



Knowledge Management, Organisational Learning Processes, and Sustainable Entrepreneurship in New Ventures: An Integrative Review and Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

New ventures confront the liability of newness while operating under rising expectations for environmental and social performance. This paper examines how knowledge management practices enable organisational learning processes that support sustainable entrepreneurship outcomes aligned with the triple bottom line. An integrative review draws on recent systematic and bibliometric reviews of the knowledge management and sustainable entrepreneurship interface, together with foundational work on the knowledge-based view, absorptive capacity, organisational learning and unlearning, and sustainable entrepreneurship. The synthesis suggests that the knowledge management practices of external acquisition, internal sharing and creation, and retention supply the inputs for exploratory, exploitative, and unlearning processes, which help convert entrepreneurial intent into economic viability, environmental stewardship, and social equity. Absorptive capacity, digital and artificial-intelligence-enabled knowledge management maturity, and founder or top-team sustainability orientation act as boundary conditions. The paper offers thirteen testable propositions and a framework in which unlearning also helps ventures navigate tensions among the three outcome dimensions. Because venture-specific empirical evidence remains thin, the propositions are offered for testing, and the research agenda prioritises longitudinal designs, emerging-economy contexts, and clearer measurement of social outcomes and unlearning.

Keywords: Absorptive Capacity; Knowledge Management; Organisational Learning; Sustainable Entrepreneurship; Triple Bottom Line; Unlearning

1. Introduction

The contemporary entrepreneurial landscape is marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. For new ventures, survival no longer depends solely on rapid scaling and financial returns. It increasingly depends on the capacity to address environmental and social externalities alongside economic value creation. Sustainable entrepreneurship, understood as the pursuit of opportunities that generate economic value while mitigating environmental and social harm, has therefore become a central concern for scholars and practitioners (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). New ventures, however, face the classic liability of newness. They typically lack established routines, possess weaker legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders, and operate under severe resource constraints (Stinchcombe, 1965). Under these conditions, intangible assets, and particularly knowledge, assume heightened strategic importance.

The knowledge-based view positions the firm as an institution whose primary role is the integration and application of specialised knowledge (Grant, 1996). Yet possessing knowledge is insufficient. Knowledge must be acquired from external sources, shared and refined internally, retained in organisational memory, and, when necessary, deliberately discarded when it becomes obsolete or counterproductive. Organisational learning processes convert knowledge stocks into adaptive capability. Substantial literatures exist on knowledge management in established firms and on sustainable entrepreneurship more broadly. The specific mechanisms that link knowledge management practices to learning processes and triple bottom line outcomes in new ventures nevertheless remain incompletely integrated.

Recent systematic work has begun to map this terrain. Cai et al. (2026) reviewed seventy-six articles on knowledge management and sustainable entrepreneurship in startups and found that knowledge management operates in several roles, including as an antecedent and a mediator of sustainability outcomes. Alkathiri et al. (2024) analysed two hundred and thirty-three documents from Scopus and Web of Science, mapping the intellectual, social, and conceptual structure of the field and setting out a research agenda. At the empirical level, a study of Italian startups reports that knowledge management practices positively influence sustainable practices, with board gender diversity and financial performance acting as mediators (Alfiero et al., 2025).

Against this background, the paper addresses one research question: how do knowledge management practices enable organisational learning processes that support triple bottom line outcomes in new ventures, and under what boundary conditions does this relationship hold? The contribution is threefold. First, it synthesises recent systematic evidence with foundational theory to clarify the micro-foundations of the relationship among knowledge management, organisational learning, and sustainable entrepreneurship. Second, it proposes a conceptual framework, summarised in a figure and thirteen numbered propositions, that distinguishes knowledge management practices, learning modes, triple bottom line outcomes, and key moderators, and that addresses trade-offs among the outcomes. Third, it identifies research priorities that can guide cumulative empirical work.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Knowledge Management in New Ventures

Knowledge management is commonly understood as the set of processes through which knowledge is created, stored, transferred, and applied (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). In resource-constrained settings, it is less a matter of formalised information systems and more a set of social and cognitive practices. These include the acquisition of external knowledge, the internal sharing and creation of tacit and explicit knowledge, and the retention of knowledge in forms that support organisational memory (Grant, 1996; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Startups rely heavily on founder networks, early employees, and selective external linkages, such as incubators, supply-chain partners, or research institutions, to access sustainability-related knowledge. Because formal structures are typically underdeveloped, the effectiveness of knowledge management depends substantially on interpersonal trust, psychological safety, and the cognitive framing of the founding team. Knowledge that remains locked in individual founders, or that is not translated into collective routines, offers limited strategic value. Knowledge that is shared, combined, and applied can compensate for the absence of accumulated organisational experience.

