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Promoting Design Leadership through Skills Development Programs

Alan Topalian, Principal, Alto Design Management

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Promoting design leadership through skills development programs

by Alan Topalian

Recognizing that design management is still in its formative stages, Alan Topalian has prepared a “brief” specifying a conceptual approach to lifting the profile and effectiveness of the discipline within the corporation. Going beyond current strategies, he discusses the audiences, content, methodologies, and desired outcomes of an education effort he believes should be broad-based, pragmatic, and hands-on.



Alan Topalian,
Principal, Alto Design
Management

Twenty years ago, it was just about impossible to find practitioners in business or design—in the United Kingdom, at least—who believed that managing design required special skills. Experienced designers tend to think they are efficient design administrators. Similarly, business executives often think that competence in, say, marketing, production, or project management transfers easily into an equivalent competence in managing design.

Professional practice has revealed a rather different reality, so executives and designers are coming to realize that special design management skills *do*

exist. Some even go so far as to admit that such skills are critical to the continued success of their organizations. However, it is still rare to find organizations around the world that include design as more than a token input in staff training and management development programs. Moreover, very few academics have grasped the fact that design management represents considerably more than an optional sideline or a straightforward extension of management, engineering, or design practice.

If design management is to attract sufficient attention and gain credibility



within business, there is a need to establish what Frank Cokayne (marketing director of Imperial Hotels at the time) aptly called “a new discipline with no concessions.” Moreover, clear guidance ought to be available on what managing design professionally entails. The lack of a consensus on the scope and substance of this emerging discipline is an indictment of practitioners and academics alike.

True, little of the body of knowledge and experience necessary to underpin such a discipline has been documented. There are huge gaps in reference material, particularly at the corporate level. The lack of progress since the 1980s is particularly depressing, since raw material is available in abundance within business enterprises and independent design practices. However, few practitioners or researchers have seriously taken up the challenge to document and publish that experience for the benefit of wider audiences. Fewer still have the insight and expertise to gain trust and draw out that experience from those “at the sharp end.” The supervision of such activity leaves much to be desired. Perhaps more disturbing is the fact that the academic world tends to ignore the BS7000 series of British Standards on design and innovation management issued since 1989, which were submitted to scrutiny around the world before publication.

In the 1980s, separating out design management for rigorous analysis was scorned by those who cried for integration. However, effective integration cannot be conjured out of thin air. It requires vision, knowledge, courage, and tenacity to deal with a myriad of practical details in circumstances that are often hostile and in which little solid, sustained support is forthcoming. Fortunately, more and more business executives are coming to realize—often through hard experience—that successful integration is not possible in the long term if they don’t first separate design management out to determine exactly what they are required to integrate.

Courses offered under the design management banner

Design management courses have tended to fall into four basic types (see figure 1).

Management for designers

Those who propose this kind of course point out that designers commonly lack knowledge of industry and commerce. Consequently, they are insensitive to business and marketing considerations, and are reluctant to accede to compromises requested to address these. Moreover, designers are perceived to be broadly unsympathetic to the profit motive and generally lack the drive and discipline required to create wealth.

Designers are often criticized, too, for being inefficient administrators of design projects and their own practices. It is argued, therefore, that primary investment in design management education should be directed at designers to increase their knowledge of, and sensitivity toward, business matters. There are two types of courses in this area:

- *Business familiarization*, which covers descriptive material on a range of industries, in addition to general management techniques
- *Business management*, aimed at helping designers run their practices more efficiently

The first tends to be heavily oriented toward the study of marketing and innovation, while the second concentrates on office organization, accounting, business planning, project management, communication, and the legal aspects of design practice.

Figure 1.

Different kinds of courses proposed under the design management banner.

		<u>Audience</u>	
		Designers	Managers
<u>Subject</u>	Management	Management for designers	Management for managers
	Design	Design for designers	Design for managers

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Taken together, the scope of these courses would extend broadly to topics covered in general business management programs, as well as to those that have particular relevance to running small and medium-size businesses. These would appear to be the predominant models for design management courses currently on offer.

