and to return the organization to either its previous state or one better. Ware and Linkugel (1973), laying the theoretical groundwork for image repair/restoration research, offered that “questioning of a man’s [sic] moral nature, motives, or reputation” should be “most easily satisfied only by the most personal of responses by the accused” (p. 161). William Benoit’s theory of image restoration creates a detailed typology of image restoration strategies for organizations (Benoit, 1995a). Image restoration theory focuses on the variety of message options the organization has at its disposal during a crisis. Benoit identifies five categories of image repair strategies: 1) denial; 2) evasion of responsibility; 3) reducing the offensiveness; 4) corrective action; and 5) mortification. Each of these typology categories manifests as one or more specific techniques. Denial includes simple denial, shifting the blame, separation, and denying that the act was harmful. Evasion of responsibility appears as provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. Techniques for reducing the offensiveness include bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, and compensation. Corrective action includes any actions designed to ameliorate the negative situation. Mortification involves apologies and acceptance of blame (Table 1).

Table 1. Benoit’s Typology of Image Restoration Strategies and Techniques

Strategy	Techniques
Denial	Simple denial, shifting the blame, separation, denying that the act was harmful
Evasion of Responsibility	Provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions
Reducing the Offensiveness	Bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, compensation
Corrective Action	Any action designed to ameliorate negative situation
Mortification	Apology and accepting the blame

We explored one research question:

RQ₁: DePauw University and Delta Zeta National employed which image restoration/repair strategies and techniques?

Analysis of the public statements of both DePauw and DZN, reveals that DePauw engaged in simple denial, separation, and corrective action, while DZN employed shifting blame, good intentions, attacking the accuser, compensation, mortification and apology. These concepts form the basis for our analysis of this crisis.

Method

Data/Artifacts

Utterances of both DePauw and DZN, including statements from each group's website, newspaper accounts, public statements made by DePauw administration, faculty, and students, Delta Zeta Delta Chapter members, and DZN representative form the foundation of this analysis. This data includes policy statements and anecdotal evidence from parties involved in the conflict. In short, available *public* statements inform the analysis of DePauw's and DZN's *public relations* strategies and techniques.

Procedure

Each utterance is categorized first by source: DZN or DePauw. Each of these categories is then separated into the subject referenced: Delta Zeta Delta Chapter, DZN, or DePauw. Each statement is then compared to Benoit's strategies and techniques for image restoration/repair to determine the presence or absence of each.

Analysis

DePauw University strategies

University officials responded to the initial allegations by: (1) simple denial, (2) separation, and (3) corrective action. Simple denial is a rejection of the charges. The accused party may deny that the act occurred or that they even performed the act. Separation seeks to place the blame on a small portion of an organization that can be separated from the remaining and presumably good part (Benoit 1999). Corrective action involves the offender promising to correct the problem. The offender may promise to restore the situation to the state of affairs before the event by repairing existing damages, and/or promising to take preventive action to avoid a recurrence (Benoit 1997).

DePauw University President Robert Bottoms initially responded to the conflict developing over the eviction notices by sending a letter dated December 20, 2006 to the campus. In the letter he claimed that university representatives were working closely with the local Delta chapter to assist the women through "a difficult transition" and to secure housing for all of the women and that the university was in communication with DZN. By February 2007 DePauw Representatives had organized a meeting with the Executive Director of Delta Zeta, Cynthia Menges to discuss a series of issues concerning the sorority purge. Between February 8 and February 28 the resolution process broke down and President Bottoms sent a statement to the campus detailing his dissatisfaction with Delta Zeta national. He also sent a letter of reprimand to the DZN. In DePauw President Bottoms' letter to the campus, DePauw University strategically separated the university actions from that of the national sorority position while simultaneously denying responsibility. The February 28 University Statement begins, "DePauw University is home to the Delta chapter of Delta Zeta but we are not responsible for, nor do we condone, the manner in which the national officers of Delta Zeta carried out their membership review and the

subsequent treatment of their members. DePauw University disagrees with Delta Zeta's actions and their characterization of what has occurred on campus" (DePauw, 2007, February 28).

By March 9, 2007, President Bottoms made the decision to sever ties with the sorority and addressed his concerns in a letter to the President of DZN. In order to further separate DePauw from DZN, Bottoms wrote, "What has become increasingly clear from these discussions is that we at DePauw believe that the values of our University and those of the national Delta Zeta Sorority are incompatible" (DePauw, 2007, March 9). Further, the letter underscores other areas of separation, stating, "We also disagree with your portrayal of the University in the media. We are opposed to your media freeze. One of the foundations of a university is free and open communication. . . We also vehemently contest the assertion on your Web site that 'at all points in this process we (Delta Zeta) have worked with the University, sought their advice and acted upon their advice in our reorganization efforts'" (DePauw, 2007, February 28). This letter represents a simple denial strategy and reinforces the separation of the university and the sorority headquarters.