2.2 Organisational Learning Processes

Entrepreneurial learning has often been conceptualised at the individual level, focusing on the founder's cognitive development and opportunity recognition (Politis, 2005). Organisational-level learning, by contrast, encompasses the collective processes through which knowledge is interpreted, institutionalised, and applied across the venture. The 4I framework describes this movement as flowing from individual intuiting to group interpreting and integrating and, finally, to the institutionalising of learning in organisational routines (Crossan et al., 1999). For a new venture, the central challenge is that learning begins in the founders and must be institutionalised before it can shape the venture's identity and practice.

Three modes of learning are particularly relevant to sustainable entrepreneurship. Exploratory learning involves the search for novel knowledge and the generation of new possibilities, such as alternative business models or green technologies. Exploitative learning refines and extends existing knowledge to improve efficiency, reliability, and operational performance (March, 1991). Unlearning, including the more recent concept of regenerative unlearning, entails the deliberate discarding or updating of obsolete assumptions, routines, or knowledge structures that impede adaptation (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2025; Hedberg, 1981). The distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning is useful here. Single-loop learning corrects errors within existing norms, whereas double-loop learning questions the norms themselves (Argyris & Schön, 1978). The unlearning relevant to sustainability resembles the latter, because it asks whether inherited assumptions, such as the belief that sustainability is costly, should be retained.

Recent evidence on regenerative unlearning comes from a survey of 310 medium-sized Spanish manufacturing firms. It indicates that intentional updating of the knowledge base is associated with better green process innovation performance, partly through its effects on knowledge breadth and depth (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2025). Although that evidence does not come from new ventures, the underlying logic of releasing cognitive and routine constraints is pertinent to ventures that have not yet institutionalised unsustainable practices. The capacity to unlearn may therefore be a distinctive advantage of organisational youth, provided that founders and early teams treat unlearning as a deliberate organisational process and not as an accidental by-product of failure.

2.3 Sustainable Entrepreneurship and the Triple Bottom Line

Sustainable entrepreneurship embeds sustainability in the core value proposition of the venture and does not treat it as a peripheral corporate social responsibility activity (Muñoz & Dimov, 2015; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Two influential lenses frame it. One treats environmentally relevant market failures as opportunities for entrepreneurial action (Dean & McMullen, 2007). The other defines the field by linking what is to be sustained with what is to be developed (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011). Outcomes are commonly evaluated through the triple bottom line, which encompasses economic viability, environmental stewardship, and social equity (Elkington, 1997). Balanced performance across these dimensions requires continuous adaptation to evolving stakeholder expectations, regulatory pressures, and technological possibilities. Organisational learning processes therefore form a critical link between knowledge inputs and sustainability outcomes. Without effective learning, knowledge remains inert. With effective learning, it becomes the basis for strategic renewal.

2.4 Absorptive Capacity as a Bridging Construct

Absorptive capacity is the ability to recognise the value of new external knowledge, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends. It provides a theoretical bridge between knowledge management practices and learning outcomes (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002). In new ventures, absorptive capacity is often concentrated in the founder or founding team, and it can be enhanced or constrained by prior knowledge, relational networks, and cognitive frames. High absorptive capacity increases the likelihood that externally acquired sustainability knowledge will be internalised and translated into routines. Low absorptive capacity may leave knowledge acquired but never applied.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts an integrative review design. It does not conduct a new systematic search with original screening statistics. It synthesises findings from recent, transparent systematic and bibliometric reviews and triangulates them with established theoretical contributions and selected empirical studies. The principal systematic sources are the review of seventy-six articles by Cai et al. (2026) and the bibliometric analysis of two hundred and thirty-three documents by Alkathiri et al. (2024). They are complemented by the empirical study of Italian startups by Alfiero et al. (2025), the study of regenerative unlearning by Cegarra-Navarro et al. (2025), and foundational theoretical texts.