Management for managers

In the late 1970s, most suggestions for design management courses aimed at managers fell into this category. The thinking behind them was that, in the final analysis, there is no such thing as design management. Professional managers

should be able to manage all aspects of business with equal competence. Therefore, if more-effective managers are sought, existing managers should be trained to become more professional at their jobs.

Course content tends to concentrate on marketing, creativity, innovation, and new product development; project, operations, R&D, and quality management; and value engineering.

Design for designers

Design colleges are often criticized for being out of date in their curricula and teaching methods, and out of touch with the requirements of employers, whether from industry or independent design groups.

Changes in the way design courses are funded have created pressures to increase student numbers in courses, limit facilities, and generate new options, thus exacerbating these shortcomings. As a result, many employers feel that graduates often lack even the basic skills necessary to practice their profession. Consequently, an opportunity was perceived to upgrade designers' skills under the design management banner by teaching (among other things) the latest technical developments in the profession, particularly in relation to information technology—knowledge

that should help make designers both more proficient and efficient at their jobs.

Design for managers

Those who advocate design appreciation courses for managers argue that managers will be unable to harness the skills of designers effectively unless they themselves develop greater perceptive skills. In sum, they have to become more sensitive to the designed environment—that is, more visually literate. This kind of course had the most support in the latter part of the 1980s.

Clearly, all such courses have a place in general management, engineering, and industrial design education and continuing professional development. However, none constitute true design management offerings, and their actual titles can be very misleading.

Fundamental premises underlying design management

The following premises underlie the development of design management as a rigorous discipline on a par with other established disciplines in business.

- Design is a strategic resource that is central to wealth creation because it has a critical influence on the conception and delivery of products and services that match closely with customers' needs and aspirations.
- Innovation is essential for those who aspire to be noteworthy players in world markets. *All* innovations are designed (though not always consciously).
- Design leadership is one of the most powerful means of generating new ideas, making tangible market expectations revealed through research and rehearsals of user experiences, demonstrating added value, and differentiating in a cost-effective way.
- Design activities can be managed efficiently, like all other activities in business, and design management decisions are as “hard” and “soft” as other business decisions.
- A rigorous approach to the management of design is an integral part of professional management. Indeed, managing design presents some of the most stringent intellectual challenges in business.
- Consistent high quality is impossible to

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attain without effective design in the products, services, and operations of business enterprises. This is best achieved by instilling a concern and pride for design standards in the hearts and minds of staff at all levels.

- *Effective design is integrated design.* Therefore, the professional management of design must encompass all principal categories of design. It also requires that work be coordinated across major disciplines (such as marketing, production, finance, and distribution), as well as between stages of projects, with implications of decisions being followed through from project to project, wherever appropriate.
- An effective uplift in design standards in business will only be possible over the long term if there is a significant improvement in design management performance.
- Appropriately skilled and committed middle managers, backed by equally enlightened senior executives, are essential to the effective management of design.
- Given that design enlightenment is not normally part of the culture of business, a sensible number of such executives will emerge only as a result of formal training in design management, duly supported by able outside specialists.

The design management universe

The lack of a consensus on what design management encompasses remains a critical obstacle to establishing its credibility as a rigorous business discipline.

It is futile to attempt a meaningful definition of design management in a couple of sentences. Yet it is possible to map out the scope of this emerging discipline by distilling