President Bottoms also clearly defined the university's decision for corrective action. The letter stated, "It is my decision to sever ties immediately with your national organization. Beginning in the fall of 2007, Delta Zeta will not be recognized by the University" (DePauw, 2007, February 28). In a letter to the Alumni of DePauw, President Bottoms described this strategy. He wrote, "Our destination for this undertaking should result in a very public position that there is a new Greek tradition evolving at DePauw—one that builds on our system's strengths within our learning community—one that might become a national model for other colleges and universities around the country" (DePauw, 2007, March 12).

Evident in all of the public messages that the university produces is an underlining concern for the well being of the university sorority members and the concerns for building a "learning community" that includes the Greek system on the campus. While there is "vehement denial" of the accusations by the sorority headquarters, it is not the central theme to the messages. As a public relations strategy, the message is clear, definitive, and works to the advantage of the university. The incident also gives the administration a boost in building a "new Greek tradition" at DePauw. In the process of responding to the events, university administrators have been able to define—redefine—the university's model for the Greek system. As a corrective action they provide an image of a better, more equitable, more diverse, and potentially more successful model for the system.

DZN filed a lawsuit against DePauw University, but the parties achieved a successful resolution terminating the litigation. University administration made it clear in the agreement that consideration was being made to the DZ alumnae that the sorority could apply for return to campus during the academic year 2010-2011, three years after agreement. This image restoration action intends to restore confidence on campus, with alumni, and with the media.

Delta Zeta National strategies

Delta Zeta headquarters responded with a complex array of techniques: shifting blame, good intentions, simple denial, compensation, attacking accuser, and mortification and apology. In

contrast to the strategies employed by DePauw University, DZN did much to reinforce the negative stereotypes of the Greek system—particularly sorority systems—as being elitist, focused on physical attractiveness, and above the regulation. This reinforcing is one reason that this campus incident became a national media crisis for the sorority.

The overriding message in most of the responses from Delta Zeta headquarters was an attempt to shift the blame and attack the accusers. Shifting of blame entails an argument that another party is actually responsible for the undesirable act (Benoit 1999). Attacking the accuser occurs when the offender attempts to cast doubt upon the attacker’s credibility to reduce the intensity of the attack (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). In the February statement from the Delta Zeta National President Debbie Raziano, the Delta chapter members were blamed for lack of recruitment, the university administration was blamed for the membership review, and the media was blamed for the representation of the national sorority. Shifting the blame as a strategy was so pervasive in the documents that when they issued their statement regarding the law suit it was still part of the grievance. “We have also sought, to no avail, to end the university’s campaign to falsely portray Delta Zeta and the situation involving our chapter at DePauw. DePauw’s leadership has engaged in an intentional campaign to defame Delta Zeta and inflicted significant harm on many of the student members of the sorority by deliberately exposing them to national ridicule” (Delta Zeta, 2007, march 28).

DZN also used a strategy of evasion of responsibility. The strategy of good intentions represents an attempt to convince the audience that the offensive act was performed with good intentions, that although an undesirable situation occurred, the accused meant well (Benoit 1997). Specifically, in most of their statements, they characterize the actual crisis as a mishap done with good intentions. For instance, in the February 26 *Statement from the National President*, they write, “It is here in communicating the results that we made a mistake. We misjudged how these communications would be received. . . In hindsight, Delta Zeta national leadership should have once again returned to campus and communicated the results in person with each woman.” There is an underlying message that DZN’s actions were correct, but the Delta chapter women overreacted.

Continual denial appeared in DZN’s statements that issues of “race, color, religion, national origin or handicap” were used in the recommendation for active status process. While this may be true, DZN representatives used evasive language when the subject of appearance was approached. Based on reports from sorority members, a representative from DZN admitted that “image” is important.

DZN utilized compensation as a method of image management. Compensation manifests when the accused offers to reimburse the victim of the offense, which, if it is acceptable to the victim, should help reduce the negative feelings arising from a failure of some sort (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). Each sorority women recommended for alumnae status was offered \$300 for compensation to cover housing costs. This also seemed to backfire as a strategy. The offering further displayed a lack of sensitivity to the actual issue. For instance, parents of the women evicted told the university administration that they were led to believe that their daughters would have a secure home at the charter house to the end of the year. Informing the women by a form letter at the end of the semester and telling them they had to find other housing before the next

semester caused much anxiety and upheaval for the women, their families, and the university administration. This also happened during final exams and just before the holiday break.

Many of DZN's public statements extended apologies as mortification. Apologists who use mortification confess to wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness or express regret. The rationale is that the admission of guilt and display of regret can often lead the audience to pardon the negative action (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). This strategy misfired, as each time they issued an apology it was accompanied by "shifting the blame" rhetoric. In fact, the University President cited this attempt as one reason that pushed him to sever ties with the national organization. President Bottom's letter to Delta Zeta President Raziano (March 9, 2007) states, ". . . postings on your Web site attempt to discredit any DePauw student critical of your actions. Your Web site has also been critical of our faculty for their willingness to openly discuss the way the membership review took place with the Delta Zeta chapter." This also serves as an attack on the accuser.