Scope and selection. The recent sources are peer-reviewed publications from 2024 to 2026, and the foundational texts range from 1965 to 2015. Sources were included if they addressed knowledge management, organisational or entrepreneurial learning, or unlearning in relation to sustainability outcomes in startups, new ventures, or comparable firms, or if they defined a construct or mechanism used in the framework. Systematic and bibliometric reviews with transparent methods were preferred as primary evidence, and primary empirical studies were included where they tested a link in the framework. Non-peer-reviewed and opinion sources were excluded.

The synthesis is organised thematically around three questions. The first concerns which knowledge management practices matter most for new ventures that pursue sustainability. The second concerns the learning processes through which these practices operate. The third concerns the contextual factors that moderate the translation of learning into triple bottom line outcomes. Claims are calibrated to the strength of the evidence. Because direct evidence on new ventures is concentrated in a small number of studies, findings that are limited, context-specific, or mixed are described as such, and the propositions that follow are theory-informed conjectures and not established relationships.

4. Thematic Synthesis

4.1 Knowledge Management Practices as Inputs to Learning

Cai et al. (2026) show that knowledge management in startups performs several roles in the pursuit of sustainability, acting as an antecedent that initiates sustainability processes and as a mediator linking entrepreneurial inputs to outcomes. Their review also points to dynamic knowledge routines as a way for ventures to cope with resource constraints. Drawing on this literature, this paper distinguishes three groups of practices. The acquisition of external knowledge from green technology partners, research institutions, or sustainability-oriented networks expands the set of possibilities open to the venture and thereby supports exploratory learning. Internal sharing and creation convert individual insights into collective routines, which enables exploitative refinement of processes and the gradual accumulation of capability. Retention in accessible forms supports continuity, and deliberate updating of the knowledge base supports the capacity to unlearn outdated assumptions.

Empirical evidence from a sample of one hundred and seventy-seven Italian startups points to a positive direct effect of knowledge management practices, and particularly of knowledge transfer, on sustainable practices (Alfiero et al., 2025). The same study identifies gender diversity within the board of directors and higher financial performance as mediators. This suggests that knowledge management effects are transmitted partly through governance and resource channels. Knowledge management is therefore not merely an internal technical function. It is a strategic process that interacts with the organisational and institutional context.

4.2 Learning Processes as Mediating Mechanisms

Exploratory learning enables new ventures to identify and experiment with novel sustainable business models. It involves searching beyond existing knowledge domains and entertaining possibilities that may initially seem distant from current operations. Exploitative learning improves resource efficiency and operational reliability, contributing to economic viability while reducing environmental intensity. Unlearning helps discard the assumption that sustainability is inherently costly or peripheral to core strategy (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2025).

The capacity to combine exploratory and exploitative learning in an ambidextrous manner appears especially valuable for eco-innovation in young firms. The balance required under severe resource constraint nevertheless remains an open empirical question, because new ventures may lack the slack resources that established firms use to

buffer simultaneous exploration and exploitation. The sequencing and prioritisation of learning modes may therefore differ systematically between new and mature organisations. Unlearning assumes particular importance in this context. New ventures have fewer institutionalised routines to discard, yet they may still inherit industry recipes or founder assumptions that prove maladaptive for sustainability goals.

4.3 Boundary Conditions

Three moderators emerge from the reviewed literature. *Absorptive capacity* strengthens the conversion of external knowledge into usable internal capability (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002). Ventures with higher absorptive capacity are better placed to recognise the value of sustainability-related knowledge, assimilate it, and apply it in ways that alter strategic trajectories.