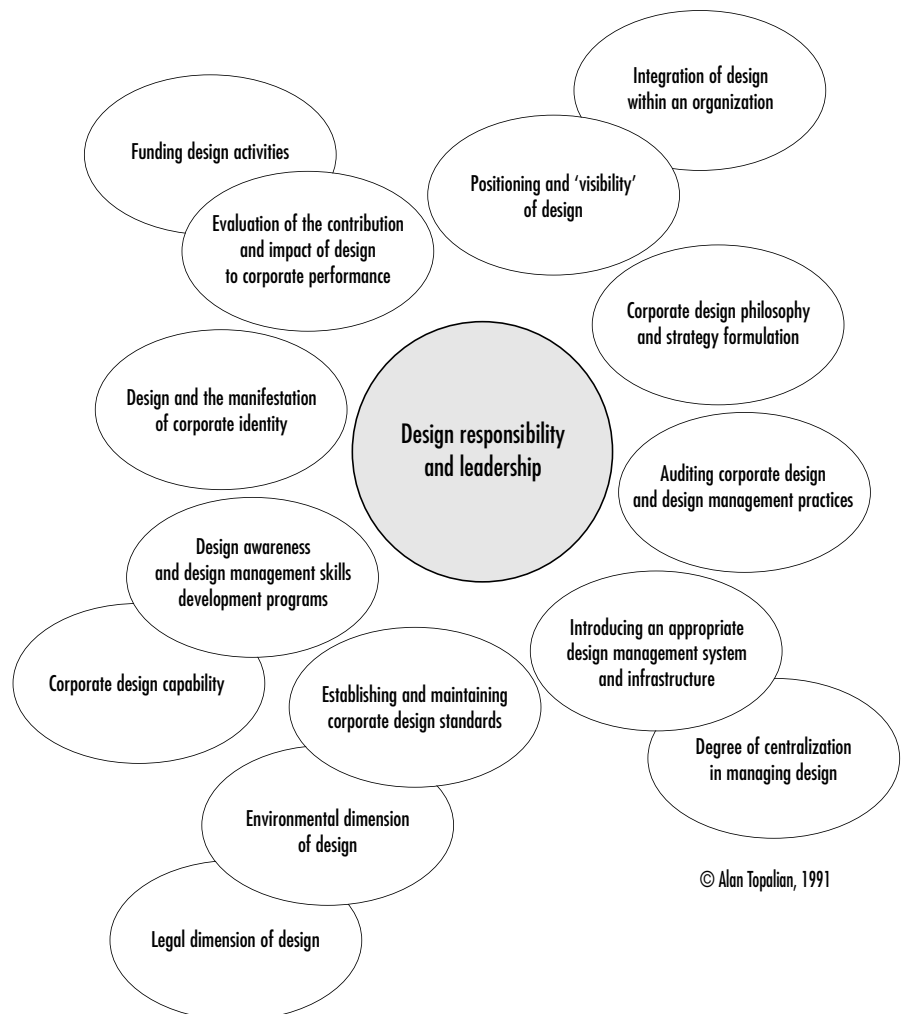
the key issues from professional practice, 26 of which are set out in figures 2 and 3.

So when talking about design management skills development, we are concerned with the acquisition and enhancement of skills required to handle these key issues effectively—preferably with a holistic perspective. Moreover, such training should support executives from different organizations as they embark on individual journeys of discovery influenced by their personal characteristics and corporate circumstances.

Clearly, there is considerable common ground between the management of design and that of other business disciplines. Nevertheless, success with design—and the development of a distinctive competence in managing design—results from an enlightened handling of the detailed differences.

Figure 2.

The design management universe: Key issues at the corporate level.



Design management skills development

The effectiveness of “learning on the job” depends heavily on the volume and range of design activity, the frequency of “repeat” projects, and the enlightenment of those who control investments in design. These factors—compounded by a tendency toward introversion among parties involved—can inhibit a rapid or sustained rise in design standards against competitors around the world.