The DePauw incident, though, was not new territory for DZN. Previously, DZN quietly settled a lawsuit in 2001 with the University of Kentucky's chapter over a very similar reorganization. In 1991, eight former members of the Alpha Theta chapter claimed they had been forced to take early alumnae status based on their appearances (Lexington Herald, 2007, March 6). A pattern of DZN behavior begins to emerge.

In all of the public messages produced by the sorority headquarters there is an overriding concern for the image of the sorority and a calculated indifference toward the sorority women. There is little concern expressed toward the evicted sorority sisters—new alumnae—and little if any mention of the impact on the learning community of DePauw. Form letters sent to sorority members the week before final exams telling them they must find new housing for the next semester is an example. Not only did the Delta chapter women not know that they were to be evicted, but they were led to believe that they would have a choice whether to remain active or to continue to the end of the academic year. DZN executives argued that the decision was not based on the women's appearances and ethnicities. In fact, one student expressed concern that at a meeting held February 2, 2007, an educational leadership consultant from DZN said, "Image, I'm not going to lie to you, is a huge part of it" (Bruner, 2007, February 6). Another student reported in the same article that the national sorority was, "only interested in the continuation of their organization. They're more concerned with the national organization than the girls in the chapter" (Bruner, 2007, February 6). As confirmation, the DePauw Dean of Students said, "They (Delta Zeta) would say the girls had a choice. . . They think you made your decision by what you said (at the review meeting). I know you didn't" (Bruner, 2007, February 6).

Conclusion

This is not an analysis of which organization bore greater responsibility for the actual events, but an analysis of strategies and techniques used in addressing the public. Both DePauw University and DZN clearly used a number of image repair/restoration strategies. As discussed earlier, maintaining legitimacy necessitates image repair/restoration. "Legitimacy is important to organizations because it represents a type of social contract that enables an organization to continue to operate. If an organization is deemed legitimate, then it should enjoy a level of social

support sufficient for its survival” (Metzler, 2001, pp. 366-367). Thomsen and Rawson (1998) argue that the main reason corporate actors engage in image repair/restoration is re-legitimation, thus restoring ties with its various publics. Effective management of the public relations process has a significant effect on the image of the organization. DePauw’s strategies and techniques appear more appropriate for the situation than did DNZ’s.

DePauw University’s President and officials consistently utilized their strategies and techniques in clear and direct messages: simple denial of responsibility for DZN’s actions, separating DePauw from DZN, and providing actual corrective action.

In contrast, Delta Zeta national demonstrated an inconsistent and at times conflicting message to address the crisis. Their rhetoric did not match their actions, reinforcing a negative perception. That the national organization might have been misunderstood or that they might have underestimated the impact of their decisions, the final perception at this point is one that hurts them in further recruitment, at least one other university refused DZN a chapter on their campus due to the negative publicity. Retaliating with a law suit that seemed a long shot for them to win did not bode well for an effective image restoration strategy. The negotiation to terminate the litigation worked to take the focus off the situation, but did not repair the damage to the sorority’s image.

Specific strategies employed by DZN help explain the failure of their image repair efforts. Denial, for instance, may be effective when the party bears no responsibility, but when a blameworthy party denies responsibility the strategy may backfire. Benoit and Brinson (1994) explain that, “we believe it is very risky for a company (or person) who is at fault to deny their culpability. If the truth comes out, the accused compounds the offense (not only performing an offensive act, but then lying about it)” (p. 85).

Another instance of possible misapplication of image restoration techniques occurred in the use of denial and shifting blame. Experimental evidence indicates that these strategies appear inappropriate to parties hurt by the actions of the guilty party (Brinson & Benoit, 1994). Under other circumstances, the feelings of 25 university students would not rise to the level of discussion. However, when a prestigious university and a large national sorority become involved, the press enters the equation. By reporting, in a national forum, the sequence of events and the feelings of the women involved, the DZ alumnae’s dissatisfaction negated DZN’s efforts.

Finally, corrective action appears absent in DZN’s communication, while DePauw offered a quite specific plan to ameliorate the problem. Foss (1984), in a study of Chrysler’s redemption, notes that merely talking about quality is not enough—they must actually produce quality cars. Benoit (1995b), in a study of the Sears’ crisis involving their auto repair department, noted that only when Sears took corrective action did resolution of the crisis become possible. Sellnow, Ulmer, and Snider (1998) further suggest that, “a prompt admission of responsibility by an organization with a willingness to undertake corrective action can expedite the organization's effort to rebuild its legitimacy” (p. 60).

The crisis involving DePauw University and Delta Zeta National could have been avoided had DZN used more appropriate image restoration strategies and used them more thoughtfully.

Rather than putting out the fire, DZN fanned the flames—to their own detriment. DePauw University responded more appropriately than did DZN by taking responsibility for their part in the controversy and engaging in meaningful corrective action.

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