Digital and artificial-intelligence-enabled knowledge management maturity is the second moderator. Cai et al. (2026) note that how digital tools enhance knowledge management in resource-constrained ventures remains underexplored, and the discussion here is therefore illustrative. For ventures with limited budgets, the relevant tools are likely to be inexpensive and off the shelf, and not bespoke systems. Examples include shared document and wiki platforms for capturing lessons from early experiments, collaboration tools for distributed teams, dashboards that track resource use and emissions, and generative artificial intelligence assistants for scanning literature, regulation, and supplier information. Such tools can compensate for limited human information-processing capacity and can accelerate sensing and reconfiguration under uncertainty. They also introduce risks of information overload and knowledge inequality.

Digital tools may affect the two learning modes differently. Tools that scan widely and recombine information from diverse sources may support exploratory learning by exposing founders to unfamiliar sustainability knowledge. Tools that analyse operational data and automate routines may support exploitative learning by refining existing processes. Systems trained on past data may also reproduce established patterns, and heavy reliance on them could therefore weaken unlearning. These possibilities are speculative, and they are stated as propositions to be tested.

Founder or top-team sustainability orientation, and in some evidence board gender diversity, shapes whether knowledge is filtered through a purely economic lens or through a multi-dimensional triple bottom line lens (Alfiero et al., 2025). Cognitive framing at the apex of the organisation is therefore a critical filter that determines which knowledge is attended to and how it is interpreted.

4.4 Navigating Trade-offs within the Triple Bottom Line

The framework should not be read as treating economic viability, environmental stewardship, and social equity as three parallel outcomes that can always be pursued together. In practice the dimensions often conflict. Greener materials may raise costs, and community expectations may clash with the speed of scaling. The corporate sustainability literature describes such tensions as inherent and argues that firms manage them better by accepting and working with the contradictions than by trying to eliminate them (Hahn et al., 2015).

Learning processes may help in three ways. Exploratory learning widens the search for options that satisfy more than one dimension at once, such as alternative materials or business models. Exploitative learning can lower the cost of the more sustainable option and so narrow the gap between dimensions. Unlearning, in the double-loop sense, helps teams question the framing of a trade-off, for instance the assumption that environmental performance must come at the expense of profit, and decide when and how to accept a residual conflict (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Ventures that learn in this way may be better able to sequence investments and to explain trade-offs candidly to stakeholders. They will still face choices in which one dimension is sacrificed in part.

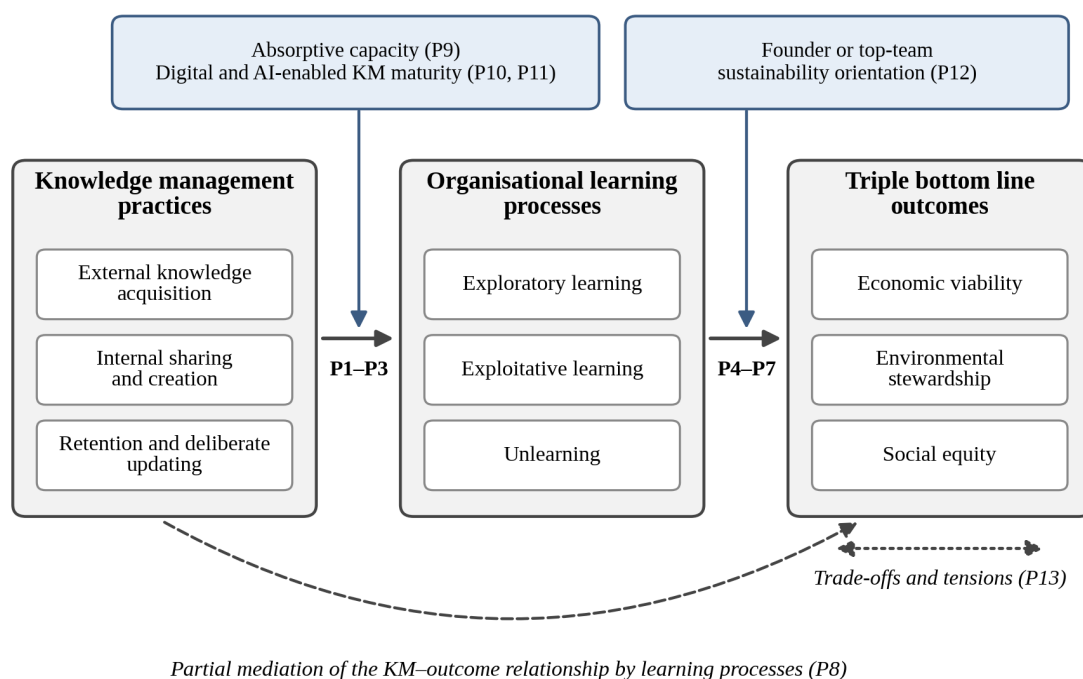
4.5 Knowledge, Learning, and Social Equity