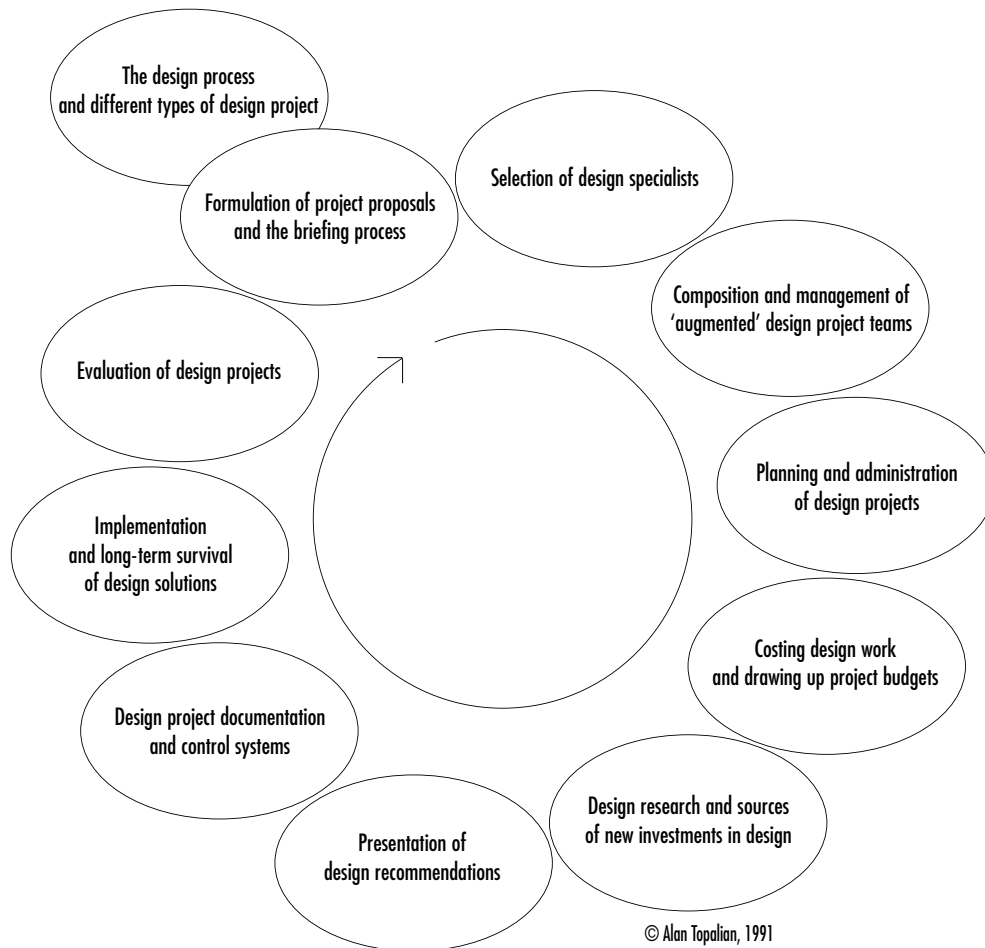
Formal training to develop design management skills provides a clearer demonstration of how standards can be raised. More important, it helps to build the confidence to take action and strive for improved performance. It achieves this by:

- Highlighting the fundamental incompatibility between professional business management and an indifferent approach to design management

- Demonstrating the extent of the body of knowledge of this emerging discipline and confirming the key issues it encompasses at corporate and project levels, thus enhancing its credibility
- Providing practical guidance on how these issues might be explored and addressed as rigorously as for any other discipline in business—in particular, to convey a flexible conceptual framework for analyzing problems and coordinating decisions
- Legitimizing the time devoted to design issues and the investment of resources to enhance design management performance
- Widening access to experience in professional practice, and making the personal experience of participants more meaningful to them
- Lowering acceptance of indifferent design solutions by raising expectations of what can

Figure 3.

The design management universe: Key issues at the project level.



be achieved through a more professional approach to managing design

- Raising tolerance of uncertainty and encouraging greater risk-taking in design (and other) investments, albeit on an appropriately informed basis
- Promoting the common ground among those who design, those who commission design work, and those who use (or are affected by) the designs produced—to build mutual respect and confidence and encourage closer, more-effective working relationships among them
- Upgrading the specialist technical and behavioral skills required to tackle key issues competently by exposing executives and staff to a wider range of practical applications
- Nurturing design leadership in key staff at appropriate levels of the organization
- Helping to broaden achievements through design discipline
- Building the management of design into a distinctive competence

Design management skills development training requires participants to address design management issues, as well as corporate and project circumstances that they may not normally encounter. It should challenge their preconceptions and prejudices, test their grasp of new knowledge and skills, and provide them with relatively low-risk opportunities to test their newly acquired skills in real situations.

Critical problems can always be found in business enterprises. Using these as the bases for discussions in training often results in more-vivid and effective learning experiences. Not only do they seem more real to participants, but demonstrating how more can be “seen” in, and done about, familiar problems and project circumstances can provide more-powerful lessons than addressing problems imported from elsewhere. Creating insights into important issues and laying the foundation for new strategies and viable solutions to existing problems in the calmer, neutral environment of a training workshop raises the perceived value-for-money of such training.

Areas in which research and development are necessary can be pinpointed through design management skills development training—particularly in relation to an organization’s internal practices and achievements.