The social dimension receives less attention in the reviewed literature, and this section is exploratory. Cai et al. (2026) and Alkathiri et al. (2024) give little guidance on how knowledge management supports social outcomes. One reasoned pathway runs through external acquisition. Ventures that acquire knowledge directly from community members, workers, and supply-chain partners learn about local needs and risks that internal teams cannot see, and exploratory learning can turn this knowledge into inclusive products, community engagement practices, and fairer supplier relations. A second pathway runs through internal sharing. Inclusive hiring and more diverse boards widen the pool of perspectives that are shared and combined, which is consistent with the role of board gender diversity reported by Alfiero et al. (2025). A third pathway runs through unlearning, which allows founders to revisit assumptions about whom the venture serves and employs. These pathways are conjectures drawn from the framework's logic, and they require empirical testing.

5. Conceptual Framework and Propositions

The synthesis yields the framework in Figure 1. Knowledge management practices of external acquisition, internal sharing and creation, and retention form the independent variables. They feed three mediating learning processes: exploratory learning, exploitative learning, and unlearning. The dependent variables are the three dimensions of sustainable entrepreneurship outcomes. The relationships are moderated by absorptive capacity, digital and artificial-intelligence-enabled knowledge management maturity, and founder or top-team sustainability orientation.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework linking knowledge management, organisational learning, and triple bottom line outcomes



Note: P1 to P13 refer to the propositions in the text. KM = knowledge management; AI = artificial intelligence. Source: Authors' synthesis.

The core proposition is that knowledge management practices influence triple bottom line outcomes largely by creating the conditions for learning processes that translate knowledge into adaptive strategic action, although direct effects are also reported (Alfiero et al., 2025). New ventures that develop these learning routines early may convert the liability of newness into a relative advantage, because the absence of entrenched unsustainable routines can facilitate faster unlearning and the embedding of triple bottom line principles in organisational identity. This advantage is not automatic. It depends on deliberate investment in knowledge management and learning, and on

enabling boundary conditions. The following propositions formalise these relationships for new ventures.

P1: External knowledge acquisition is positively related to exploratory learning.

P2: Internal knowledge sharing and creation is positively related to exploitative learning.

P3: Retention practices that include deliberate updating of the knowledge base are positively related to unlearning.

P4: Exploratory learning is positively related to environmental stewardship, through the development of sustainable business models and green technologies.

P5: Exploitative learning is positively related to economic viability and to reduced environmental intensity.

P6: Unlearning is positively related to environmental stewardship and social equity, because it removes the assumption that sustainability is costly or peripheral to core strategy.

P7: Knowledge acquired from community and supply-chain stakeholders, and converted through exploratory learning, is positively related to social equity outcomes (exploratory).

P8: Organisational learning processes partially mediate the relationship between knowledge management practices and triple bottom line outcomes.

P9: Absorptive capacity strengthens the relationship between external knowledge acquisition and exploratory learning.

P10: Digital and artificial-intelligence-enabled knowledge management maturity strengthens the relationship between knowledge management practices and both exploratory and exploitative learning.

P11: In resource-constrained ventures, reliance on artificial-intelligence-enabled knowledge systems is more strongly associated with exploitative than with exploratory learning, and may weaken unlearning where systems reproduce established patterns (speculative).

P12: Founder or top-team sustainability orientation strengthens the relationship between learning processes and environmental and social outcomes relative to economic outcomes.

P13: Ventures that combine unlearning with exploratory and exploitative learning are better able to resolve, and not merely accept, tensions among the three outcome dimensions.