Encouraging such activity and making the findings more-widely available to practitioners will help fill critical gaps in reference and training material. This, in turn, should help develop future professional trainers in design management (currently in desperately short supply).

Target audiences

Because resources are scarce, design management skills development initiatives should be directed at those audiences likely to lead to the largest number of enterprises adopting a more professional approach to design in the shortest time.

Business executives make up the most powerful body of “designers” in the world, for it is they who decide the design problems to be tackled, the concepts that go forward, the resources committed to their development, and how solutions are presented to the market. Indeed, ultimate responsibility for the outcomes of design projects *always* rests with these executives. Consequently, they are the prime targets and, within this extensive group, the greatest care and attention ought to be focused on those who are responsible for design and fulfill roles as design leaders. They create the environment within which design energies can flourish or are thwarted. They also influence the seriousness with which design is handled and integrated with other disciplines.

Practitioners in engineering and industrial design make up the next tier of targets, together with others who have a stake in the initiation, progress, and outcome of design projects.

Academics in these three disciplines form the third set of critical targets.

Effective training approaches

If design management skills development is to contribute directly to an improvement in design management performance, what training approaches would be effective?

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A core requirement is to focus on the realities of professional practice—day-to-day, as well as longer-term—not least in establishing more-tangible links between design and other disciplines to enhance corporate performance and profitability. Key points to highlight throughout are that the management of design is enmeshed with many other roles, and crosses departmental and disciplinary boundaries.

Experienced designers tend to think they are efficient design administrators. Similarly, business executives often think that competence in, say, marketing, production, or project management transfers easily into an equivalent competence in managing design

It is essential that design management development programs provide a logically structured exploration of key issues, particularly at the corporate level. The emphasis ought to be on analysis for action, not merely a description of the context in which design activities take place. This calls for a consistent method of analysis and coordination in presentation. It also requires an appropriately rich common language to be established for use by all parties involved in, or affected by, design activities. A diversity of views and approaches can be very

valuable when such a conceptual framework is available to participants; otherwise, the rich mixture will prove confusing and indigestible.

Wherever possible, training should cover the latest developments in professional practice and convey a state-of-the-art overview of the discipline.

As with other applied disciplines, the acid test of understanding in design management is demonstrated most clearly through effective practice, underlined by an ease in communicating principles and a fluency in sharing personal experiences.

Therefore, design management development needs to broaden the participant's experience of design problems and the range of project and corporate circumstances within which they have to be solved. This is because the lessons of

professional practice will be internalized only when participants experience *for themselves* the opportunities and constraints that various problems and circumstances present. This will help open eyes to the potential benefits that derive from the professional management of design. It will develop the skills to see more of what is going on and make more out of the situations encountered. It should also help executives and their staff to create opportunities to excel through design.

An emphasis on fast application of the newly acquired framework of analysis and skills across a broader front and to greater depths is a further indicator of effective training. Applications should be geared principally toward decision making and the way in which decisions are to be implemented.

Design management training will be more valuable still when it helps participants from different backgrounds and disciplines to develop together. The days when specialists worked in isolation are past and, however much reliance might be placed on individual ingenuity and initiative, there is now an even greater dependence on effective, multidisciplinary team workers.

Managing design involves considerable interaction among different specialists. This is a source of many critical problems. Therefore, the discipline should be taught in an interactive manner, allowing the different stakeholders to work together in carefully supervised conditions.

Moreover, there is nothing God-given in design management practice. Just as participants ought to be challenged to defend their views and actions, so too must facilitators be challenged to substantiate the grounds on which they make their presentations. For it is only through rigorous open discussion and experience that participants can really get to grips with common problems and project circumstances.

In summary, the training approach likely to have the greatest chance of success will:

- Offer substance through a body of knowledge and shared experience distilled from real problems, set within actual corporate and project circumstances
- Equip participants with an integrative, conceptual framework that links all key issues using a consistent method of analysis
- Provide the language with which design

management problems and issues can be discussed in detail across a wide range of contexts

- Center on design management decision making with appropriate attention given to the communication, defense, and implementation of such decisions
- Focus attention on the elements of professional design management practice, and how these might be introduced into different types of organizations
- Force participants to articulate perceptions on design and design management issues, and provide a mirror to challenge prejudices and highlight misconceptions
- Harness personal experience and build the confidence to tackle design management issues professionally in conditions of uncertainty, perhaps in hostile environments
- Create multidisciplinary, team-based opportunities to broaden personal experience of analyzing key issues
- Legitimize time spent exploring design management issues, and motivate participants to draw the most from these opportunities
- Provide the framework to undertake credible and accurate evaluations of investments in design

Appropriate training material

What kind of reference/training material will help promote effective design management training?