6. Discussion

The framework advances theoretical understanding by integrating the knowledge-based view, absorptive capacity theory, and organisational learning research with the literature on sustainable entrepreneurship. It clarifies the micro-foundations of how knowledge becomes sustainability-oriented action in new ventures. In particular, it elevates unlearning from a peripheral concept to a central mechanism, consistent with recent findings on regenerative unlearning (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2025). By drawing together the systematic review of Cai et al. (2026), the bibliometric analysis of Alkathiri et al. (2024), and targeted primary studies, the paper provides a map of established relationships and remaining gaps. It also extends that literature by treating trade-offs among the three outcome dimensions explicitly and by giving the social dimension its own pathways.

The framework also shows that the new-venture setting is not merely a smaller version of the established firm. Limited legacy routines, founder centrality, and resource scarcity alter both the feasibility and the influence of knowledge management and learning practices. What works in large corporations with formal knowledge management systems may require substantial adaptation for early-stage ventures. The agility of new ventures may in turn allow them to adopt learning-oriented practices more quickly than incumbents burdened by inertial structures.

The strength of the evidence behind these claims needs to be stated plainly. Direct evidence on new ventures rests largely on one study of 177 Italian startups (Alfiero et al., 2025), supplemented by two secondary reviews (Alkathiri et al., 2024; Cai et al., 2026). The study of regenerative unlearning concerns medium-sized manufacturing firms and

not new ventures (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2025). The propositions should therefore be read as theory-informed conjectures about new ventures, and not as findings.

7. Limitations and Direction for Future Research

This integrative review relies on secondary synthesis, not on a new systematic search conducted according to PRISMA guidelines. Its venture-specific empirical base is narrow, as noted above, and publication bias in the underlying literature, the scarcity of longitudinal studies, and the scarcity of research in emerging economies further limit generalisability. The social dimension of the triple bottom line is measured poorly in much of the existing research, and the social-equity pathways proposed here are conjectural. The discussion of artificial-intelligence-enabled tools is illustrative and not drawn from empirical evidence.

Several avenues for future research follow. Longitudinal primary studies are needed to track how knowledge management practices and learning modes co-evolve as ventures mature from founding through growth. Comparative research in emerging economies, where institutional voids amplify both resource constraints and the potential value of knowledge-based strategies, would test the boundary conditions of the framework. Rigorous tests of digital and artificial-intelligence-enabled knowledge management as a moderator are required, including attention to information overload and knowledge inequality, and to differences between exploratory and exploitative learning. Clearer conceptualisation and measurement of regenerative unlearning in startups, and of social equity outcomes, would strengthen the foundations of the framework. Multi-level designs that link founder cognition, team processes, and organisational outcomes, and studies that examine how ventures decide and communicate when trade-offs cannot be resolved, would give a more complete account of how knowledge becomes sustainability-oriented action.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Knowledge management practices are a foundational capability through which new ventures can develop the organisational learning processes that sustainable entrepreneurship requires. By supporting the acquisition, sharing, retention, and deliberate updating of knowledge, they enable exploratory, exploitative, and unlearning activities that translate entrepreneurial vision into triple bottom line outcomes and help ventures work through the tensions among them. The absence of entrenched unsustainable routines can, under the right conditions, become an advantage and not a liability. Realising that advantage requires intentional investment in learning systems from the earliest stages of venture development.

Three recommendations follow. First, founders and early teams should not defer knowledge management until the venture reaches scale. They should adopt simple routines for capturing lessons from early experiments, seek knowledge actively from non-traditional sources such as environmental scientists, non-governmental organisations, community members, and circular-economy networks, and treat unlearning as a deliberate practice, because founders who view knowledge only through an economic filter may overlook opportunities that a triple bottom line orientation would reveal. Second, incubators and accelerators should move beyond technical sustainability content to develop strategic learning capabilities, especially the capacity to question inherited mental models, and should foster the psychological safety and open discussion of failed assumptions on which unlearning depends. Third, policymakers should extend support for sustainable entrepreneurship beyond subsidies for green technology adoption, and should strengthen digital knowledge management infrastructure and absorptive capacity in early-stage ventures, since policies that recognise the distinctive knowledge and learning challenges of new ventures are more likely to produce lasting sustainability outcomes. Future research should test the propositions advanced here so that the framework can be refined or revised.

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