The most critical need is for a conceptual framework distilled from acute observation and objective analysis of a cross-section of actual design management practice. This kind of framework is much sought after by business schools because it represents a documented body of knowledge and provides the language with which experience in practice can be shared. It should link key issues together and enable them to be treated with appropriate rigor, then taught.

More important, such a framework should provide the means by which participants can transcend the experience of others, and develop their own potential within their particular work circumstances.

Second, the requirement to apply quickly what has been learned—while fostering interaction among the parties normally involved

in design projects—suggests a need for real-time projects in addition to role-playing exercises and case studies based on actual projects.

How specific organizations handle design can be a rich source of inspiration and cautionary tales. Therefore, such descriptive material will always have a place in design management development. After all, implementation is the only real test-bed for ideas in design management, and building on the experience of others is a rich source of competitive advantage.

The integrative nature of design also suggests that material should deal with more than one issue—probably requiring consideration at both corporate and project levels—and promote an *interdisciplinary* approach to problem solving.

It is worth reiterating that all material produced ought to be compiled to fulfill specific design management teaching objectives and to provide effective learning experiences relating to the discipline.

Paradoxically, none of this material need be high on visual content, for many issues can be explored in great depth without such illustration. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting that introducing the visual dimension of communication can be one of the most powerful benefits of design management training, as well as a distinguishing feature in, say, MBA programs. Visual imagery offers another language to participants. It can liberate thinking and offer fresh perspectives, so helping to restructure, re-present, and resolve complex problems and issues.

Best practices in design management skills development

Unfortunately, minimal progress has been made in design management skills development training over the past decade. To conclude, some practices likely to distinguish leading organizations recognized as world-class performers in design management in the not-too-distant future are summarized below.

Implementation is the only real test-bed for ideas in design management, and building on the experience of others is a rich source of competitive advantage

- Design is acknowledged as a corporate discipline that makes a direct contribution to long-term profitability.
- All staff members accept their places on the front line of design quality.
- “Design” training is considered an important part of continuous improvement that starts shortly after recruitment with a mandatory design awareness component in the induction program for all staff, followed by training programs that address specific development objectives.
- Design management skills development forms a mandatory part of executive development and is offered to a wide range of staff, with updates at particular stages of their careers.
- The importance of design is reinforced further during training offered in other disciplines.
- “Design” training promotes a holistic, integrative perspective on products, services, and business processes, covering all facets and categories of design.
- “Design” training also promotes an innovative perspective and champions the development of design leadership among executives and staff through state-of-the-art thinking, techniques, and applications.
- Members of staff are encouraged to develop an external perspective through visits to outside facilities and agencies. Extensive guidance is provided on design sources, events, and venues of interest around the world.
- Special emphasis is placed on distilling best practices that may then be promoted within their operations.
- “Design” training promotes the mixing of staff from different disciplines, as well as job rotation among functions.
- There is evident pride in the professionalism of the organization’s approach and achievements through design.
- “Design” training is driven by design specialists, even though the programs are orchestrated by training professionals.
- In-house designers feature prominently in such training.
- Corporate and departmental plans include budgets specifically assigned and restricted to “design” training.
- Time off and financial assistance are offered as incentives to pursue such training.
- Extensive guidance is offered on training available externally.
- The visual dimension of communication is used extensively throughout training programs to enhance the effectiveness of communication and learning.
- External inputs are always welcomed, as are collaborative training programs with like-minded organizations.
- Executives and staff are encouraged to spread “the design message” and give presentations about design elsewhere.
- “Design” training is given considerable weight when making decisions about remuneration and staff progression.
- “Design” training is accepted as an important “glue” in sustaining strategic partnerships with customers and other organizations. ■ Reprint # 02133TOP10

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Suggested reading

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